

# SPOTLIGHT ON RACISM



LEEDS LGBT+ MAPPING PROJECT | 2018  
A FORUM CENTRAL PROJECT

# Background

In April 2017, the Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project published the community research report 'Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project: A snapshot of LGBT+ assets and challenges in Leeds'. This piece of research took stock of Leeds' LGBT+ landscape, mapping the assets of LGBT+ communities, including social and community groups, commercial bars, and health services.

Through this mapping, it was clear there is little provision or spaces in Leeds specifically for LGBT+ people who were also Black, Minority Ethnic (BME). The findings of the community survey indicated that many BME LGBT+ people did not feel included or safe in many existing LGBT+ spaces. We also found that racist hate crime was a community safety concern for LGBT+ people in Leeds.

National studies on BME LGBT+ experiences also indicate that racism is common across mainstream LGBT+ spaces in the UK. A 2017 UK-wide survey by the magazine The Fact Site found that 75% of black gay men, 86% of South Asian gay men, and 100% of Arab gay men said they had all experienced racism on the gay scene. In 2017, Manchester's LGBT Foundation published a state of the city report on the experiences of BME LGB people - it found that BME LGB people felt alienated and isolated from LGB communities and ethnic communities, and that they experienced greater health inequalities than the general LGB population.

This short piece of research attempts to scratch at the surface of BME LGBT+ experience in Leeds. Data was collected via a focus group and surveys. This qualitative method is important as foregrounds the voices of BME LGBT+ people in the city. This brief report is a summary of stories and experiences some LGBT+ BME people in Leeds have shared with the project. What is captured here does not represent the views of all BME LGBT+ people in the city, but highlights some strong and common themes that have surfaced through this community research.

We hope this document can be a springboard for discussion on experiences of BME LGBT+ people in Leeds, and in particular, experiences of exclusion, racism and Islamophobia.

\* Front cover design is taken from More Color, More Pride campaign in USA for better inclusion of non-white LGBT+ people. Black and brown have been added to the traditional 6 colour rainbow flag.

# Key messages

- Many felt that LGBT+ communities in Leeds lacked ethnic diversity.
- Some BME LGBT+ people did not feel welcome or included in LGBT+ spaces and communities in the city. This related to both commercial LGBT+ spaces and more alternative LGBT+ communities
- Experiences of racism on the commercial gay scene were common - much of this was sexualised racism
- There was an expectation among some BME LGBT+ people that they would encounter racism in LGBT+ communities
- It was important for BME LGBT+ people to be in community with other BME LGBT+ people
- There are health and well being impacts of racism for BME LGBT+ people. This include loneliness, isolation and poor mental health.
- BME LGBT+ people are travelling to Manchester, Bradford and London to find more inclusive and diverse LGBT+ communities. This suggests that despite the ethnic diversity of Leeds the city is lacking in and resources for BME LGBT+ people.
- It was felt by some that BME LGBT+ work was not supported by wider LGBT+ community in Leeds.

# Diversity and populations in Leeds

Leeds is the third largest city in the UK, and one of the fastest growing, with a population of 751,485. Leeds is also an ethnically diverse city with 140 ethnic groups including Black, Asian and other minority ethnic populations representing around 18.9%, according to the 2011 census data. With no nationwide collection of data on sexuality or trans status there is a lack of statistical evidence on the size of LGBT+ populations in the UK, however Stonewall estimates that 5–7% of the population is gay or lesbian.

# Experiences of racism and prejudice

## Racism and lack of ethnic diversity in LGBT+ scenes

A common perception amongst those who participated in the survey and focus group was that LGBT+ communities in Leeds were predominantly white communities. We found that many BME LGBT+ people did not feel welcome or included in LGBT+ spaces and communities in the city. This related to both commercial LGBT+ spaces and more alternative LGBT+ communities.

*It feels very white, very cis -gendered, very male and gay - and if you're not all four of those [things] there doesn't seem to be anywhere for you in the main LGBT+ community.*

*I think improvements could be made in terms of venues making BME/POC LGBT+ people of colour more welcome. I haven't had a great deal of trouble in venues etc. but people that identify within the same group as myself say that they won't attend certain venues due to attitudes, stigmas, stereotypes and racism.*

*I don't think the scene is particularly racist or xenophobic, but a bad experience has left me a little wary of going to places that seem to be mostly white and mostly men (I'm a cis-gendered man).*

*I think it's difficult because even like white queers are aware that the LGBT+ scene is racist and shit, and they are like we are better we've got our own space we're better than the white cis gays, but they're not...they are really not.*

There were some comments that alluded to racist performances from some drag queens in gay clubs and bars in Leeds. For many, this signaled to black and minority ethnic LGBT+ people that they were not valued and were objects of ridicule.

There were also examples given of racist cultural assumptions expressed about minority ethnic and religious communities; that BME communities are all homophobic and patriarchal. One participant said,

*I've got a female friend who's from Pakistani heritage, she's LGBT, and somebody has actually said to her 'I'm surprised you're allowed out the house'.*

A focus group participant of South Asian heritage said,

*I've played in football teams or been in gay clubs and straight away people have said 'How did your parents react to your sexuality?' or 'it must be so hard'.*

In the Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project report from April 2017, one person reported feeling driven to present himself differently in LGBT+ spaces, to conform with expectations and prevent 'suspicions'.

*I belong to a religious and ethnic minority and feel like I'm viewed with suspicion a lot. I often feel like I have to justify my presence and sometimes consciously dress a particular way to try and fit in with expectations of what LGBT people look like.*

Participants from both the focus group and the surveys shared their experiences of racism in Leeds' commercial gay scene - the areas of Lower Briggate and The Calls. Many people told stories about attention being drawn to their ethnicity or religion in ways that made them feel different and singled out. One black participant spoke about a time he visited a venue on the gay scene with other friends who were also black.

*When we walked in - I walked straight to the toilet - I heard the DJ make a comment about my friends being black who were walking in behind me, and then he started playing the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air theme tune as they come into the club. I was like "I'm actually out [of here], I'd rather piss myself than stay in here any longer"*

Another participant spoke about being subject to racist stereotyping in a LGBT+ venue, where, because they are black, it was assumed that they were selling drugs.

*I got approached by somebody and they were like 'hey do you sell cocaine' and I was like 'why?' and they were like 'you just look like you do' and I was like 'what does that mean?' and they were like 'well do you have any weed' and I was like 'no I don't have any drugs' – and then they were like 'oh yeah your not even drinking' and tried to make a joke of it, and I was like 'nah man you've just come up to me cause I'm the only black person here'.*

There were also stories of gay black men attempting to visit a gay venue in Leeds and being questioned about their motivations for coming to the venue, their and their sexuality. In some of these incidents, these men were not believed to be gay and refused entry.

A recent piece of survey research undertaken by the gay magazine, The Fact Site, reported similar stories about racial profiling of black men in gay venues. A 47-year-old white respondent from London told The Fact Site, "When I arrived at a gay club with a black friend, the door staff asked him whether he knew it was a gay club not me and when I walked around the club with him, people on the dancefloor kept stopping and asking him if he sold drugs. They didn't ask me the same thing."

However, not all people who engaged with this research had negative things to say about Leeds' LGBT+ communities and venues. Some people cited good experiences in city centre LGBT+ spaces.

## Sexualised racism

Many BME LGBT+ men reported that they had experienced racism while dating, and particularly while using online dating apps. This racism often manifested as the fetishization of BME people as exotic objects, or rejected on the basis of their ethnicity and 'inferiority'.

*Dating is difficult if you're a BME person; we are fetishized and treated like meat rather than people worth dating.*

Another participant said that they experienced this kind of sexual racism in clubs in Leeds, where men have said,

*'Well I'll only get with you if you've got a big penis - I wouldn't usually go for a black guy but if you've got a big penis then I'll do it'*

Discussion in the focus group touched on the idea that racism sometimes expresses itself as ownership over non-white people's bodies and lives. One participant talked about how common it was for people in gay bars and clubs to approach them to try and touch their hair without asking permission.

*And I do think that comes down to the racist mind of ownership over black bodies, black spaces, POC people - like they think 'I know you because I spent longer than 20 seconds with you and there's obviously not that much to you so I'm just gonna assume things about you and do stuff to you'. Like people touching my hair - that's one that happens. Someone spends longer than a few minutes talking to me and they think it's completely appropriate to approach me like that, and I'm like 'what kind of ownership do you think that you have over my body that we haven't discussed yet - because I haven't clocked any consent going on'*



# Understanding the pervasiveness of racism and lack of ethnic diversity within LGBT+ spaces and communities in Leeds

Some people saw the racism and islamophobia they had experienced in LGBT+ communities as a reflection of racism in Britain at large. Others felt that racism in LGBT+ communities and social scenes was amplified and more prevalent, and they expected to encounter more overt racism in commercial gay scenes than in other places in the city. One participant said,

*You know, you could just probably go sit in Three Legs pub and have less trouble than you would wandering down the gay end trying to get into Viaduct.*

In the focus group, participants tried to unpick and discuss why they thought that experiences of racism in LGBT+ communities were so common. Some participants thought that for some white LGBT+ people, belonging to a sexual minority makes them feel able to make offhand racist comments to BME LGBT+ people with impunity.

Some participants felt white LGBT+ people justified their racism through holding the belief that minority ethnic and religious communities are homophobic, as black and minority ethnic communities are often positioned as in opposition to LGBT+ communities. One participant said,

*[...]so you've got white LGBT people who are very quick to kind of condemn LGBT people who are of colour, to condemn them because they view our communities as being inherently homophobic. I think that's actually a big problem [...] yeah ok lot of us can experience a lot of things and it can be quite tough, but you can't just tarnish entire communities as being inherently homophobic and that is actually a big problem because it kind of gives them the grounding – or the armour if you like – to be like 'I'll be racist to you because your mum's homophobic'.*

One participant spoke about a tension between being seen as both insider and outsider within LGBT+ communities because of their race.

*I think on the one hand they lump us in with them, but also see us as outsiders. I think that there's this idea that BME people are more homophobic, and so we're not visible when you do go into LGBT+ spaces (their spaces) [...] so on the one hand they think that we're a part of them and they can talk about being minorities but on the other hand I think they almost want us to validate ourselves as being part of the LGBT+ community.*

In focus group discussions, participants talked about Leeds, and what they saw as the characteristics of the city. Some participants felt that although Leeds is an ethnically diverse city, it is also a racially segregated city.

*Why is this [segregation] happening in Leeds? If we were in Devon, I could understand. Because we're not a white city. We are a multicultural city.*

This opinion was held by both BME people who were born and grew up in Leeds, and those who had moved to Leeds as adults. In the focus group, participants discussed how ethnically divided neighbourhoods in Leeds are; that many neighbourhoods were majority white, majority black or majority Asian – and that this may impact on the diversity of LGBT+ communities.

*[...] something that my friends say who have come from places like London, is that they always think Leeds is really really white, and I sometimes think that perhaps in the city centre it seems like that. But then if you go outside of the city centre, it's not. But I just wonder why is it that this representation isn't so much in our city centre, or our LGBT spaces.*

*My Aunt was all up for me moving to Leeds [...]she was like 'Oh it's such a diverse City' etc. and was really up for it. But when she first visited and we were walking through town she actually stopped on Briggate and was like 'Where are the black people? Where are the Asian people? I can't see anyone here. I didn't think Leeds was like this - it's so white.' It's kind of like if you mention black people in Leeds...where is it assumed they live? Chapeltown. If you mention Asian people it's Harehills. And it's almost actually that people in Leeds are conditioned to live and stay in those places, it's like a wider reflection of Leeds as a whole, it's messed up.*

People also felt that there was a lack of accountability from LGBT+ venues and communities around racism and Islamophobia, and that this meant that racism and Islamophobia was unchecked and unchallenged in these spaces.

*Yeah it's difficult because you don't want to call the police on the only place that you're supposed to be able to go. It's like do you stand up for yourself on your own, there's a lack of protection from that stuff. There is no policy put in place to say that 'x y z will happen if x y z happens to you'. That doesn't exist in any space for LGBT+ people.*

*Social spaces need to be held accountable for not being inclusive, For example, lack of gender neutral toilets, cultural appropriative or racist behaviours in social spaces*

## Impacts of racism on LGBT+ BME people in Leeds

Feeling isolated was a significant consequence of racism and prejudice in LGBT+ scenes – because people felt they could not find belonging or welcome in mainstream LGBT+ communities, and because they were not able to find BME LGBT+ community in Leeds.

*LGBT spaces in Leeds only cater to 1 demographic (white) that perpetuates feelings of isolation*

*The lack of safe spaces is difficult for a lot of BAME LGBT people because many are unable to be 'out' in their family spaces due to religious or cultural pressures, this in turn creates more isolation for certain individuals.*

*Speaking to other Queer POCs I have discovered loneliness due to racism*

Despite Leeds being an ethnically diverse city, many people reported that they couldn't find spaces that centred LGBT+ BME people in Leeds, so they travelled to other places in the UK to access this – Rainbow Noir in Manchester, Spice in Bradford, and to London.

*It just got to the point where being the only Asian woman drunk or high in a club, it's just not fun anymore. So I would just say it was really isolating, and that for me had negative impacts on my mental health – so yeah I think Leeds is really lacking.*

There were a number of comments throughout the focus group discussions and the survey connecting the effects of racism on mental health. The negative impact of racism (and other prejudice and discrimination) on an individual's mental health has been well established. Mental health was the number one health and wellbeing concern for survey participants, and 17 of the 20 respondents said that they had experienced mental health difficulties that had impacted them severely in their day to day life in the last five years.

One participant spoke about trying to access mental health support through counselling, and experiencing culturally racist assumptions about their upbringing because of their ethnicity and religious background.

*I've accessed counselling that's LGBT+ focussed, but even all of the counsellors are white [...] I thought it would be better than other counsellors I'd had, but they still made all my difficulties about my ethnic and religious background...making comments like 'I bet it was really difficult growing up in a Muslim household, I bet your parents were really strict blah blah blah'*

This example highlights the difficulty of accessing mental health support that is culturally appropriate for both LGBT+ people and BME people.

## What LGBT+ BME people want from community in Leeds

When asked what kind of community people wanted to be part of, people talked about the desire to have 'real' relationships and connections with individuals, having access to affordable non- commercial and non- alcohol centred spaces to socialise, and engaging in activities that were cultural or teamwork driven.

*Things that are going to build real connections and real relationships you know, and real human connection [...] Yeah, like for example if your like doing rock climbing or something, and you have to like help each other you know – cause maybe somebody is not as good, or they need a bit of assistance with something, that's how you build that kind of connection- cause you're all working together towards something.*

*More spaces where our community can just hang out, It shouldn't have to be about drinking, food/clubbing or spending a lot/any money.*

*Art and sport related events that are not in bars or clubs that encourage teamwork and participation.*

There were a number of survey respondents who said BME led groups and activities and spaces in Leeds were most needed to support LGBT+ community.

*First of all I think BAME run groups are mostly needed for the community in Leeds so we can navigate our own discussions and events..*

There were a number of survey respondents who said BME led groups and activities and spaces in Leeds were most needed to support LGBT+ community.

*[...] for me I thought like having a safe space like a social group [...] we've talked about how Leeds does have BME communities but it seems we're all so isolated from each other. And how can we look at tackling racism in the wider LGBT+ community if we don't have any solidarity amongst ourselves - we don't know each other exist.*

*I don't think it's always necessarily about integrating [with mainstream LGBT+ communities] like part of me wants a Queer POC community that isn't like any other community. Do you know what I mean...there's a way that white queer stuff works, there's a way that white LGBT stuff works and I don't care for it.*

It was important for those in the discussion that LGBT+ BME community spaces were centred around celebrating BME lives and celebrating difference, as well as being spaces where people can share their experiences of racism or prejudice.

*When we get together and talk about being BME and LGBT+ there's two points that are raised, it's the racism we face and the assumption that our communities are also homophobic, but actually when you're around other people like you it just feels great. And often this positive narrative of actually I feel lucky, and I think having a place where you can celebrate that is really valuable. And you can share your experiences.*

*It'd be nice to be in a space where we [BME LGBT+ people] are the majority [...] I feel like we fight our fight alone.*

Some participants felt that there were ways in which BME led LGBT+ organising had been unsupported by wider LGBT+ community in Leeds, and that there was an unwillingness to share resources or platform.

# Conclusion

Racism and Islamophobia within LGBT+ communities is not particular to Leeds. For some participants, it seemed that Leeds was particularly marked by its lack of BME LGBT+ community, or that these communities were not as visible and dominant as white LGBT+ communities, and that as a consequence, BME LGBT+ people travelled outside the city to find community.

BME LGBT+ people in Leeds experience different faces of racism - some overt racial slurs and other more insidious cultural assumptions. Racism structures the lives of BME LGBT+ people in Leeds and limits their access to safe spaces in LGBT+ communities. These experiences of racism and isolation have health and wellbeing consequences.

While it is important to some that LGBT+ spaces are held to account for allowing racism and Islamophobia to flourish unchecked, this does not necessarily mean that BME LGBT+ people are overall seeking access to these spaces. For many, the fostering and building of BME led LGBT+ spaces and community is a priority over the inclusion in other spaces.

## About Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project

The LGBT+ Mapping Project is a Forum Central project. It started as a short piece of exploratory work commissioned by Leeds Community Foundation, in conjunction with Leeds City Council, as part of their commitment to making Leeds an LGBT+ inclusive city. It has since been funded by the Big Lottery to do influencing around the findings and recommendations from the original research 'A snapshot of LGBT+ assets and challenges in Leeds', and to do some further investigation into gaps identified.

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