



Anti-Racist Action in Arts & Wellbeing 'Engaging with Confidence (Part 2) - Tackling Racism & Islamophobia in Cultural Organisations' Workshop – Summary

This toolkit document provides a summary of the key findings and learnings from the 'Engaging with Confidence (Part 2) - Tackling Racism & Islamophobia in Cultural Organisations' workshop, delivered by Pasha Shah, Saba Ahmed, Mustafa Field and [Faiths Forum for London](#) in partnership with Flourishing Lives and the Anti-Racist Action Group (ARAG) in Arts & Wellbeing.

The session focused on the lived experiences of racism and Islamophobia, providing participants with practical tools to recognise and challenge discriminatory behaviour in cultural spaces.

1. The Legal Framework: Dismantling the Hierarchy of Hatred

A fundamental takeaway was that all forms of discrimination must be tackled with equal urgency.

- **The Equality Act:** This legislation identifies race, religion, gender, sexuality, and disability as protected characteristics. It requires institutions to move beyond 'technical compliance' to genuinely modifying their culture to tackle racism.
- **Defining the 'Other':** The presentation explored definitions of Islamophobia (hostility against Muslims or those perceived as such), Antisemitism (hatred towards Jewish people), and Racism (discrimination based on ethnicity or skin colour).
- **The 'Swapping Exercise':** To demonstrate bias, Pasha Shah took derogatory public statements about one group and swapped the group's name with another (for example, swapping the word "Muslim" for "Jew" in derogatory statements). If a statement is considered abhorrent when applied to one group, it is equally abhorrent when applied to another, even if society reacts differently.

2. The Shift in Identity and Narrative

Lived experience shows that identity is often fluid and politicised by external events.

- **External Labels:** Pasha shared how his identity shifted from 'Asian' to 'Muslim' overnight following 9/11. When identities are 'problematized' by media or society, they are viewed through a lens of trouble rather than heritage.

- **The Burden of Perfection:** Minoritised individuals often feel a huge responsibility to be 'perfect'. There is a constant fear that a 'bad day' or an imperfect interaction will leave a lasting negative impression of their entire faith or community.
- **Symbols of Exclusion:** National symbols (like the flag) are increasingly weaponised by the far right. For many, these objects have been transformed into sources of fear, anger, and pain, acting as physical barriers to feeling safe in public spaces.

3. Lived Experience: Masking vs. The Full Self

Guest speaker Saba Ahmed shared the profound psychological toll of 'institutionalisation' within professional spaces.

- **The 'First Aid Room' Metaphor:** In rigid work environments, staff may feel the need to mask their identity - for instance, sneaking away to pray in a first aid room because they don't want to be seen as 'different' or 'complicated'.
- **The Loss of Joy:** Masking involves hiding parts of oneself (like faith-based studies) in favour of 'acceptable' topics (like popular TV). This prevents organisations from benefiting from the full self and the unique joy a person brings.
- **Exhaustion:** Navigating daily assumptions and the need to defend one's humanity is physically and mentally exhausting.

4. Participant Questions: Challenges from the Field

During the breakout session, participants generated a rich variety of questions that highlighted the sector's current challenges, including:

- **Blind Spots:** How can White British individuals recognise microaggressions they might miss?
- **Fragile Gains:** How do we maintain trust when progress is being eroded by the far right and social media?.
- **Specificity:** How can organisations find specific consultancy rather than 'one-size-fits-all' diversity training?
- **Generational Language:** How do we handle outdated terminology when working with older people while maintaining respect?.

5. Addressing Microaggressions and Bias

- **Intent vs. Impact:** Language can be harmful regardless of intent. Common examples include assuming a person of colour is an interpreter rather than a lead, or commenting that someone 'speaks well for a [insert demographic] person".
- **Loose Assumptions:** It is natural to have assumptions, but the key is to hold them 'loosely' to allow for learning.
- **Relationship as a bridge to learning:** Strong, trust-based relationships allow individuals to feel confident asking respectful questions (e.g., "Can I ask you about your hijab?") without causing offence.

6. Practical Strategies for Cultural Organisations

- **Strategic Remuneration:** Lived experience is expertise. When seeking consultancy or engagement from minoritised artists or community leaders, they must be fairly remunerated for their time.
- **The Irony of Local Consultancy:** Organisations should avoid the trap of bringing in 'external' consultants for a community when local experts already exist. For example, London-based organisations being brought into Liverpool despite local leaders knowing the community best.
- **Timing is Inclusion:** Engagement must be convenient for the community, considering school holidays, half-terms, and work schedules rather than institutional convenience.
- **Diversify Your 'Internal Library':** Actively check your personal and social media algorithms against those from different backgrounds to see what information you are missing.

Conclusion: Sustaining Transformation

Transformation in cultural organisations is a slow process that requires empathy, listening, and bravery. The arts sector has a unique role in building a narrative that reflects the complexity of modern identity. As the workshop concluded: "The option of doing nothing should never be an option". Change begins by being willing to "have a go", even when it feels difficult.