



Sajid Javid

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Sajid Javid: 770,000 people in England unable to speak English well

Communities secretary promises to expand teaching as he speaks of experiencing racist abuse

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Sajid Javid has revealed that 770,000 people living in England speak no English or hardly any, in a personal interview in which he described his own experience as a “six-year-old interpreter” for his Pakistani mother.

The communities secretary promised to expand the **teaching of English for immigrants** as he warned that up to 70% of those unable to speak the language were women, and most of them were from Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities.

Speaking exclusively to the Guardian ahead of the publication of a government green paper that will pledge £50m to boost integration in Britain, Javid said that his mother’s decision to learn English 15 years after arriving in the country “transformed her life”.

He said it enabled her to work for the family clothing business, build a new network of friends, and - years later - meant she could speak freely with his wife, Laura, and

her grandchildren.

He said the government wanted to use Wednesday's consultation document to tackle segregation by also: acting against cultural practices "not compatible with the British way of life" such as polygamy; tackling disproportionately low take-up rates of free childcare by Asian women; and using the roll-out of universal credit to help target ethnic minorities and help them to integrate better.

In the green paper, the government says that over three quarters of a million people in England speak the language poorly or not at all.

Javid said: "We estimate that there [are] 770,000 people that live in [England] that speak hardly any or no English. That figure will be in the report. And most of those people - we estimate 60 to 70% - are women. And most of those women, in turn, are of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin."

Javid said the figures, which were derived from census data, were critical, because "if you don't speak English then there is no way you can take full advantage of the opportunities that modern Britain has to offer you".

In a frank interview, Javid, one of Britain's most high profile Muslim politicians revealed how he had been subjected to regular racist attacks on social media - echoing a similar admission by the **London mayor, Sadiq Khan**.

Javid said that he issued warnings to others wanting to pursue a career in politics.

"You get a lot of stick in this job, and I don't mean political opposition that is part of your job, but real abuse. And unfortunately if you are from an ethnic minority that may include racial or religious abuse," he added.

"So I would warn people that you have got to be ready to take that, and if you are not, then you should not be thinking about a public service career."

He described the **"Punish a Muslim" letter** that had been sent to people in several cities and **to four Labour MPs** as "sick" and a crime, adding that he had "not yet" received one.

The cabinet minister, **whose father was a Pakistani bus driver**, said that British society was much more diverse and united than when he was a school child. He said he remembered at times "being called Paki and people physically attacking me for being a different colour".

"But we also have to recognise there are too many communities that are still very segregated and therefore divided," he said, talking about specific measures that the government will unveil in the integration green paper.

As well as unveiling five pilot areas - Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest - to attempt integration measures including a boost in English teaching, Javid said the document would include:

a cross-government review of language teaching, with a focus on hard-to-reach communities.

a government consultation on changing the marriage laws to make it illegal to have a **religious marriage that has not been preceded by a civil marriage**, amid evidence of men in some Muslim communities using unofficial ceremonies to have more than one wife

a warning that the take-up of free childcare is significantly lower among women from minority ethnic, particularly Asian, communities - limiting work opportunities and the integration of children

assessing an Australian-style scheme under which new arrivals in the country are given support for many more years about how to take up employment opportunities

The paper is, in part, a response to the **review of social integration by Dame Louise Casey**, who criticised successive governments for failing to keep up with the “unprecedented pace and scale of immigration” that had left some communities increasingly divided.

She also highlighted “deeply regressive religious and cultural practices, especially when it comes to women”.

Javid said that he believed that minority ethnic women were too often the ones who were denied opportunities and said the policies being unveiled were as much about “women’s rights as integration”.

“I have three girls and that makes me think more about what sort of country I want my kids to grow up in,” he said.

Javid echoed Casey’s suggestion that previous governments had been “too politically correct” to tackle the questions of segregation, particularly for many women. But he said that while sexism did exist in some communities, the drivers were complicated.

Describing his early childhood in Rochdale, he said that segregated communities meant that women like his mother could live much of their lives speaking Punjabi and not interacting with people from other ethnic groups.

“I used to go to the doctor’s surgery with her - not because I was ill, but because I had to interpret for her. I was six or seven and an interpreter,” he said.

But when the family moved to Bristol, which was more integrated, and his father opened up a clothes shop, his mother was persuaded to take up English. “She started working and made friends ... All her grandchildren speak English. She speaks to my wife in English. It is transformative in every way.”

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