Written evidence from Project Resist [GIS0029]

About us

Project Resist is an autonomous organisation set up to support black and minoritised women's struggles for equality, rights and freedoms in all aspects of their civil, social, political, economic, and cultural lives. Using the tools of legal and political advocacy, we strive to challenge all systems of power, privilege and censorship that stand in the way of women's access to equality, dignity, peace, and security[1].

Project Resist currently facilitates and supports the Resist Network,[2] which is made up of independent, specialist black and minoritised women's grassroots organisations, based in the north of England and Scotland. It was set up by Project Resist to strengthen front-line advocacy and policy work on violence against women and children and related issues.

Following the Far-Right riots in the summer of 2024, Project Resist has been working with the Resist Network to gather evidence on the impact of the riots on black, minoritised and migrant women and girls and the specialist organisations that support them. We are currently working in partnership with the Angelou Centre on a research report and a series of events and seminars that will focus on the impact of the riots on women in the North East of England.

This Submission

This submission is informed by first hand testimonies of black, minoritised and migrant women following the Far-Right violence that erupted in the summer of 2024 and by many years of insight and experience garnered from undertaking front line advocacy work and campaigning against violence against women, racism, inequality and the rise of religious fundamentalism. All of these interlinked issues have had serious - life-changing and life-threatening - implications for the rights of all black and minoritised women in the UK.

In this submission we will primarily address the usefulness of the term 'gendered Islamophobia' and its negative implications in respect of the struggle against racism (since it

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[1] The Project Resist website can be found here.
[2] The Resist Network includes the Angelou Centre, Apna Haq, Humraaz, Project Resist, Rochdale Women's Welfare Association (RWWA), Saheli, Sangini, Safety 4 Sisters and Ubuntu Women Shelter. These organisations directly support women and children in the North West, Yorkshire, North East and South Scottish regions. All organisations also work within a national remit due to their strategic advocacy/campaigning work and specialist refuges and safe accommodation services.

conflates religion with race) and women's rights and freedoms. In doing so, we will address some of the questions raised in the Call for Evidence document.

The problematic framing of 'islamophobia'

The framing of the problem of racism towards Muslim women and girls as 'Gendered Islamophobia' is highly questionable since it presumes that there is a consensus around the concept 'Islamophobia'. In reality, it has no settled meaning, is highly contested and vulnerable to very subjective interpretations that undermine women's rights and efforts to build a more equal, integrated and cohesive society.

Islam is not a race or ethnicity. In literal terms it is a set of religious ideas, many of which may vary from community to community, and criticism of which cannot be conflated with racism towards a group of people. To hold otherwise is absurd and illogical since the attacks against individuals and groups labelled 'Islamophobia' is in fact no different to the racism faced by many other minorities.

In her written and oral submissions to the APPG inquiry into 'Islamophobia' in 2018,[3] as Director of Southall Black Sisters, our current Co-Director, Pragna Patel, set out the arguments as to why 'Islamophobia' is not a useful term. She pointed out that the term is riddled with ambiguities and conflates too many issues since it implies not just hatred of Muslims (who are not a homogeneous ethnic group) but of the religion itself. To liberals, it can mean an attack on Islamic texts and precepts or causing 'offence to religious sensibilities,' the punishment of which is often censorship but also violence and even death.[4]

The APPG has since produced a report which defines Islamophobia as *'…rooted in racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness'.* Far from clarifying the issue or addressing the causes and consequences of structural racism including anti-Muslim racism, the term will only serve to further shore up religious authoritarianism which uses the language of 'Islamophobia' to generate an internal culture of social control, discrimination, fear and censorship. The most dramatic example of this was the ferocious attack on Salman Rushdie following the publication of the Satanic Verses in 1988. From academics to activists, mobilisations within Muslim populations labelled the book 'Islamophobic' and secularists, atheists, feminists and other liberal or non-conforming Muslims were silenced by the violence and intimidation that ensued, making it harder for them to openly support Rushdie or challenge the view that the book was 'Islamophobic'. Unfortunately, the state's response to this and similar events is not to defend freedom of speech but to adopt 'Islamophobia' as a definition even though it results in the political institutionalisation of religious fundamentalism and a social culture of censorship and

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[3] For details see: Patel_APPG+Islamaphobia_Corrected_2023 (8).pdf
[4] For details see: Patel_APPG+Islamaphobia_Corrected_2023 (8).pdf

intolerance that impacts negatively on many Muslims including many Muslim women, who do not follow the definition of Islam as promoted by dominant Islamist forces and who wish to assert their right to self-determination.

The institutionalisation and normalisation of 'Islamophobia' in legal and political discourse has also empowered conservatives and illiberal forces within other religious minorities to establish concepts such as 'Hinduphobia' and 'Sikhphobia'. These terms are being defined and used not to challenge racism in any meaningful way but to protect religious beliefs and identities from criticism and to police and punish those who dissent.

In our view, the term 'Islamophobia' has nothing to do with Muslim safety; it is about consolidating authoritarian power under the veneer of minority protection. There is a deliberate lack of transparency about the vested interests of those behind the government that are pushing for a formal definition of 'Islamophobia' that are in fact connected to religious fundamentalist networks and take deeply anti-women's rights stances.[5] It must be understood that fundamentalists have utilised the power to define 'Islamophobia' in order to prevent and deter any legitimate criticism of so-called Muslim values and identity and to exercise absolute power over the most vulnerable in their community as well as women and children. As we demonstrate in this submission, this has specific implications for women who, on a daily basis, rely on criticism and dissent to challenge the prevalence and impact of domestic and sexual abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence and Female Genital Mutilation, amongst other forms of gender-based harms and inequality.

Anti-Muslim Racism or 'Islamophobia'?

"There's a lot of discrimination towards all the women here, Black women, Chinese women, women in scarves, women are just targets. I'm afraid to speak up because of my background and my culture. When they look at me, they just see someone who they think doesn't belong, the think they know about me because of racism." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

It is undeniable that levels of racism and racial violence against Muslims has been growing not just in the UK[6] but also across Europe.[7] Such violence however, is not borne out of some irrational fear/phobia of Muslims or perceived 'Muslimness' but out of nativist and supremacist ideologies that are both rooted in, and reproduced through, social relations and state structures of power and discrimination. To this extent anti-Muslim racism, our preferred term to 'Islamophobia', is no different to the growing violence, exclusion and discrimination faced by many other minority groups such as those from Roma-Gypsy Traveller and Black African and Caribbean backgrounds. For example, a 2023 survey by Kings College, London, noted that more than a third of people from these specific minority groups

[5] For an account of how the term 'Islamophobia' has come to be defined by Muslim fundamentalists see Patel_APPG+Islamaphobia_Corrected_2023 (8).pdf
[6] TheNewNormofAnti-MuslimHate-TellMAMAReport2025.pdf
[7] Why racism against Muslim people is rising in Ireland & Europe

in the UK have experienced racist assaults.[8] The Home Office also notes that in 2024, while there was a slight increase in religiously motivated crimes against Muslims and Jews, the majority of hate crimes in 2024 were racially motivated, accounting for over two-thirds of such offences (70%; 98,799 offences). [9]

In 2024, we witnessed far right violence erupting in many towns and cities in the UK. They were not just aimed at Muslims but at anyone who looked culturally or ethnically different which is why Eastern Europeans were also targeted in the attacks. It was clear that the violence that was unleashed impacted on all minorities and was fuelled by over a decade of populist anti-immigration rhetoric and racism, largely fostered by politicians and much of the media.[10] The creation of the hostile environment against migrants has been greatly exacerbated by the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories circulated by right wing forces including a prominent misogynist influencer who regularly promotes himself as being a 'brother' of Islamists and a supporter of Islam, while also holding abjectly racist views. He posted an online video falsely claiming that the Southport attacker was an "undocumented migrant" who had "arrived in the UK on a boat". This video was viewed over 12 million times before its eventual removal by X/Twitter. This and many other examples demonstrate that it would be disingenuous to claim that the far-right racist riots were motivated by 'Islamophobia' as some have suggested.

Against this backdrop, our view is that adopting the term 'Islamophobia' not only fails to reflect the reality of racism on the ground but also actually serves to fuel the far-right, which is already reverting to an assumed white 'Britain-First' 'cultural Christian' identity. This identity provides a further rationale for the use of 'white exceptionalism' to justify racism and oppression against all minorities (not just Muslims) deemed to be non-white/Christian and to pose a threat to national security and social cohesion in the UK.

'Islamophobia' and Sectarian Politics

In our view, terms such as 'Islamophobia' and increasingly 'Hinduphobia' and 'Sikhphobia' are also less about addressing racism and inequality, and more about encouraging a politics of division and sectarianism. These new forms of religious-political identities can, and often does, radiate communal tensions and riots in the UK as each religious group vies for political influence and power in opposition to the other. For example, the unprecedented communal riots in Leicester between Hindus and Muslims on 17 April 2022 saw armed and unarmed men from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds marching through the streets chanting incendiary Muslim fundamentalist and Hindu Nationalist slogans. These communal riots followed

[8] More than a third of people from minority groups in the UK have experienced racist assaults, survey finds | King's College London
[9] Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024 - GOV.UK
[10] Hostile environment fostering racist practices across society, finds report | The Independent | The Independent

several weeks of simmering tensions between Hindus and Muslims that moved from social media onto the streets. Propelled by both religious and far right fundamentalist politics, the riots were a calculated attempt to intimidate and incite hatred and violence against the 'other' community and were labelled 'Islamophobic' or 'Hinduphobic'. Sadly, it would appear that since 2022, not much has been done to address the issue of communal violence in any meaningful way. To focus on 'Islamophobia' at the expense of racism towards other minorities in social policy and political spheres is likely to fuel such intra-communal tensions.

In the light of this, it makes no moral or political sense to single out racism towards Muslims alone. The use of the term 'Islamophobia' will only elevate the view that racism towards Muslims is more serious that other forms of racism, thus creating a hierarchy of victimhood that has policy, legislative, political and social consequences. The impact of this will be two-fold: it will splinter minorities even more into religious groups and encourage policy formation that protects their religious sentiments rather than the causes and consequences of structural racism. Secondly, it will create fragmentation and an enforced communalisation as each group uses religious identity to vie for the status of ultimate victimhood and to gain status and access to scarce resources that should be equally available to all minorities facing racism.

Ultimately, the use of terms like 'Islamophobia' will be used to distract from a focus on structural disadvantage, poverty and class-based oppression. Racism must be seen as a structural phenomenon rooted in political, economic and cultural structures of power. It is an experience shared by many minority groups in the wake of the rise of anti-immigration racism, particularly in post-industrial regions, and it needs to be challenged in solidarity with rather than in competition with other minority groups.

Gendered Racism

Following the far-right riots, Project Resist interviewed both Muslim and Non-Muslim women form a range of Black, minoritised and migrant communities. Many of them told us that they were targeted for racist violence not because they were visibly Muslim but because they were visibly women from a minority or migrant background:

"Wearing the hijab or a scarf made you a target because people think it's a sign to be racist to someone. When they shout at me, they shout at me for being 'black' and being a 'bitch', they shout at me for being dirty and telling me to go home. This is what we share together here, we have all had racism but its more, because it's about what was said before, they tell you that you don't belong because you have an accent or different clothes or don't look white." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

It is clear that the eruption of anti-immigration racist violence was fuelled not just by anti-Muslim sentiments but by a broader anti-immigration and an anti-multi-cultural agenda that did not discern between settled minorities and newly arrived migrants or between Muslims

and other minorities. What followed were mobs and thugs who engaged in acts of violence, vandalism, arson and threats aimed at people and buildings that housed or were used by those with a different skin colour or culture, irrespective of their religious background.

"It's the way they speak to us or do things; they dehumanise us; cruelty is generated to all of us who come here. The bad behaviour was given licence, and an excuse and bad behaviour is incentivised." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

"I felt it wasn't safe because of my dress code because it's obvious I'm from a different background, and what can I do? I can't change all my clothes and the way I look. It depends on which area you live in, it's just as scary hearing lots of rumours, but when you're outside you feel the tension too." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

Many women from minoritised and migrant backgrounds described how their experiences and need for protection were completely ignored by authorities and the police. Their accounts of racist abuse highlighted gendered forms of racism rather than 'gendered Islamophobia' in that the racism was targeted at all women from minoritised and migrant backgrounds equally. Women were particularly targeted because they were perceived to be on their own or because they looked different and were physically less able to defend themselves.

"I was with my mum the whole time and she made sure I was with someone and never did anything alone, it became very difficult to travel alone, all my friends who are not white experienced racism even if they didn't have a headscarf on like me. My mum had to take me to school." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

Another significant aspect of the gendered impact of the racist violence is the way in which it was used by Black, minoritised and migrant women's families or community and religious leaderships as an excuse to further restrict their freedom and autonomy. This happened in two ways: Firstly, women's desire to have a voice or their need for protection during the counter-protests by minorities were ignored altogether:

"It was nearly all men at the anti-racist counter protests, we felt oppressed, we felt unable to keep women and children safe. Although it's good that so many men from the community were out- it also tells another story about why they weren't supporting women from the community to attend or making space for them." (Staff from Black and minoritised woman's organisation)

"Racism and riots affect more women than men because they know we don't have voices and aren't listened to, and we have to be together to be safe because we are not safe alone on the street. The men in the community like to be in charge and they shouldn't be, they won't solve these problems." (Staff from Black and minoritised woman's organisation)

Secondly, during the riots, many young men used the counter-protests to chant religious slogans in ways that made women extremely uncomfortable as they were no longer about challenging racism but about asserting a political religious identity that some women felt was immensely problematic for women's rights as well as being sectarian in tone:

"At the protests some of the men from the community started using religious terms and shouting for other things that were divisive, none of this help women and children." (Staff from Black and minoritised woman's organisation)

'Islamophobia', Domestic Abuse and the Control of Women

"As women we need more support in places that feel more isolated and adds to more vulnerabilities. Women are targets, the aim is to frighten women, so they do what men and religion wants. We now have to be cautious when we go outside, careful taking kids to school, careful who we talk to, careful if we speak up…they target women more because we give birth to children, but that also makes us stronger." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

One of the most insidious aspects of the insertion of 'Islamophobia' in the public discourse is the impact that it has on the struggle for women's self-determination in minoritised communities. The use of the term has gone hand in hand with the rise in Islamism and religious conservatism and the redefinition of gendered social relations within many Muslim and other minoritised communities. Religious fundamentalism has engendered a culture of misogyny resulting in a rise in violence and discrimination against women and the curtailment of women and children's freedom of expression. The harmful impact of regressive cultural and religious values on women was captured by Dame Louise Casey as long ago as 2016 in her review on opportunity and integration in isolated and deprived communities[11]. She found that the advances made towards gender equality in the country generally, were not reflected in the lives of many Asian women:

"… in many areas of Britain the drive towards equality and opportunity across gender might never have taken place. Women in some communities are facing a double onslaught of gender inequality, combined with religious, cultural and social barriers preventing them from accessing even their basic rights as British residents…Throughout our review we have encountered countless examples of abuse and unequal treatment of women enacted in the name of cultural or religious values, or as a reaction to those values."

Since the Casey report, gender-based abuse and discrimination against black and minoritised women has not only persisted but has in fact grown. Muslim fundamentalists and ultra-conservatives have demanded less and less state intervention in family matters irrespective of domestic abuse or child abuse. Their demands have led to the police, social services and other statutory bodies to adopt a 'hands-off' approach for fear of being seen as 'Islamophobic' or of offending so called religious and cultural sensibilities. The frontline experience of many minoritised women's organisations shows that challenging practices such as FGM, polygamy, forced marriage, honour-based violence and sexual abuse is becoming much more difficult due to the community backlash against women unleashed by religious and patriarchal forces that continue to grow in power. This is why we maintain that the adoption of the language of 'Islamophobia' is not a benign development; it has been deliberately created to impose stricter controls on communities and/or women and children while also enabling and encouraging mainstream services to ignore minoritised

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[11] *The Casey Review: a review into opportunity and integration*, Dame Louise Casey (2016): The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

women's needs for protection at a time when sate and community structures are already failing them amidst an 'epidemic' of violence against women and girls.[12]

"The men in the communities are listening to the religious leaders, we know that. But now we have the local authorities and police also just following what they say. No one came to us to ask us if we needed safety support, or whether our women were safe- even though we have a refuge and get threats from men and the community." (Black and minoritised specialist domestic VAWG and Safe Accommodation service based in the North of England)

Not only have fundamentalists and ultra conservatives come to define the content of what constitutes 'Islamophobia' but they have also used the term to condone harmful practices against minoritised women and to police women in ways that profoundly impact on the struggle for their rights. It is well documented that in the name of 'Islamophobia', voices against patriarchal and heterosexual structures inherent in Islam such as 'sharia laws', the imposition of strict dress codes, gender segregation in schools, universities and other public spaces and any criticism of prominent Muslim leaders - have been suppressed and met with censure and violence. The point of such suppression is to create a climate that demands complete conformity to so called Islamic norms and to legitimate hostility, aggression and abuse against those who defy them.

Moments of crisis such as the far-right riots and racist attacks can also lead to an increase in violence and control against women rises as community leaders use the fear of external attacks on the community to clamp down on internal dissent, especially from women. This is precisely what happened to many women who recounted how at the time of the riots of 2024, they faced the double jeopardy of racist violence and internal patriarchal control:

"It isn't just about religion that's just an excuse. It's about the way that men in communities and some families cover up abuse. When this happened (the riots) I knew at the time what would happen, and I was right. It might be six months after the riots, but we feel it, us women, the control is worse…they deny abuse more." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

"My husband abused me and used religion to control me, he told me that because I wasn't a good woman I had no faith. What I've seen happen on the streets [during the far-right riots] and the control in the mosques has reminded me of this abuse. It makes me not want to have a faith although this about men abusing women is not about faith." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

"I have too many worries. I'm always fearful for children due to news and the amount of abuse in our communities- its heightened as a single parent there is more of risk and danger from men in streets and men in our community." (Survivor of domestic abuse)

"Young women were being told 'see you shouldn't go out- patriarchs are using this to control and threaten young women, there's a crackdown on them and women, children weren't able to go out but the police hadn't said that people should stay home…" (Black and minoritised specialist domestic VAWG and Safe Accommodation service based in the North of England

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[12] See national Police Chiefs 2024 statement: https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/call-to-action-as-violence-against-women-and-girls-epidemic-deepens-1

Many minoritised and migrant women were also excluded from community rebuilding efforts that were attempted following the far-right violence. There was no intersectional understanding on the part of statutory bodies of the very specific ways in which the far-right violence impacted on all black, minoritised and migrant women and their need for safety and protection:

"Also, the police and local authorities … they run about after the community leaders like they can solve the racism, I mean what have they done so far to help? They haven't included any women in these discussions, they haven't invested in us or supported us, they do make referrals but even then, only sometimes. The men from authorities talk to men from communities, women are sidelined and this is dangerous." (Black and minoritised specialist women's service based in the North of England)

Specialist domestic abuse women's organisations that have been in the forefront of attempts to create integrated and safe spaces for women based on the values of equality, empathy, compassion and solidarity across social and racial divides, are routinely ignored and undermined by local power structures that are racist, patriarchal, caste-based and often corrupt. Grassroots women's groups have been repeatedly shut out of local funding schemes and decision-making processes on the grounds that they do not fit the religious leaderships' stereotypical notions of how women should behave in accordance with their religious values and because they challenge patriarchal power:

"During the riots (2024) we had an incident at one of houses and the police didn't turn up as they were too busy on the streets due to the riots, they didn't once think that we are calling about a protected refuge address for Black and minoritised women and children, but we know they went straight out to the mosques." ((Black and minoritised specialist Safe Accommodation and Refuge)

We get no support from the local authority, the police or any local agencies. The religious leaders made a complaint, and police got in touch, but no one understood the threats to women's organisations. We were left out of discussion about safety- whereas discussions with mosque leaders continued." ((Black and minoritised specialist domestic VAWG service based in the North West of England)

It is also significant to note that at the same time as women's rights and freedoms are being restricted, the radicalisation of young minoritised men has increased. Many have succumbed to the incel/online world of toxic masculinity and misogyny as well as to the world of religious fundamentalism - the two coalesce but are rarely discussed together as this doesn't fit into the 'Islamophobia' narrative.

The powerful testimonies provided by a range of minoritised women and specialist women's organisations deserve to be taken seriously. They signal the warning signs of a growing culture of control, abuse, fear and censorship, generated by a religious right agenda that is promoting terms like 'Islamophobia' in public and legal discourse not to address structural forms of racism but to wield power and to control the powerless and the vulnerable, in particular women and girls within minoritised communities.

Conclusion

We strongly oppose the adoption of the term 'Islamophobia' in principle and in policy and legislation because it is deeply embedded in, and defined by, dogmatic religious forces that use it to cause serious harm not only to Muslim women but also to women and children from other minoritised communities. Religious 'leaders' from other communities are also seeking to exceptionalise their experiences of racism by articulating it as an attack on their religious identity for the purposes of exercising social control. In our view, the rise of race hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims is more than adequately captured by the term anti-Muslim racism. This must be seen as part of the continuum of racism, especially increasing levels of anti-immigration racism post Brexit which does not discern on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, culture, accent or even histories of minority settlement in the UK.

The acceptance and implementation of the term 'Islamophobia' will encourage a regressive politics of sectarianism that prevents solidarity from forming across racial and religious divides; solidarity and unity that is desperately needed to challenge all forms of racism and to build a more integrated and cohesive society. If adopted, it will set back the cause of anti-racism precisely because the fundamentalist agenda that is driving the wholesale adoption of this concept, is antithetical to equality and human rights principles, including the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of and freedom from religion and the right to female autonomy.

April 2025