

THE LABELLING OF RELIGIOUSLY SLAUGHTERED MEAT IN THE UK: AN INDUSTRY AND CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract – The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Shechita UK have been leading campaigns to promote awareness about their methods of killing animals for food, insisting that their religious way of killing result in no compromise to animal welfare when compared to conventionally slaughter. However, further than the welfare debate, it seems peculiar and inappropriate that consumers do not get informed whether the meat they buy from supermarkets is religiously or conventionally slaughtered.

To establish whether the UK should enforce the mandatory labelling of religiously slaughtered meat within its supply chains, a mixture of qualitative data from industry interviews and quantitative data through the distribution of a consumer questionnaire were performed.

Overall the outcome highlighted concerns including the mistrust within the halal industry, alongside fears raised regarding anti-Semitism and Islamophobia if labelling is undertaken in a biased manner. Christians and those of no-religion advocate the labelling of such meat, alongside expressing concern regarding the welfare of animals slaughtered without prior stunning.

For the mutual benefit of the Muslim community, those of Christian faith and of no religion the results of this study indicate a recommendation for the mandatory labelling of religiously slaughtered meat.

I. INTRODUCTION

The religious slaughter of animals for both the Islamic and Jewish faiths is steeped in historical context [1]. With a growing multicultural population in the UK there is an increased production of religiously slaughtered meat. Whilst labelling is currently in place for halal and kosher meat sold to the designated communities, a percentage of religiously slaughtered meat is being shifted into the conventional supply chains and sold un-labelled [3].

The debate regarding religious slaughter of meat and thereafter the labelling has reached parliamentary level at the EU, and has also been debated within UK parliament. With increasing media coverage, the topic of religious slaughter

and then after the labelling has been put under the national spotlight in recent months. As such, there was urgent need for research to be carried out as to the industry perspective of religious slaughter alongside consumer opinion from a cross section of the population.

With a growing desire for increased consumer choice this study aims to analyse the industry and consumer perspective of religious slaughter labelling from a variety of religious backgrounds.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Industries opinion and stance on the labelling of religiously slaughtered meat was studied by conducting a number of interviews. As this is a very emotive topic that has differing significant to those of varying religious beliefs, one key objective of the interviews was the contacting of different organisations each representing a different viewpoint of religious slaughter, the Halal Food Authority (HFA) representing the views of the Muslim community whilst Shechita UK of represents the views of the UK Jewish community. With their current research into the possibility of a voluntary halal assurance scheme, the organisation for the English beef and sheep industry (EBLEX) were a priority to contact in terms of labelling possibility and opinion within the industry. As the welfare of the animals slaughtered without stunning is one topic at the heart of this debate contacting Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) was imperative in understanding, from a religiously unbiased stance, the welfare perspective of religious slaughter from this charity [2].

The consumer opinion and perception of labelling was also examined through questionnaire. Responses from consumers of differing religious background allowed for unbiased results. Skew analysis was used in this study to determine any patterns of behaviour.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen in figure 4.1, there is a relatively even collection of data from those of Muslim, Jewish, Christian belief and those of no religion. The lower data collection for those of a Jewish faith could be accredited to the smaller Jewish population in comparison to those of Christian and Muslim communities within the UK.

The consumer opinion of labelling of religiously slaughtered meat was met with a mixed response. The results from the industry interview signify that a possible explanation for the skew results of -1.98 for the Muslim population in terms of advocating labelling of religiously slaughtered meat could be attributed to the high level of miss trust within the halal industry. Theoretically the mandatory labelling of halal meat could prove to be of a twofold benefit, with the Muslim communities able to confidently purchase halal meat whilst those of a Christian faith and those of no-religion having their desire for the labelling of such meat that was apparent through the irrefutable negative skew analysis results for these two demographics. Carcasses rejected from the kosher food chain could evidently not be labelled as kosher. Thus, labelling would theoretically be required to state the slaughter method, and primarily that of the slaughter of animals without prior stunning.

As for the impact on the supply chain if mandatory labelling was to be introduced. The interview with Shechita UK stated that the further labelling of kosher meat could not be authenticated outside of the kosher food chain [4]. This was a concern also highlighted by the HFA in which it was noted that full traceability of the supply chain would, at present, be unattainable. Conclusively the feasibility of accurate labelling of all religiously slaughtered meat irrespective of market destination is met with a number of significant difficulties.

A significant outcome that can be drawn from this study is the realisation that both the socio-political and the socio-religious elements certainly must be treated with the upmost respect, yet so must the desires of those consumers who wish, for either ethical or perceived welfare grounds, not to consume

such meat. The debate regarding the labelling and indeed the practice of religious slaughter will foreseeably gather increased coverage in the coming months and years.

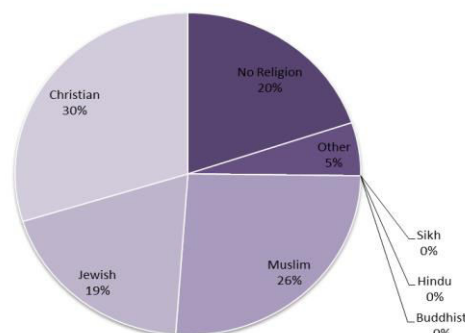


Figure 1. The percentages of the religious breakdown in response to the questionnaire

IV. CONCLUSION

The decision to label religiously slaughtered meat must not be taken lightly and simply placing a sticker on a box of fraudulently processed meat indicating it to be halal or kosher shall not suffice. Would the recognition in law for such meat reduce the fraudulent claims that are both made now and undoubtedly would be made if mandatory labelling was to be introduced? Possibly, yet it shall be through increased transparency, auditing, a heightened number of spot checks and confidence in the certification bodies that shall be needed if mandatory labelling is to be introduced.

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