

### **The Community Supermarkets Exploiting Vulnerable British Muslims during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Implications for Immunity, Physical/Mental Health, and Social Trust** (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020) By Dr Suriyah Bi

As mainstream supermarket shelves continue to empty, due to panic buying amidst the coronavirus pandemic, local community supermarkets in largely Muslim areas across the country are exploiting the most vulnerable. In poverty-stricken areas, such as Birmingham Hodge Hill, which is one of the **poorest constituencies** in the UK, such exploitative price hikes can have dire consequences.

The price of flour, rice, vegetables, herbs, and meat has in some cases increased by more than 150%, which could translate into a reduction in the quality of a balanced diet, thus **compromising health and immunity**. This comes at a time when many in Asian and Muslim communities **already suffer from underlying health issues** such as diabetes and heart disease making them **more susceptible to COVID-19**.

The price of meat and vegetables which allow for a balanced diet are currently being sold for 6.99, and 10.99 per kilo respectively. Rice bags are being sold at £38.99. The unaffordability of staple food will no doubt translate into the **malnourishment and reduced immunity** of an already vulnerable community and this will disproportionately reflect in **increased mortality rates**.

The prices of herbs such as garlic, ginger, coriander all of which are commonly used to flavour cultural foods such as curries and biryani giving them their distinct scent and taste, have trebled. A single garlic bulb is now selling for £2.59, which is usually at 18 pence per bulb. Coriander, usually at 29 pence per bunch is now selling for £1. Green chilies, which usually sold for £1.29 per kilo are now being sold at £15.38. Such flavourings and garnishes destabilise the way in which food is related to (sight, smell, taste) at a delicate time. This could have **severe consequences for mental health**, as cultural foods are known to be **sources of comfort and familiarity**.

The government yesterday confirmed that it was investigating the disproportionate number of deaths in the West Midlands, which based on such price hikes could trigger a domino effect and **inflate mortality rates within the region** further.

For society more broadly, these price hikes could have severe consequences for the concept of **social trust**, which is required to **prevent civil unrest**. If some in society are abusing this notion at an already delicate time, the consequences can be far reaching.

The **government must intervene** to ensure that this exploitative practice does not continue. This **pandemic should not serve to profit** business owners. If there are concerns about the **insecurity of the supply-chain** on the part of business owners - which could be driving these price hikes - a **financial package** that includes adequate support for shopkeepers should be put in place.

#### **Selected References and Resources**

Bi, S. 2020. The Community Supermarkets Exploiting Vulnerable British Muslims during the Coronavirus Pandemic. *Journal of British Muslim Studies*.

<https://www.britishmuslimstudies.com/post/the-community-supermarkets-exploiting-vulnerable-british-muslims-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

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