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Gendered Islamophobia: Evidence of Disproportionate Abuse Against Muslim Women and Girls

Abstract

This paper examines the emerging evidence that Islamophobic abuse is not experienced uniformly across Muslim communities but disproportionately affects women and girls. Recent data from anti-hate organisations and academic research reveal that female Muslims particularly those wearing visibly religious attire such as hijabs face higher rates of verbal, physical, and online abuse compared to their male counterparts. By analysing trends from the United Kingdom and beyond, this paper explores the intersection of gender, religion, and racism, and discusses the societal and psychological impacts of such abuse. In addition, the paper considers contributing factors, including media representations, political rhetoric, and longstanding stereotypes that intensify the vulnerability of Muslim women. Finally, the discussion turns to policy implications and recommendations for developing gender-sensitive frameworks to effectively address and mitigate the harms of Islamophobic abuse.

Keywords: Islamophobia, gendered abuse, Muslim women, hate crimes, policy, intersectionality

Introduction

“Why do we hate?” This fundamental question encapsulates the roots of prejudice, which often stem from ignorance. Racism, bigotry, and other forms of discrimination are not innate but learned behaviours (Allen, 2010). As educators and leaders, it is essential to challenge this ignorance, fostering a deeper understanding that all humanity shares one race: the human race. Acknowledging this interconnectedness is critical to addressing Islamophobia, which, like racism and anti-Semitism, reflects a systemic issue deeply embedded in societal structures and attitudes (Said, 1978; Modood, 2005). The term "Islamophobia" broadly refers to anti-Muslim prejudice and bigotry yet debates about its precise definition complicate efforts to address it. While the term is frequently understood as hostility, fear, and discrimination against Muslims, its varied interpretations in academic and policy circles create challenges in implementing cohesive responses (Bleich, 2012). This form of prejudice operates through multiple avenues, including misinformation spread via social media, biased

portrayals in traditional media, and the influence of far-right rhetoric (Feldman and Stocker, 2019). According to the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), “there is a 73% surge in Islamophobic assaults in 2024”. The recent Southport riots illustrate the destructive power of misinformation in fuelling Islamophobia. A tragic incident wrongly attributed to a Muslim immigrant was manipulated by far-right groups to incite anger and violence. Social media platforms amplified these false claims, spreading fear and prejudice across communities (Mohamed, 2024). Such events emphasise the urgency of addressing Islamophobia and highlight its embeddedness within societal narratives. Media outlets perpetuate negative portrayals of Muslims, framing them as threats to “British values” such as democracy and gender equality (APPG, 2018). These portrayals reinforce a “them versus us” mentality, creating divisions and exacerbating tensions. Awan et al. (2020) emphasise that colonial discourses fostered a “strong attachment to ‘our’ way of life, creating boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ founded upon difference rather than inferiority.” This framing has contributed to systemic marginalisation and discrimination against Muslims in contemporary Britain.

Political rhetoric adds to this and plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Islam. Over the years, scholars like Allen (2010), Bleich (2012) and Bhatti (2021) argued that Islamophobia functions similarly to racism, perpetuating systemic inequalities and marginalising Muslim communities. According to Bleich (2011), Islamophobia is a term broadly defined as prejudice, hostility, or discrimination directed at Muslims has long been recognised as a ‘pervasive social ill’. While Muslims are susceptible to its damaging effects, recent trends indicate that abuse is not experienced equally by all. Muslim women and girls are emerging as especially vulnerable targets. Visible markers such as the *hijab* or *niqab* often mark these women as “other,” making them easy targets for abuse in both public and online spaces (Amnesty International, 2023). This visibility often leads to Muslim women and girls becoming targets of discrimination, verbal abuse, physical attacks, and structural inequalities. The intersection of gender and religion exacerbates their vulnerability, as they face both misogyny and religious prejudice. Thus, this paper shifts focus from traditional discussions of Islamophobia’s historical roots and political rhetoric to an examination of gendered patterns in reported abuse. By highlighting recent statistics and case studies, the analysis emphasises the urgent need for gender-sensitive policy interventions to protect those who are most at risk. The paper first reviews the latest evidence and statistics regarding the disproportionate targeting of Muslim women. It then explores the factors contributing to these trends, including media portrayals and intersectional discrimination. Finally, policy recommendations are discussed to provide a framework for mitigating the abuse and supporting affected communities.

I. Evidence of Recent Trends in Reported Abuse

Muslims come from diverse ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds. This is reflected in the global nature of Islam as a religion. According to MCB, the Muslim population is varied due to the numerous ethnic groups that co-exist from South Asian, Arab, African and White converts. It is revealed that “46% of Muslims are 24 years old or younger” (2025). Recent reports from the organisation monitoring hate crimes indicate that Islamophobic abuse has taken on a distinctly gendered character. For example, data collected by the anti-Islamophobia organisation Tell MAMA (Muslim Anti-Abuse) reveal that a substantial majority of reported incidents involve female victims. According to their 2023 report, nearly “65% of all Islamophobic incidents in urban cities have been directed against Muslim women and girls” (Tell MAMA 2023). When compared to male Muslim victims, the data are unequivocal. While men are also subjected to hate crimes, the nature and frequency of abuse

against women are distinct. For example, studies have documented that male victims are more likely to encounter generic or politically motivated insults, whereas female victims are frequently targeted with misogynistic abuse that compounds their experiences of marginalisation. In one analysis, “male victims represented approximately 35% of reported incidents, compared to 65% for female victims” (Tell MAMA, 2023).

One significant factor contributing to the disproportionate targeting of Muslim women is the visibility of their religious identity (Shaw, 2024). The hijab, niqab, and other forms of Islamic dress serve as immediately recognisable markers of religious affiliation. This visibility not only makes Muslim women more identifiable as Muslims but also subjects them to heightened scrutiny and stereotyping (Bhatti, 2021). In environments where negative stereotypes about Islam are widespread, such markers can transform everyday encounters into opportunities for abuse. Historically, Muslim women, especially those wearing Islamic clothing, have been primary targets of Islamophobic attacks. Another report in 2024 by Tell MAMA highlighted that in its first year of operation, “70% of physical incidents were perpetrated against *hijab* or *niqab*-wearing women”. Many of the attackers were white males aged between 20 and 50. The organisation Tell MAMA published that in 2024 alone it had received 5,837 reports of anti-Muslim hate which is the highest annual figure to date. This marks a substantial increase from 3,767 reports in 2023 and 2,201 in 2022, reflecting a 165% rise over two years. While there is clear evidence of a rise in anti-Muslim hate incidents in the UK, with Muslim women being disproportionately targeted, there is a lack of detailed, recent statistics specifically addressing attacks and abuse against young Muslim women (Ahmed, 2017; Shaw, 2024). This highlights the necessity for more comprehensive data collection to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by this demographic.

Quantitative analyses from recent years paint a stark picture of gendered statistics. According to findings by the European Network Against Racism (2022), Muslim women are disproportionately targeted by Islamophobic abuse across multiple domains. This study examined hate crime statistics across several major UK cities and researchers found that “more than 70% of reported verbal harassment incidents are directed at this group, emphasising the pervasive nature of hate speech aimed at female Muslims” (Ibid). Although physical attacks occur less frequently than verbal abuse, nearly 60% of such cases involved female victims, revealing that the threat of violence is also significantly gendered. Furthermore, another survey conducted in late 2022 indicated that “75% of those experiencing online Islamophobic abuse were women” (Ibid), many of whom described sustained harassment campaigns on social media platforms. These statistics collectively illustrate the multifaceted ways in which Muslim women are singled out, both in public spaces and online, amplifying their vulnerability and highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions. These findings indicate that while Islamophobia affects the entire Muslim community, the intersection of religious and gender-based discrimination leaves women and by extension - young Muslim girl- particularly vulnerable and exposed to abuse.

Similar findings have emerged over the years from surveys conducted by MCB in 2021, revealed also that young Muslim women are particularly prone to harassment in both public spaces and online. For example, the survey showed that young Muslim women frequently report experiencing verbal abuse, derogatory comments, and targeted online harassment. They are often subjected to comments that critique their dress code of the *hijab* or *abayya*, for aspects of their lifestyle as Muslims or for their Islamic faith. Many respondents noted that they receive hateful remarks often linked to their visible religious attire over social media platforms and while commuting on public transport or engaging in everyday activities in

public. The remarks, in extreme cases, lead to physical incidents of violence against them such as the pulling of their headscarves, being spat on, thrown with water, touched or pushed. These real-world examples of violence highlight how such abuse forces many young Muslim women to alter their routines, such as avoiding certain public spaces or reducing social outings to protect their safety (Shaw, 2024).

II. Contributing Factors to Gendered Islamophobia

The UK's Prevent strategy, introduced in 2015, aims to combat extremism but has faced criticism for disproportionately targeting Muslims. Critics (Qurashi, 2018; Skoczylis, 2020; Bhatti, 2021; and Farrell, 2023) argue that Prevent fosters suspicion and marginalisation within Muslim communities, undermining trust and exacerbating feelings of exclusion. For example, Amnesty International's report (2023) highlights instances of wrongful referrals, often based on subjective judgments rather than concrete evidence. Opponents of the APPG's definition claim it could weaken Prevent by protecting "Muslimness" and hindering counterterrorism efforts (Kennedy, 2019). However, data suggests that Prevent's flaws stem not from such definitions but from its implementation, which has been criticised for profiling and surveillance rather than effective prevention (Qurashi, 2018). Several scholars like Skoczylis (2020); Farrell, (2023) and Shaw (2024) have called for reforming Prevent (and Fundamental British Values (FBV) within education) to address its discriminatory impact as an essential step towards building trust and inclusivity within Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

The abuse targeted at Muslim women is frequently laced with misogyny and political rhetoric and media narratives have a profound impact on public perceptions. For instance, high-profile comments such as Boris Johnson's infamous comparison of veiled Muslim women to "letterboxes" serve to trivialise and objectify these women, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about their perceived inferiority and 'Otherness' (Zempi, 2020). Similarly, Suella Braverman's recent characterisation of pro-Palestinian demonstrators as "hate marchers" exacerbated tensions, culminating in violent clashes (Baker, 2023). Such remarks not only undermine the dignity of Muslim women but also contribute to a culture where gendered abuse is normalised (Tell MAMA, 2019). Moreover, the intersection of Islamophobia and sexism means that Muslim women often face a dual burden. They are not only viewed through the lens of their religious identity but are also subjected to gender-based discrimination. This "double jeopardy" amplifies their vulnerability, as they must navigate both Islamophobic and misogynistic tropes in their daily lives.

The concept of intersectionality is essential for understanding the heightened risk faced by Muslim women. In their case, women are at a double disadvantage; on the one hand due to their race and on the other due to their Islamic faith. Intersectionality, according to Crenshaw (1989), explains how overlapping social identities such as race, religion, and gender compound experiences of discrimination. For Muslim women, the intersection of religious prejudice and gender discrimination creates a unique and severe form of vulnerability. Notably, recent qualitative research has shown that Muslim girls experience or early exposure to both overt and subtle forms of abuse can indeed have long-term psychological and social consequences on their health and well-being (MCB, 2021). One might highlight a key contributing factor that reflects the extent of modern advancements namely, the digital age. It has opened new avenues for hate speech and abuse with social media platforms acting as amplifiers of prejudice (Awan et al., 2020). A 2023 report by Amnesty International noted that Muslim women are significantly more likely to be targeted by online harassment

campaigns. The anonymity and rapid dissemination of content online mean that abuse can be relentless and far-reaching (Zempi, 2020). For many Muslim women, the online sphere has become a hostile environment where they face not only Islamophobic slurs but also misogynistic and gendered threats that discourage their full participation in public discourse (Amnesty International, 2023). The report also revealed that media outlets play a critical role in shaping public perceptions, and with that power comes the responsibility to represent Muslim women fairly. For example, journalistic standards should be revised to avoid sensationalism and stereotyping, particularly in coverage of issues related to Islam and gender. Campaigns that highlight the positive contributions of Muslim women and challenge negative narratives are essential for shifting public opinion and reducing the incidence of abuse.

III. Impact on Muslim Women and Girls

In recent years, there have been several reported incidents of physical attacks against young Muslim women in the UK. First was an assault on a 14-Year-Old Muslim Schoolgirl in Sheffield (*Muslim News*, October 2024). The 14-year-old Muslim schoolgirl was assaulted by a 40-year-old woman on a bus in Sheffield. The attack, which included physical violence and Islamophobic slurs, continued outside the bus. A second incident was a headscarf removal incident in London (July 2024). Videos surfaced online showing an individual in West London forcibly removing headscarves from Muslim women in public. The attacker targeted women walking through Kensington, pulling off their *hijabs* and leaving them visibly shocked. These attacks may include groping, or gendered slurs, reinforcing the idea that Muslim women and girls' bodies are sites of control or domination. These incidents of abuse and violence anger many of the Muslim communities who took to social media criticising the behaviour of the attacker and calling for police intervention. Thirdly, the murder of Aya Hachem in Blackburn (May 2024). Aya Hachem is a 19-year-old Muslim woman who was fatally shot in a drive-by shooting while shopping in Blackburn. The investigation treated her death as a targeted attack (Atta, 2025). These incidents are only those reported and caught the media's attention. Many incidents go unreported, and victims feel overlooked or silenced (Zempi, 2020). These examples show the persistent threats and challenges young Muslim women continue to face in the UK.

The cumulative impact of sustained abuse can have profound psychological effects. Research indicates that the experience of persistent Islamophobic abuse is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among victims (Amnesty International, 2023). For Muslim women and girls, the combination of verbal, physical, and online abuse contributes to a pervasive sense of vulnerability and isolation (Zempi, 2020). Studies conducted by mental health organisations in 2022 revealed that victims of gendered Islamophobic abuse are more likely to report symptoms of trauma than those who experience non-gendered hate crimes (European Network Against Racism, 2022). Additionally, beyond psychological harm, the disproportionate abuse of Muslim women has tangible social and economic implications. The fear of harassment can restrict the mobility of Muslim women, leading to self-imposed limitations on their participation in public and professional spheres. For instance, a 2021 survey by MCB found that “nearly 40% of female respondents reported altering their routines” such as avoiding public transport or attending social events due to concerns over personal safety. This curtailment of freedom not only affects individual well-being but also has broader implications for community cohesion and economic participation.

Moreover, for many young Muslim girls in education, exposure to Islamophobic abuse can

disrupt educational and developmental trajectories (Ahmed, 2017). Schools and universities, which should serve as safe spaces for learning and growth, can become arenas where abuse is either directly experienced or vicariously witnessed. The long-term impact on self-esteem, academic performance, and social engagement can be profound, setting back not only individual progress but also community advancement. Early exposure to such hostile environments has been linked to higher drop-out rates and diminished aspirations, further perpetuating cycles of marginalisation (MCB, 2021).

IV. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The evidence reviewed here points towards the need for policies that specifically address the development of gendered- sensitive frameworks that tackle all dimensions of Islamophobic abuse. Existing frameworks that aim to combat hate crimes must be re-evaluated to ensure they capture the nuances of gender-based discrimination. This involves data collection where authorities should, firstly, disaggregate hate crime data by gender to better understand the scope and nature of abuse (Zempi, 2020). And secondly, to include granular statistics to enable policymakers to target interventions more effectively. Additionally, tailored support services should aim to provide victims with the support needed to face the challenges in their everyday lives as Muslim women and girls. This could be via specialised counselling services where language barriers are diminished or legal aid or by providing a safe space where victims can report anonymously the abuse without fear of retribution. Evidently, political rhetoric significantly influences societal attitudes. Leaders must be held accountable for comments that incite or normalise abuse and public discourse should ideally promote respectful debate that distinguishes between legitimate criticism and hate speech. In doing so, councils may be able to work more effectively with community groups to develop guidelines that ensure political statements do not contribute to an environment of hostility towards Muslim women. Evidently, the current legal frameworks often fail to account for the unique ways in which Muslim women experience abuse. Law enforcement agencies should receive training on the intersectional aspects of hate crimes, ensuring that investigations and prosecutions are sensitive to the vulnerabilities of female victims. Additionally, the introduction of stricter penalties for hate crimes that target specific groups can serve as a deterrent (MCB, 2021). This in turn calls for a reform of hate crime legislation to explicitly recognise the gendered nature of Islamophobic abuse which is a critical for the protection of victims.

Education plays a vital role in combating prejudice. Community outreach initiatives must aim to increase awareness about the realities of Islamophobic abuse especially its gendered dimensions can foster greater understanding and solidarity (Ahmed, 2017; Zempi, 2020). Workshops, school initiatives, and public forums should be organised in collaboration with community leaders, educators, and advocacy groups to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive attitudes (Shaw, 2024). The disproportionate targeting of Muslim women and girls by Islamophobic abuse is a complex issue that sits at the intersection of religion, gender, and social inequality (ibid). The evidence presented herein asserts not only the scale of the problem but also its deeply entrenched nature in the fabrics of society. Muslim women are caught in a double bind: their visible religious markers and the pervasive misogyny of contemporary society expose them to heightened risks that extend far beyond the general experiences of hate crime (ibid). Thus, future research should continue to explore the intersectionality of Islamophobia, with a particular focus on long-term outcomes for female victims. Data from longitudinal studies are needed to understand the cumulative impact of repeated abuse on mental health, educational attainment, and economic participation of

Muslim women and girls. Furthermore, comparative studies across different national contexts could illuminate whether these trends are unique to the UK or reflect a broader global phenomenon.

From a policy perspective, the insights gained from recent data and trends should inform the development of targeted interventions. Gender-sensitive approaches to hate crime legislation, media representation, and community support are essential as first steps. Policymakers must ensure that strategies to combat Islamophobia do not inadvertently reinforce the very biases they seek to eliminate. Instead, interventions should empower Muslim women and girls, amplify their voices, and create environments where diversity is celebrated rather than vilified. This calls for genuine collaboration among governmental bodies, civil society organisations, academic researchers, and community groups to work together. Only through a concerted and sustained effort can the dual challenges of Islamophobia and gendered abuse be effectively addressed. And only in doing so, can societies move toward a more inclusive future – in the UK and globally - where all citizens regardless of their gender or religious background are afforded the dignity and respect, they deserve.

Conclusion

The recent trends in reported abuse make it clear that Muslim women and girls face disproportionate levels of Islamophobic abuse compared to their male counterparts. Visible religious markers, pervasive misogyny, and the dynamics of intersectional discrimination converge to create a uniquely hostile environment for female Muslims in Britain. The psychological, social, and economic impacts of such abuse are profound, necessitating urgent policy responses and the development of gender-sensitive legal and support frameworks. As this paper has shown, the data from organisations such as Tell MAMA, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), and Amnesty International indicate a disturbing trend: female Muslims are consistently more vulnerable to both overt and subtle forms of abuse. Addressing these issues requires not only refined policy and legal measures, but also a broader cultural shift in how Muslim women are represented in public discourse. By advancing targeted strategies from improved data collection to community outreach and media accountability, policymakers can begin to dismantle the structures that perpetuate gendered Islamophobia. The goal is to create a society in which all citizens can participate freely and safely, free from the threat of abuse and discrimination. Future research and sustained collaborative efforts are essential in this endeavour to ensure that the voices of Muslim women and girls are heard and that their rights are protected.

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