

**Written evidence from Professor Imran Awan, Professor of Criminology,
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As authors of a number of trailblazing peer-reviewed academic papers¹, several books that push the boundaries on our understanding of Islamophobia² including the books, *Islamophobic hate crime*³ and the first ever *International Handbook of Islamophobia*⁴, we have spent our whole academic careers, researching and investigating Islamophobic hate crimes. Drawing on our extensive ground-breaking research and empirical findings, we provide a brief outline below of some of the key issues from an evidenced-based approach on the drivers of Gendered Islamophobic hate crime and the need to define Islamophobia for victims, stakeholders and policymakers.

Introduction

There has been a spike in racist and Islamophobic hate crime, following the tragic murder of three children in Southport on 29 July 2024 (Guardian, 2024). The far-right riots across England and in Northern Ireland have been fuelled by false claims circulated online that the perpetrator was a Muslim (BBC, 2024). The Muslim Women's Network (2024) surveyed its members on how safe they felt in the UK before and after the riots. Three-quarters of Muslims stated that they were worried about their safety – a rise of almost 60% since the week of the riots. For victims, it is often difficult to isolate the online threats from the intimidation, violence, and abuse that they suffer offline. Moreover, female victims live in fear because of the possibility of online threats materialising in the real world. In this context, Islam and Muslims find themselves under siege. Muslim men have emerged as the new 'folk devils' of popular and media imagination, being portrayed as the embodiment of extremism and terrorism, whilst Muslim women have emerged as a sign of gender subjugation in Islam, being perceived as resisting integration by wearing a headscarf or face veil. Such stereotypes provide fertile ground for expressions of Islamophobia in the public sphere. It is

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³ <https://www.routledge.com/Islamophobic-Hate-Crime-A-Student-Textbook/Awan-Zempi/p/book/9781138552708>

⁴ <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-International-Handbook-of-Islamophobia/Zempi-Awan/p/book/9780367783914>

important to highlight that Islamophobic hate crime is also intersectional. This is particularly the case for the lived experiences of Muslim women who face a 'triple penalty': being women, being Muslim and being racially minoritised.

The visibility of Muslim identity

- Evidence shows that Islamophobia is highly gendered. Muslim women are more likely to be attacked or abused than men in public settings, particularly if they are visibly Muslim (for example, wearing Islamic clothing such as a headscarf, face veil, abaya), and the largest proportion of perpetrators remain white males.⁵
- The visual markers of Islam are the tools for identification upon which Islamophobia can be expressed. This approach demonstrates why certain individuals and groups are more likely to become targets for hostility than others.
- The veil ban across Europe stigmatises veiled Muslim women as 'criminals', thereby potentially 'legitimising' acts of violence towards them when they are seen in public. In this sense, the law increases the sense of vulnerability of veiled Muslim women in the public sphere.
- As such, the threat of Islamophobic hate crime has long-lasting effects for individual victims including making them afraid to leave their homes and feeling like 'social lepers' and 'social outcasts'.⁶
- As a result, a common sensation cited by veiled Muslim women is the panic attacks, worry, extreme anxiety and depression, which was said to derive from the fear of having to endure future victimisation when in public.
- Muslim women are often reluctant to leave the house through fear of being attacked particularly on the street, in parks, in shops and on public transport. However, some veiled Muslim women described feeling like 'prisoners in their own home'.

⁵ Zempi, I., 2014. *Uncovering Islamophobia: The victimisation of veiled Muslim women*. Leicester: University of Leicester.

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‘Trigger’ Events

- The prevalence and severity of Islamophobic hate crimes are influenced by ‘trigger’ events of local, national and international significance.
- Islamophobic hate crimes increase following ‘trigger’ events as they operate to galvanise tensions and sentiments against the suspected perpetrators and groups associated with them.
- Evidence shows that Islamophobic hate crimes have increased significantly following ‘trigger’ attacks including terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam.⁷

Intersectionality

- Intersectionality theory stems from the work of western feminists of colour and critical race theorists (McCall 2005). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the term ‘intersectionality’ to mean a crossroads where different identities intersect.
- Intersectionality argues that social identities are not independent but the multiple social identities intersect to create unique experiences of oppression. This framework is important because it provides members of marginalised or disadvantaged groups with a voice.
- This shows that the vulnerability of Muslim women to Islamophobic attacks depends upon the visibility of their Muslim identity coupled with the visibility of ‘other’ (perceived) aspects of their identity such as age, race, disability, sexual orientation, body shape and size, in parallel with other situational factors.
- The likelihood that a Muslim woman will suffer Islamophobic victimisation depends heavily upon the intersections of religion, gender, identity, space as well as media reports of trigger events, that is local, national and international events related to Islam and Muslims.

⁷ https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-International-Handbook-of-Islamophobia/Zempi-Awan/p/book/9780367783914?srsId=AfmBOoqRNC_2hW3zwKFRxtrO1GCjWBQ2H8lQcFx-aavXlBjJeeNQjfvT

- The wearing of the veil does not necessarily make a Muslim woman vulnerable. Rather, it is how this identity intersects with other aspects of this woman's identity, such as being visibly disabled, elderly, or pregnant and how this identity intersects with other situational factors that make her vulnerable in the eyes of the perpetrator.

Individual impacts

- Being a victim of any kind of crime can have devastating and long-term impacts upon individuals including emotional, psychological, behavioural, physical and financial effects. However, victims who have been targeted on the basis of their perceived 'difference' are likely to experience a host of negative emotions that are qualitatively distinct from those experienced following victimisation that is not motivated by hate or fear towards the 'Other'.
- The emotional impacts of Islamophobic hate crime can be especially severe, with victims suffering a loss of confidence or feelings of vulnerability after the incident. They are also more than likely to experience fear, difficulty sleeping, anxiety or panic attacks or depression.
- Female victims' responses to Islamophobic hate crime may include downplaying or perhaps denying parts of their self so as to reduce the potential risk for victimisation, which may lead to the 'invisibility' of certain identities.
- Actual and potential victims may attempt to make themselves as 'invisible' as possible to try and reduce the potential for abuse. A decision not to veil, a decision to reduce travel by foot and public transport, and a decision to avoid visiting specific public places, are all ways of trying to reduce the risk and manage the fear of Islamophobic victimisation.
- Experiences of Islamophobic victimisation impact upon the way in which Muslim women and men express their 'Muslimness' particularly in relation to their outward displays of faith, body presentation and dress.

The need to define Islamophobia

- Hate crime is the umbrella concept used in its broadest sense to describe incidents motivated by hate, hostility or prejudice towards an individual's identity. Definitions of 'hate crime' vary from one country to another. In England and Wales, the central point of reference is the operational definition offered by the College of Policing (2014), which earmarks hate crime as offences that are motivated by hostility or prejudice on particular grounds – race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status and disability.
- From this perspective, Islamophobic hate crime is defined as any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated wholly or partly by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion that is, their Muslim religion. **However, this definition fails to capture the specificities of Islamophobic, anti-Muslim hostility, bias and prejudice.**
- We argue that the British Government should adopt our working definition of Islamophobia, which is defined as follows: ***“A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim.”***
- The significance of this definition is two-fold: firstly, it emphasises the link between institutional levels of Islamophobia and manifestations of such attitudes, triggered by the visibility of the victim's (perceived) Muslim identity. Secondly, this approach also interprets Islamophobia as a 'new' form of racism, whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to the British/Western values. Accordingly, this conceptual framework indicates that victimisation can be 'ideological' and institutional (for example pertaining to ideas and concepts that victimise individuals or groups) or it can have material consequences for those who are victimised (for example through verbal and physical abuse). Within this framework, Islamophobia can be interpreted through the lens of cultural racism whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to 'British values' and 'national identity', whilst 'visible' Muslims are viewed as 'culturally dangerous' and threatening the 'British/Western way of life'.

- The notion of cultural racism is largely rooted in frames of inclusion and exclusion, specifying who may legitimately belong to a particular national, or other community whilst, at the same time, determining what that community's norms are and thereby justifying the exclusion of those whose religion or culture assign them elsewhere. From this premise, there is such a strong attachment to 'our' way of life that creates boundaries between 'them' and 'us' founded upon difference rather than inferiority. In light of popular debates about British values and national identity, immigration and community cohesion, colour racism has ceased to be acceptable; nevertheless, a cultural racism which emphasises the 'Other', alien values of Muslims has increased. In this context, cultural difference is understood as 'cultural deviance' and equated with the notion of cultural threat.
- Following this line of argument, Islamophobia manifests itself as an expression of anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim hostility towards individuals identified as Muslims on the basis of their 'visible' Islamic identity. Expressions of Islamophobia include verbal abuse and harassment, threats and intimidation, physical assault and violence (including sexual violence), property damage, graffiti, offensive mail and literature, and offensive online and internet abuse.
- Islamophobia as a form of racism It is important to draw out the differences between different groups. In this respect, a more revealing picture emerges in relation to experiences of victimisation. Prior to 9/11 it could be argued that the status as visibly practising Muslims did not raise the risk of abuse or violence. However, following trigger events such as Brexit, victims of racist attacks – often described by perpetrators as 'Paki-bashing' – in the 1980s and victims of Islamophobia post 9/11.
- Islamophobic victimisation was understood as a 'new' form of racism on the basis that there was a shift from race to religion. While the 'old' racism was based on an explicit belief on biological superiority, the 'new' racism is based on notions of religious and cultural superiority.
- In light of the recent racist attacks, experiences of Islamophobic victimisation feels like 'history repeating itself'. In our research, converts to Islam have discussed the sharp contrast in people's behaviour towards them after they wore the veil. On one level, when a veiled Muslim woman is targeted the offender will not be aware of the ethnic identity of the victim.

- From this perspective, white veiled Muslim women are routinely perceived as British converts and thus they are targeted for their decision to convert to Islam. In the eyes of their abusers, converts have supposedly betrayed the British values and the British way of life, as the following comments indicate.

Recommendations

The need to define Islamophobia

1. The following is our working definition of Islamophobic hate crime which we recommend should be adopted by the British Government as a working definition of Islamophobia to assist policymakers, the police, CPS and victims of Islamophobic hate crime. Islamophobic hate crime is a: **“A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim.”**

2. **Address issues around social mobility**

Muslims are the most disadvantaged faith group in the labour market in the UK. According to Social Mobility Commission (2017), Muslim women experience the greatest economic disadvantages than any other faith group in the UK.⁸

3. **The public should intervene and assist victims of anti-Muslim hate**

Victims do not necessarily want physical action but just a phone call to assist the police. We believe frontline workers should be trained in how best to respond for victims who have report Islamophobic hate crime.

4. **Anti-Muslim hate crime awareness and visibility**

Better awareness of what gendered Islamophobic hate crime is and what people can do to help reassure victims and build confidence. We found that in many public spaces the visibility and awareness of what victims of Islamophobic hate crime should do is not visible. Posters, videos from victims and information leaflets that help victims on third-party reporting mechanisms are important.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/young-muslims-in-the-uk-face-enormous-social-mobility-barriers>

5. Improving the lives of victims of gendered Islamophobic hate crime

We feel much more work should be done to better understand the causes and drivers of gendered anti-Muslim hate crime. In particular, we feel the emotional stress and anxiety factors require further action from within a cross-range of partners such as the health sector. We feel that such services can be shaped within each geographical location and be used by community and third-party organisations to help reassure communities.

6. Public transport should be made safer

We argue that public transport staff should be given appropriate training with regards helping victims of gendered Islamophobic hate crime. In particular, we feel that the night-time economy which involves taxi drivers and restaurant owners, should be linked with crime prevention strategies across the UK. A campaign of powerful stories and posters should also be used across public transport, such as on buses and the tube.

7. The quality of support provided to victims

We feel that the services provided to victims of gendered Islamophobic hate crime needs to be improved. In particular, in many cases for victims of gendered Islamophobic hate crime are unaware as to who they can approach to assist them. We feel that local and community- based interventions should be properly resourced.

8. Training provided for frontline workers

We argue that for those on the front-line such as teachers, transport services and the police that they also should be provided with training and educating on how best to respond to gendered forms of Islamophobic hate crime incidents. We believe this could assist the general public in feeling safer and therefore more willing to report hate crimes.

9. *Social Media Training in tackling online hate speech*

We argue that for a long-term sustainable change of attitudes, social media training should be provided for teachers and children in schools which can help equip young people from an early age in tackling cyber gendered Islamophobic hate.

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