



Ethnic Minorities  
& Youth Support  
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth  
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig  
& Ieuenctid Cymru

## **All Wales Black Asian Minority Ethnic Engagement Programme**

*‘Where are you from? Identity and Belonging in Wales’*

**Notes from Forum – 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023, 10am – 12pm**

*Chaired by Selima Bahadur, Programme Manager.*

*Co-hosted and supported by Grainne Connolly, Policy Officer, and Judy Li, Marketing and Communications Officer.*

### Guest Speakers/Panellists

*Tasnim Zaki (Community Organiser, Muslim Engagement and Development)*

*Jainaba Conteh (Refugee Support Worker, EYST)*

*Rabab Ghazoul (Director – gentle/radical)*

### Attendees – (32 in total)

Abby Wilson (Diverse Cymru) | Abi Lasebikan (Senedd Wales) | Aderinola Omole (EYST Wales) | Annette Snell (NHS Wales) | Unnamed Attendee (NHS Wales) | Carole Phillips (Kidscape) | Catriona Learmont (TNL Community Fund) | Debanjali Bhattacharjee (EYST Wales) | Debbie John (Carmarthenshire Council) | Deborah Cooze (EYST Wales) | Diane Cooper (Swansea Council) | Eileen Wong | Elyn Hannah (Vale of Glamorgan Council) | Fadhili Maghiya (SSAP) | Gavin Evans (Carmarthenshire Council) | Helen Ley (Macmillan Cancer Support) | Jane Ryall (Unltd) | Anonymous Attendee | Leila Usmani (Race Alliance Wales / BeDiverse) | Lucy Luca (EYST Wales) | Mark Bryant (Carmarthenshire Council) | Maxine Joseph (Mentor Ring) | Nicola Hinton (Vale of Glamorgan Council) | Pat Dunmore (Citizens Advice NPT) | Petal James (DVLA) | Rajma Begum (WCVA) | Sam Edwards | Shelina Mohammed (EYST Wales) | Simon Lu (Tai Pawb) | Stephen DeAbreu (Sport Wales) | Tammy Foley (EYST Wales) | Twahida Akbar (EYST Wales)



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## **Opening Statement from Selima Bahadur**

As a Team we felt this discussion needs to take place off the back of what happened with Ngozi Fulani at Buckingham Palace, and because of a change we noticed when looking through the Census 2021 data and comparing it to the Census 2011 data. Grainne will expand on this a bit when she introduces the topic.

If you are visibly from a Minority Ethnic background, whether born in Wales or not, you will have at some point or more realistically at many points, been asked “Where are you from?” and then if you answered Wales/I’m from here/this country, you will likely have had that follow up of “but where are you really from?”. I know I have been asked countless times since I was a child!

We had a comment on our Twitter page saying “Looking forward to this event. Lost count of the number of times I’ve been asked “where are you really from?” or been told “you sound more Welsh than me” Well I was born in Wales and this is my home”. I’m not sure if the comment poster is with us today but.....Well said Eileen!

Living in Wales, the first country worldwide to have an Anti-racist Action Plan and goal to become an anti-racist nation by 2030, there is no place for questions such as these when they are asked with prejudice lurking behind them. We need to be accepting that Wales is a diverse nation, a world leader with our Anti-racism work, and people should consider what meaning their questions have before asking them. I’m looking forward to hearing what our panel members have to share with us today and would like to pass over to Grainne next.

## **Opening Statement from Grainne Connolly**

In Welsh, there’s a term ‘Hiraeth’, it doesn’t have a direct English translation, and its usage has changed over time, but these days it is an emotive description of homesickness for Wales.

For me, I know the feeling of Hiraeth, a deep longing to be back home in Wales when I’m away, and a sense of belonging to this land, when I’m here.

Wales is my home, I’ve lived here since I was young, after spending my early childhood in Ireland.

But I’ve always struggled with my own sense of belonging here, I was shunned by local Welsh children growing up, because I had an English accent. I’ve been spat at, and called Saes, a derogatory term for an English person (although I’ve never lived in England, and don’t identify as English). As an adult, I have been asked countless times ‘where are you from’, and if I say ‘I’m from here’, the response is usually ‘but you don’t sound Welsh.’ A lot of the time, people are just curious, but over time, the effect it has, is to erode your sense of belonging, and make you feel like an outsider.



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For me, my experience is a result of opening my mouth and having the wrong accent, for many others in Wales, it's based on appearance, and the colour of your skin.

Planning this forum was sparked by two things; Ngozi Fulani's experience at Buckingham Palace, and looking at the recent Census results which suggested that this time more people had chosen 'British' as their Identity, instead of 'English'. This got me thinking about identity, and whether it was something that could shift and change.

Once we started conversations with our guest speakers around this topic, I felt my eyes open to how individual our identities can be - how they can change depending on the situation, who we are talking to, our lived experiences and our often-complex ethnic heritage.

Our guest speakers have already changed how I feel, and made me realise that our identity, sense of belonging, and our Welshness, is something that's ours. No-one else can dictate that.

On that note, I'd like to say Happy International Women's Day, thank you for joining us, and thank you very much to our Panel Tasnim Zaki from MEND, Jainaba Conteh from EYST, and Rabab Ghazoul from gentle/radical. Apologies from Guest Speaker Leila Usmani who is unwell today. I'm really looking forward to us discussing what it means to be Welsh, thoughts around identity and belonging, and the sometimes contentious question 'Where are you from?'.

We'll now hand over to our first guest speaker Tasnim, for a brief introduction.

### **Passing over to panellists for introductions**

#### **Tasnim Zaki – Community Organiser at MEND**

Good Morning, Bore Da, Salaam Allakum.

I'm here on behalf of MEND, a Muslim organisation that works with Muslims across the UK. I was born and raised in Swansea, my father was from Newport, moved to Cardiff, and then settled in Llanelli. My mother was born and raised in Pakistan. When she came here, they got a Fish and Chip shop in Port Tennant, Swansea. So that's our short journey.

Being born and raised here has given me fond memories of doing things like learning Welsh at school, and participating in the Eisteddfod.

I think one of the things that drew me to this conversation today, is more about identity, rather than the question of 'where are you from'. I wanted to see how other people make sense of this complex issue, and whether others share my experiences, given my own identity as a Muslim woman and my mum's heritage, coming from Pakistan.



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### **Jainaba Conteh – Refugee Support Worker, EYST**

Good morning, I work as a family support worker at EYST, supporting Ukrainian refugees. I was born in the US, but have lived in Wales since I was a baby, I feel Welsh, and Swansea is my home. I identify as a Black Muslim woman, and I am also Gambian, culturally. Within the Muslim community, I'm a minority within a minority, and I'll talk about this experience later on.

### **Rabab Ghazoul – Director, gentle/radical**

I'm Rabab, director of gentle/radical.

I was born and raised for the first 10 years of my life in the north of Iraq, and then because of the trajectory of events there, my family moved permanently to the UK at that point. I then moved to Wales when I was 19, so I've been here for 30 years now, and sometimes I ask myself, have I been here long enough to be Welsh now?

There are layers of complexity about each of our lives and lived experiences. My own sense of identity is something that's constantly evolving and emerging.

I'm interested in how our identities shape our sense of belonging, and not belonging... how we all yearn to feel connected, and the complexities around that.

### **Questions for Panel**

#### **GC – Question for TZ**

*You are born and raised in Wales. What does being Welsh mean to you, and how does it shape your identity?*

TZ – "Thank you for the question. Our identity is so complex, whether it's to do with accent, language, or various other factors. I think for me personally, with being born and raised here, but not fluent in Welsh, or having much of an accent, I think that being Welsh is about the values that you take with you wherever you go, and what I mean by that is the sort of traits that I associate with being Welsh.

I noticed this when I studied in England, and when I moved to England recently. I think being Welsh means having this natural affinity to being really friendly, really warm, really honest, and open and welcoming. That's my experience, and I think that a lot of people see Welsh people in that way, so I think it's those values that make you Welsh, and taking that with you wherever you go.

I'd also say that to me, being Welsh means being very inclusive, and what I mean by that is in my experience being in Wales, and considering this sort of wheel of identity, I've never really associated myself with one or the other (identities). It's always been mushed together, and I think that's because in Wales my experience is that there aren't different spaces for different people, it's been like we're all together in a shared safe space.



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Whenever I've been exposed to celebrating diversity, it's been in that manner as well. So I would say at the crux of it, being Welsh is being friendly and warm. There are probably far more Welsh values than just being friendly and warm, but for me that's what I think strongly of, when I think about being Welsh."

### **GC - Question for JC**

*You've lived in Wales your whole life, but as a visibly Muslim Black woman, have you ever felt excluded from identifying as Welsh? If so, how has it effected your sense of identity and belonging?*

JC – "It's a very tough question to answer. I do see myself as Welsh, and Swansea is home to me. Infact, when I speak to people outside of Wales, I always tell them that I'm from Wales, not from England. It's a different country! and I always big up Welsh cakes, even though I really don't like them.

When we first moved to Swansea from England I was very young, and I remember people being very, very friendly back then, because there were only a few Black people in Swansea, so people used to give us free stuff just because we were Black. They were so excited to meet us! The only comparison I have to that, is how I was welcomed in the Muslim community. I would say that to this day I feel more comfortable with Welsh White people than I feel with Muslims. Mainly because, being a Black Muslim means that I'm a Minority within a Minority. In Swansea, the biggest Muslim community is the Bangladeshi/South Asian community, and because I was Black, my Muslim-ness was always put into question. So I was always asked to prove how Muslim I was, I had to recite Quranic verses, and even with practice, I always felt like my family and I were over corrected. We were always told 'this is not how to do things, this is how you should do things'. Which is not the right way, because Muslims have different practices, how they pray etc, depending on your school of thought. My mum is very religious, when we went to the mosque for the first time, we were actually shoo-ed out of the mosque, and that was a very traumatic experience for my family. So when I compare being welcomed by Welsh people, and being welcomed by Muslims, I feel more like I have a Welsh community. I can join my roller derby team, I can go out to have food with people, whereas I still don't feel comfortable just doing that with Muslims.

Looking at being Welsh - is that to do with language? Does speaking Welsh make you Welsh? Is it being born in Wales? Is it a racial thing? Is it practice? Is it culture? It's hard to say, but I think the feeling of Belonging-ness is very important. And similarly, I'm Gambian, but I didn't grow up in Gambia, there isn't a massive Gambian community in Swansea, so I never really had the chance to be involved with community events like naming ceremonies, funerals etc. Even when I do go to Gambia, people notice that I'm not Gambian, because I walk very fast, and apparently that's not Gambian, and I queue, which is also not Gambian. So yes, I will say that I feel more Welsh than I feel Muslim, and maybe even Gambian."



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### **SB - Question for RG**

*You've lived in Wales a long time, how does this shape your identity, and do you feel a sense of belonging?*

RG – “Thank you. I was reflecting actually on some of what Jainaba was saying. This quality of ‘Being in, and not being in. Being part of and not being part of..’ I feel that's resonant for me.

In terms of Wales, I’m extremely protective and defensive of Wales, particularly when I’m outside of the country. When people assume Wales is part of England, I get quite militant in telling them - it's not England, it’s a separate country, It's Wales. So there's a sense of protectiveness and defensiveness that must come from a sense of belonging.

I think belonging inevitably happens if you've been somewhere for a long time, although its not guaranteed.

I kind of accidentally landed in Wales because I came to college here, but I didn't consciously say ‘I want to live in this place called Wales.’ It was only after living here, I think there came a point where I realized I was making a conscious decision to spend the rest of my days in this country, and that was to do with my sense of commitment to build not just my life here, but to make my contribution here. When I talk about contribution, I think so many of us who have journeys as the diaspora, journeys that arise through colonialism, that arise out of the impact on lineage and heritage, and a sense of where we have come from - I think that often gives us a strong sense of desire for social justice, and for reparations.

I spent the first 10 years of my life in Iraq, and my lineage, like many, is quite complex. There's American from my grandmother. There's Syrian, there's Armenian, there's Iraqi.. So there's a complexity when we think about identity, nationality and those issues. But I think choosing Wales was something that I realized I was doing, and I think that was from my twenties onwards. A lot of the campaigning and activism I was doing at the time was to do with the invasion in Iraq. I think that shaped my politics so much, I had a sense of ‘what does it mean to work for justice where you are? How do we work to develop just futures?’

I felt strongly affiliated to Wales, because I think there is a relationship for many of us with Wales as a colonized nation, and I want to be very particular about that, because, of course, we have a history of colonization in Wales, but also Wales as a White majority nation has benefited from empire and had its own part to play with empire and colonialism. So it's a really complex relationship in Wales, and I think I relate to that.

Due to Wales’s historical experience of colonization, I think the Welsh are still trying to find themselves, and what do we even mean when we say ‘The Welsh’? That's such a complex piece.

I think this desire to try and figure out who we are, where we locate ourselves and build our sense of cultural confidence, is part of my own experience.”



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### **GC - Question for JC**

*Have you been asked 'Where are you from?', if so, can you share your experiences, and what effect it had on you?*

JC – “When I was a lot younger, and people would ask me that question, I was really happy to tell people that I'm Gambian, because Gambia is a very small nation on the west coast of Africa, and it looks like a line as well, so I was happy to show people where it was and describe it. Most people that visit Gambia love it, and most people that have met Gambians say that we're very friendly.

I also remember when I worked as a steward somewhere in Mid Wales, and this drunk man walked up to me. We were talking for a bit, and then he asked me 'Where are you from?' and I said my parents are Gambian, so Gambia. And he said, no, where were you born? And I said I was born in the US. And then he said, 'You don't have a Welsh accent, you don't have an African accent, and you don't have an American accent, why do you sound like that?!' That was always a fun memory of mine. That was a very funny scenario.

But I remember the first time, when I was sat on a bus and someone came up to me and asked me where I was from and I said 'Swansea'. I wanted to be hard-headed because I knew what he meant. He asked me again, 'No, where are you from?' I said 'Swansea', and he had this look of annoyance on his face. I felt a bit bad at the time, but recently I thought, why would I feel bad about someone being annoyed with the answer that I gave them? You know, the fact this man could not accept the answer that I gave him? Looking back at it, it's quite problematic, and a little bit entitled to be honest.

Similarly, going back to the topic of being a minority within a minority, I always felt like when you met Muslims in the mosque, the second thing they will say to you after saying 'Hello', is 'where are you from?'. I felt that it was asked a lot in Muslim spaces because it's not as if we all identified ourselves as second-generation Muslims. With Black people, it's a bit different, I also got the question 'Are you Nigerian?' And I would say 'No, why would you assume that?!' There are 54 African countries! I do notice that there are some people that look at me, and they get confused. They want to know 'Are you Black, or are you Muslim? Which one is it?' And I'm both. So that's my experience with that question.”

### **PAUSE IN QUESTIONS FOR ATTENDEE TO READ HER POEM**

**'Born and Bred in Wales' by Eileen Wong**

**Born; in Cardiff**

**The capital city of Wales.**

**But who is this little person**

**With a small button nose, almond shaped eyes and skin that's not so pale?**





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**Name; given by the parents  
Meaning love and wisdom,  
But they worried it may seem too different  
To people in the United Kingdom.**

**Words; spoken in Chinese,  
A language not familiar to children at school.  
It wasn't long before English was the spoken language  
and acting like the other children to be just as cool.**

**Friends; none of them have familiar features.  
They have big sparkly blue, green or brown eyes,  
Fair skin and glossy brown or blonde hair.  
People don't notice the Chinese person nearby.**

**Work; a career in the civil service,  
not the usual choice for an East Asian.  
Acting out the social construct of a model minority  
But tactic not helping with progression.**

**Out; out in the big wide world.  
People still ask "Where are you really from?"  
Not quite believing the answer;  
"You sound more Welsh than I do! How come?"**

**Born in Wales, I learnt English and Welsh but also fluent in Chinese.  
Rice and noodles are my staples and I love eating Welsh cakes even if they're stale.  
I love golden yellow daffodils and fiery red Chinese Lanterns.  
I am Chinese and Welsh; born and bred in Wales.**

*Further comment on Identity and Belonging in Wales –*

*"For a long, long time, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. I didn't feel like I fitted in here. You know...this face does not look Welsh or British. And then, when I go to Hong Kong with my parents, my voice doesn't sound Chinese. So I was very conflicted as a young adult, to the point I was trying to stifle my Chinese-ness, and rebelling against my parents who wanted me to speak only Chinese at home. I've been asked so many times, 'Where are you from? Eventually I found the perfect answer – I'm from my mother's womb.'"*





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"Now I'm older, I'm much more comfortable in my own skin – I'm Welsh and Chinese, I'm not one or the other."

### **GC – Question for TZ**

*Have you had people ask you 'Where are you from?' Can you share your experience?*

TZ – "Having listened to what everyone else is saying, I feel really privileged. I don't think that's been my experience at all, and that could be for varying factors, and I don't really know why. But the only time I can recall being asked 'where are you from', is usually in a public space, when I've taken the bus or something. I usually have people approaching me, I don't know if it's because I'm quite smiley, but whenever I've been asked, it's usually with a friendly undertone. Perhaps I've never perceived it as something negative, and that might be because I was born and raised in Swansea.

Usually, the outcome of it has always been very casual, and it's been a learning experience for someone who's asked me that. I've found the conversation usually goes 'Where are you from?' And I'd be like 'I'm from Swansea', and then 'what area?' And I'd say near Fforestfach. So it was never like 'where are you really from?'.

Then there'd be like 'what's your background?' And I say, okay, well, I'm Pakistani. I was really open. I'd always tell people straight away, I'm Pakistani.

In Swansea, the Pakistani community is small. You usually see people from other cultural or ethnic groups, and they'd be really interested to talk, because they then share their own stories of when they've come across.

A lot of people have known someone who is Pakistani, whether it was in their work or other situations, and they have really fond memories of that person, or someone in their family is married to a Pakistani person. We start talking about culture and about being Welsh and Pakistani. So it's always a learning experience for the other person and myself.

It's always been a very positive experience for me personally, which I think is good. But I can see again how that question can be charged in different contexts."

### **SB – Question for RG**

*Having grown up in Iraq, but been in Wales since 1993, if you've been asked 'Where are you from?' how do you respond, and what are your thoughts on this question?*

RG – "Yeah, I am asked. But maybe in a different way.

I think visibly, I'm hard to place. When people see me, they don't think I'm White European, but they're not quite sure. I could be Turkish or Arab or Greek or a number of things, so I think there's sometimes an uncertainty.

But the times I repeatedly get asked where I'm from is when my name is introduced, because once I say I'm Rabab Ghazoul, people often say 'Where's that name from?' That is always the entry point. And what's interesting is across the entirety of my life, most of my conversations with new people start in the same way. Because that's the thing that they ask



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about. Where is that name from? So I'm aware that perhaps if I had a European name, maybe those questions wouldn't be asked.

I don't think my mixed heritage is easily identified, visibly, and that carries a lot of privilege as well. There's a lot of privilege in that.

It's interesting, I think I answer that question in different ways, depending on where I am. People definitely want to know what is the relationship between you and the name. I answer in different ways for different reasons. Sometimes I talk about my Iraqi identity for political reasons, because I constantly want to put Iraq and the historical injustices, particularly in recent years, on the map.

When describing my identity, I never quite say 'I'm Welsh', and I think it's because ethnically, I'm not British. Culturally, I'm British, and I'm also a lot more culturally Welsh now. That comes from a point of solidarity. I dream of just futures for Wales. I want Wales to feel profoundly equitable. I want the Welsh people to be able to reveal the potential that is their birth right. So there's a deep desire for the flourishing and thriving of the Welsh people, and the nation that I'm now living in. I think my Welshness comes out in that sense.

I also want to say, I respond differently to that question of 'where are you from', depending on who's asking it. For instance, being asked by people who aren't from the UK, but might be living here, with migrant heritage. If I start speaking Arabic to Arab speakers who don't expect it, there's a surprise, and they want to know what part of the Middle East I'm from. They'll ask 'Where are you from? Where did you grow up?' That's a different inflection. Different to being asked in a way that might have a racist context, from people who don't understand that we are a historically multicultural nation. There are huge numbers of people with multiple identities in this country, who also identify as Welsh."

GC Commenting – "Thanks Rabab, I think you've really touched upon something a lot of people will relate to. Depending on who's asking, we have different feelings, and give different answers. We connect with different parts of ourselves, depending on the situation. Something I've been thinking a lot about while we planned this forum, is that we're a very multicultural and diverse country, and I think the notion of Welshness is shifting, but how do we celebrate and encourage that, whilst protecting and supporting this beautiful Welsh history that we have? We have so much beautiful culture, like the Mabinogion, and our Language, that we don't want to lose. So it's getting the balance right."

#### **Attendee Comments from Chat**

"Personally, I really don't mind being asked where I am. After going through a complicated childhood, I'm now very proud of having a broad heritage. Unfortunately, I've had more prejudice shown to me from other South Asian communities. Coming from a minority within a minority I have been very much excluded from various things as I'm not the same religion or don't speak the language. And when I do visit India, I'm described as not a 'proper Indian'."



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"I think what Rabab captures is pertinent to my experience, about making a home somewhere. Having lived in different countries, I've only ever felt 'from' two of those (not the countries of my parents) - because of feeling I had a home there. I also feel Welsh because of my ability to engage in the politics and public life of the Nation. So I fully am a Welsh national - not only living and working here, but paying tax, voting, using Welsh public services. For that, I feel very Welsh, and welcomed to be here."

"I have experiences I would describe similarly - being of Pakistani and Indian heritage but not being/feeling Desi in my culture or lived experiences."

### **GC – Open Question to Panel and Audience**

*Can questions such as 'Where are you From' be re-framed? And is it important that we do?*

Leila Usmani – "I think the question 'where are you from', as we've heard from a lot of speakers, can feel different depending on the context of where you're being asked the question, and who's asking the question. At what point in the relationship of knowing that person are you being asked the question? So I think that's important to keep in mind - a lot of people say it out of curiosity, and I think it's absolutely normal for us to be curious. The article I shared looks at the difference between a white person asking you and another racialized person asking you, and whether it feels like there's a desire there for connection. A lot of people who have migrant heritage do ask 'Where are you from?' because of the desire for connection in a place where they may not feel very connected to the majority.

But I do think there is a way of reframing this, and I think we can learn to do things differently. So people say 'where are you from' is a conversation starter, just like 'what do you do?' is a conversation starter. I hate that question. Why is my job the most important thing for you to know about me? What does it give you? I think what we've got to recognize, is that for most people, this comes from a place of unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is unconscious.

But I think we can be conscious in reframing how we ask things, just like how we now consciously ask and share our pronouns, and we wouldn't ask someone if that was really their pronouns, because we recognize that that's not okay to do.

But we still, for some reason, think it's okay to ask people where are they really from? To re-frame, You can just say to people 'tell me something about yourself'.

'Hi! Nice to meet you. What would you like to share about yourself? What would you like to tell me?'

If for that person, their ethnic background and where they're from is important, and it's part of what they want to share, then they can, but you're not putting people in a position where it's a closed, single answer for that question.

So I think we can learn to re-frame. To begin with, it will come out as clunky, it won't be normal because we're used to saying 'where are you from, what do you do', but we CAN learn to reframe the way that we use our language and speak to people. Thank you."



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Attendee Comment – “These questions, the way they’re asked, it’s often because something about you is different – the way you look, the way you sound, your name.... so the question is charged, because it may not have been asked if you didn’t have something obviously different about you. Things that make you racialised, or an accent people are wrongly interpreting. These questions are ok when they’ve come up naturally during a conversation, but when it’s the first thing someone asks you, very often in an inappropriate way, that’s when it becomes a microaggression.”

SB Comments – “The experience of this question depends on who's asking, why they're asking, and how they're asking. It's just so many different things, and each of those things needs to be right, for it to be okay to be asked. And as Leila says, just accept the answer you’ve been given when someone tells you where they are from, don’t keep pushing for a different answer.”

#### **SB Question for TZ –**

*In your work and personal experience, how do you think Islamophobia affects Welsh Muslims, and their sense of belonging?*

“Thank you for the question.

I just want to make a comment - I'm really glad to participate today, and listening to everyone's comments just now has been really enlightening. With this question about where you're from... I know I shared my experience as something quite naïve and innocent in comparison to others. I’m not sure what the reasons behind that are, but I just thought about what an attendee said in terms of why you get asked in the first place, and it's usually to do with someone identifying that something about you, your appearance, or your expressions, makes you different.

It made me think about why I get asked ‘where you are from’, and it could be the fact that I wear a scarf or a hijab, and I think in the context of Islamophobia as an issue, statistically, it’s well documented that the issue is very racialized.

That's because the Muslim community is homogenized as this one big racial group. What I mean by that is, perceived expressions of ‘Muslimness’. For example, you'll have someone who might not be visibly Muslim, might not wear a hijab, they might not even be Muslim, they might be Christian, but they speak Arabic. Some people's initial thought is that person is a Muslim, and they identify you as a Muslim.

There's other communities that are affected by things like Islamophobia, for instance, the Sikh community, particularly post 9/11. Again, it could be because they wear a turban or something on their head, or because they have a beard, or because they are not white, and because of this, other people identify them as Muslim.

I would say that in my work, and going back to identity, Islamophobia affects people's identities because it's racialized, and because often people are homogenised.



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We've heard today how negative experiences can shape your identity, and how you can start to disassociate yourself from an identity, whether it's losing your accent, or not wanting to identify with being Welsh, for example.

From some of my own experiences, and experiences I've heard from other Muslims, at primary school and secondary school when you're visibly Muslim, you can be singled out, and you can be separated from the wider student body. That can be positive and that can be negative, and when it's negative it often means things like having to justify global incidents while you're also trying to figure out your own identity. For example, I didn't start wearing the hijab until my GCSE's, which for some people might be considered late. So I was 15 when I wore the hijab, no one in my family wore it, and everyone knew how my hair looked and how I looked before, so for them that was a shock. You get asked all these questions on the back of that, and again it feeds back into your identity - Where do you fit?

Out there, there are these external perceptions of you. Some are Islamophobic. Islamophobia doesn't allow you to nurture your identity, whether that's your identity as a Muslim, identity from your ethnic background, or your identity from a national perspective of whether you're Welsh or British.

In spaces where Islamophobia is pervasive, you're not able to pray freely, or wear your religious dress freely. Normalizing expressions of religious, cultural, and ethnic identities is really important, because it allows you as an individual to nurture your identity, and second of all, it allows other people to see that we're a diverse nation and that we live in a pluralistic society.

That's one way in which Islamophobia can affect your identity. The second thing is, if we look at some of the more extreme versions like hate crime on the streets, it stops you from freely participating in civic society, and you're then not engaging with other communities, or you're not engaging with people that need better awareness about your identity and your background, and that's where the ignorance starts, and it's a cycle.

One thing I found really interesting, which I want to share - it's not necessarily just about Islamophobia, but about perspectives of Muslim communities. There were some polls that Ipsos Mori took a few years ago, about the Muslim population in Wales.

It asked how much of the Welsh population do you think are made up of Muslims.... over 40 or 50% of the respondents that were from Wales thought that the Muslim community makes up over 20% in Wales. In reality, just over 5% of the entire UK population is Muslim. In Wales we only make up about 1.5%.

So 1.5% versus what people think, which is over 20%. Where does that come from?

That's fuelled by homogenization, and it's being filtered down from perceptions in the media. To go back to this topic of Islamophobia, identity, and being from the Muslim community... these external perceptions, microaggressions, and other forms of racism affects your identity as well. A lot of people that took this survey might not have even met a



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Muslim, but think there's this big community, there's so many Muslims in the UK. They probably have a negative perception, and that affects you as an individual. It affects your identity, how you fit within the wider community, whether it's Wales or the Muslim community, and it gives you these barriers. In everyday life, in terms of participating in society, being able to carry on your everyday tasks and move around freely, and to express your religious belief, which is a human right."

### **GC Question for JC –**

*How do you think the Welsh language plays into Welsh Identity and Belonging?*

JC – "My family are from Gambia, and Gambia has multiple different ethnicities. Each ethnicity has its own language, and all 4 of my grandparents were from 4 different ethnicities. However, I only spoke the Wolof language, which is my maternal Grandmother's language. The system is that you had your father's name, and therefore his ethnic background, so I'll be considered ethnically a Bujumbura, but I don't speak that language. I only speak Wolof, so I've always felt like a Wolof person. I watch Wolof movies, I feel connected to other people that speak Wolof. In fact, the first time I experienced Bujumbura, it sounded very strange to me. So I've always thought of language as being an integral part of identity.

I would say that you feel connected to people based on the language that you speak, and if you understand the jokes from that language, you feel integrated into that culture. That's how I see a language.

Welsh language - I had a B for Welsh at GCSE, I thought that was quite all right. But I've always felt disconnected from identifying as Welsh fully, because I did not speak Welsh, and I do see language as an important part of identity. So I thought, Well, I am Welsh, but not really that Welsh, because I can't speak Welsh fluently.

I also think that there is the part of being Welsh where it's cultural. So when I was in school I did participate in Eisteddfod and so on, but I've always felt like I was disconnected from the Welsh culture. I never went to any St David's Day events, I never had anyone take me to the castles in Wales. I barely knew anything about Welsh Culture.

As a Muslim, I feel like there are spaces that I can't participate in, that are closed to me because I don't drink, and drinking alcohol is a big part of British and Welsh culture. So I can't go to the pub to drink alcohol with people and socialize in those spaces. To answer your question, I do feel that not being able to speak Welsh does make me a bit hesitant to identify fully as Welsh. Maybe I consider myself 80% Welsh!"





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### **SB Question for RG –**

*Is the concept of Welshness too narrow?*

RG – “I think the concept of any identity that is encapsulated by a word relating to, let's say in this case, ‘Welshness’, is too narrow. But it depends - If ‘Welshness’ is this multi ethnic, multi historical, multilingual identity, if it encapsulates all of that rich layering and complexity, then it wouldn’t be narrow.

I think all of that is ‘Welshness’, but it's only when we surface that complexity, that we can embrace the idea of Welshness as something either hugely positive and inclusive, or incredibly narrow and infused with all of the limitations of the lens of otherness.

A lot of people have been talking about otherness, and it's been really resonating for me. When we ask people, ‘where are you from’ It's because essentially, we have already anticipated otherness and difference. And we're trying to figure out and make some kind of link, because we have imposed and placed otherness upon the person in front of us.

That makes me consider how we decolonize. How do we decolonize our own minds? Our own thinking, assumptions and perceptions about ourselves and others.

When I came from Iraq, I went to secondary school in the north of England. We did religious studies in my first year, and we started by studying Islam. There were 2 boys that bullied me, and it was about being othered. They started by saying ‘You’re the Muslim’, and I remember internally thinking I’m not Muslim, and I thought when this bit of studying Islam is over, then they're going to stop. It didn't, because what happened is when we started learning about Hinduism, I became the token Hindu and all of their jibes and their microaggressions were about that. They literally went through the entire religious cannon.

I didn't know what was happening at the time, other than my experience of that. But as an adult, I realized the powerful need to make someone ‘other’ beyond the logic of who they actually are in reality. And I think this piece about otherness has to be reckoned with before we have a positive sense of Welshness that is inflected with complexity, and where everyone feels included in that one word of Welshness. I want to embrace the idea of Welshness within this ever expanding, tolerant context, that centres all our dignity as the basis for us to really flourish and build the society that we all deserve.

So I’m looking forward to the unfolding of what Welshness is. Welshness that is evolving and contains all of that rich complexity including the Welsh language. I feel so passionately about that as someone who's now on my fifth attempt of learning Welsh, I just really want to get there. and I want to get some of my Arabic back as well!”





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From the All Wales Black, Asian, Minority  
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Thank you to everyone for attending and  
sharing experiences, to the guest speakers  
for their time and insight, and the  
attendees for all their valuable  
contributions and questions.