

UNIVERSITY OF
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Written Evidence to the Citizens
Commission on Islam,
Participation & Public Life

PART 2: ISLAMOPHOBIA & MUSLIM WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

1. This evidence is based on the findings of research undertaken by Dr Chris Allen, Dr Arshad Isakjee and Mrs Özlem Ögtem Young in 2013.
2. The research comprised in-depth interviews with twenty British Muslim women that had been victims of ‘real-life’ Islamophobia. The research sought to explore the nature of real-life Islamophobia and what impact it had on them and those around them.
3. As with the original research, all names and identifying details have been changed.
4. The original research can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/maybewearehated>.

NATURE

5. All of the Islamophobic incidents occurred in ‘real-life’ settings from car parks and trains through such places as gyms and universities to the ordinary street including locations in or around the interviewees homes. Because of this, all names have been changed as have any references to specific places or locations.
6. As with existing research, the vast majority of the incidents were ‘low level’, most of which involved verbal abuse being directed at them because of their visible identification as being Muslim. More than half of the experiences involved some form of verbal abuse.
7. Those incidents that were more high level, involving violence and aggression accounted for a quarter of the interviews undertaken.
8. The other incidents highlight the difficulty in trying to accurately categorise such incidents given they incorporated elements of harassment, intimidation and threat.
9. In terms of abuse, there was a distinct recognition of the victim’s Muslim identity.
10. For example, when Maryam was sitting in her car at traffic lights a man walked up to the car and asked “if I was a fucking Muslim” before trying to open the car window while “ranting and raving...and swearing”.
11. Naureen was similarly abused in her car while trying to drop her children at school. Focusing on her being Muslims, two other parents from the school – one male, one

female – stood outside the car aggressively shouting anti-Muslim insults at her. Naureen said this left her terrified of leaving her children at school.

12. For others, the abuse focused on allegations of being a “terrorist”.
13. Shagufta was on a busy train to university when two men began to loudly speak about whether she was a terrorist. At one point, one of the men shouted that she had a bomb in her bag. As she got up to move away, the man “tapped me on my head, making remarks about my hijab...” before “talking about how immigrants and Muslims are taking benefits from them”.
14. Alia’s experience was similar. After being called a “terrorist” on a train also, she said that the man accusing her of such claimed that she was intimidating him: “I found it hilarious and annoying...I’m kind of small and he was a huge guy, I don’t look terrorising or intimidating yet he does”.
15. Targeting the hijab, niqab or other pieces of clothing associated with Islam was a recurrent feature in Islamophobic incidents.
16. Fatima spoke about how she was randomly was approached in the street during her lunch break by a man who aggressively told her to “take that fucking thing [her headscarf] off”.
17. A few weeks beforehand, she was in a hospital when she was confronted by a woman who pointed at her hijab and said “yuck” to her face.
18. Deborah spoke about how she was abused by a group of women she regularly saw at her local gym. She said that one week while waiting for her yoga class to begin, the group of women approached her and began shouting angrily at her. The abuse included being called “Mrs Usama bin Laden” and being told “we do not like your clothes...go back to Afghanistan, go and eat some pork”.
19. Farhat spoke about she was abused at a shopping centre by a group of young me: “they seemed to be taking issue around how I dress...different people have different issues with different things. I laugh now but at the time it was shocking”.
20. Some explained that verbal abuse was a precursor to more aggressive and violent forms of Islamophobia.
21. Yara spoke about how she had been abused on her way home from dropping her children at school. The abuser – a female who was also pushing a pushchair – began by

- telling Yara to “fuck off”. Soon after she approached Yara and spat in her face before asking, “why do you look so ugly...why are you covering your face?”
22. Yara said that a few days after, her house was attacked at 3:00am by a group of people throwing stones at the windows. As she explained, “we were very frightened...we had lots of pieces of glass on the bed [and] I had some bruises as a result”.
 23. Halima explained that soon after she and her family moved into a new house, a group of people began to verbally abuse them for being Muslim. She said “these people hate us for no apparent reason, they hate us because of our background and our religion”. Resigned to being abused, she said that within a few weeks of the group appeared at her house one evening at which time they attacked her and her brother with bicycle chains.
 24. Rachel, who was seven months pregnant at the time, spoke about one day when she and her husband returned to their house to find a man sitting in a car that was parked across their drive. Getting out of her car, she went over to the car to ask the man to move the car so they could park on their drive. Refusing to move, she said the man began to repeatedly shout “thing...get this thing away from me”. Becoming increasingly agitated, she said the driver threatened her: “I’m gonna pop you Muslim”. Hearing this, Rachel’s husband ran over to her at which time the driver got out of his car and punched her husband to the ground. Having got back in his car, the man then drove the car at Rachel, hitting her in the process.
 25. Samina and Kelly’s experiences were extremely similar. Samina spoke about how she was walking near to her local mosque when she had a bottle thrown at her. What was particularly distressing was that Samina could not see who had thrown it and so became extremely anxious. Kelly was walking home from work when a car slowed down alongside her. Having ignored what the men in the car said to her, she said they then threw a number of eggs at her one of which hit her. Both Samina and Kelly believe that it was the fact that they were wearing hijabs that made them targets for Islamophobic attacks.
 26. Two further incidents involved what might best be termed intimidation and threat.
 27. The first took place in a local park. Rehana explained that while she was sitting reading a book, she became aware of a group of men sitting nearby who were talking loudly about talking about her and her hijab. Looking over, she noticed they were gesturing towards

their legs then pointing at her. She said they then proceeded to violently punch their legs as if punching her.

28. Lubna's experience occurred at her home. On waking one morning, she said that as she looked out of her window she saw that four decomposing pig's heads had been placed around the outside of her home: on a window ledge, front door step, and in the front bushes. She said, "...they must have thought that this kind of thing will intimidate us because we are brown and do not eat pork...it was done to intimidate us but these were just idiots trying to shock us. It is all ridiculous".

IMPACT

29. According to the British Crime Survey data for 2009/10 and 2010/11, victims of hate crime experience a range of different emotions: 67% experience anger; 50% annoyance; 40% shock; 39% fear; 35% loss of confidence/vulnerability; 23% anxiety; 20% depression; and 17% record difficulty sleeping¹.
30. Unsurprisingly, all of these emotions were evident in the women interviewed.
31. For some, there was a clear intent to try and shrug off the incident, to put it down to the ignorance or stupidity of a handful of individuals.
32. Others such as Mahmooda spoke about how she had been had "really shaken by [the abuse]...scared and fearful and vulnerable".
33. The phrase 'shaken up' was commonly used by those interviewed.
34. Three quarters of the women said they felt more scared or fearful after the incident and was somewhat irrespective of whether the incident was low-level or high-level.
35. Rehana's fear was immediate: "I cried in the middle of the street...I did not feel safe...I felt fearful and worried about my life".
36. For others, feeling scared or being fearful occurred after the incident.
37. Halima said this made her really scared of reprisal attacks which made her too scared to go shopping. She also explained how her and her family began to go out "in a secretive way" in an attempt to avoid confrontation.

¹ 2010/11, Home Office: March 2012, p. 22.

38. For Samina, the fear was made worse by the fact that she worked in a hospital: “I was really scared and frightened. The negative pictures and feelings kept coming into my head...it kept playing in my mind, thinking if [the bottle] had hit me on the head and what the consequences of that would have been. I work in a hospital and know exactly what that would be like”.
39. After feeling scared and fearful, half of those interviewed said they felt increasingly anxious; half also spoke about feeling more vulnerable.
40. Iffat spoke about her anxiety after being verbally abused on public transport: “Afterwards it just makes you paranoid...you start to think that everybody has the potential to insult you”.
41. Shagufta’s experience on the crowded train resulted in something similar: “it made me anxious of travelling on the train again...when I took the train next time, I felt really cautious of the other people around me. I was very anxious where I was sitting and who was around me. I became afraid”.
42. Many of the women spoke about how their experience made them feel increasingly vulnerable being a Muslim woman “walking on my own or in the evenings” (Rehana).
43. A number of the women also spoke about how they felt increasingly vulnerable in their own home.
44. Shareefa explained how she had been repeatedly abused by groups of young people who called her “ninja” and had fireworks posted through the letterbox of her home. Having a seven month old baby, she said: “It made me feel very scared...I was scared to go out on the street or into the area on my own. It made me think continuously that I need some sort of self-defence class so I know how to defend myself and protect my children...you start to think that something is going to happen. It kind of makes you feel like somebody is ready to attack you in the street...it kind of makes you think people hate you because of the way you dress. And then you start linking everything as being anti-Muslim and that may well not be the case. For example, some people give you a look which may be nothing but you link it...”.
45. Other recurrent emotions included feeling humiliated, isolated, embarrassed, disgusted and sad, all of which have the very real potential to detrimentally impact on the lives and wellbeing of those involved.

46. The impact was much wider too: among family, friends and communities.
47. Some examples of this included Yara who after her experience was too scared to let her children go out alone or even play alone in the family garden.
48. Kelly spoke about how her family pleaded with her to remove her hijab so that she no longer looked visibly Muslim.
49. For Aisha, her experience resulted in friends not wanting to visit her at her home for fear of them experiencing something similar.
50. For some of those interviewed, the incident made them think about how they felt about being Muslim.
51. While feelings of anger, shock and fear amongst others were at times quite immediate, feelings about their religion and what this meant in relation to their sense of belonging occurred sometime later.
52. As Alia put it: “it makes you think about integrating...you just put your boundaries up”.
53. Naureen’s response was more hardened: “my husband does not want to stay in this country. He does not feel we belong here...we do not feel that we are welcomed...they see us as strangers who do not belong”.
54. These feelings were surprisingly common. As Halima put it: “we now see a totally different aspect of British society...I feel that I do not belong to England, I just want to move away and never look back”.
55. While Maryam did not speak about wanting to move away she said: “maybe we are hated...I feel we’re not going to be accepted as British, like we’re always going to be seen as an outsider”.
56. The important finding though is that the experience of Islamophobia was catalytic in that it changed the victim’s attitude.
57. As Maryam explained: “I didn’t feel that way before [the incident]...before I used to think that everyone is OK with us. But now something like this happens and it challenges what you think”.
58. Similar was voiced by Samina: “I know my background is Bangladeshi but I would not know how to live there. I do not feel that I belong to Bangladesh. But when things happen to you then the identity crisis comes in and you feel that you do not belong to

anywhere. You start to question your identity: am I a British Muslim or a Bangladeshi Muslim?”

59. Only one of those interviewed said that the experience of Islamophobia made her feel more bullish. For Lubna: “They were trying to make us feel horrified, shocked and angry but it was just disgusting...yet I still feel safe, I walk on my own and go to work. As I said before, I did not feel intimidated or scared, just angry about the incident. It has not affected the way I am with other people, we still socialise and do things in the usual way...we live in an area where there are not many Muslims living and we do not have a mosque nearby so we are socialising with other people, no problem”.
60. In terms of the overall impact of Islamophobia however, it is Maryam’s observation that was maybe most telling. As she put it when reflecting on the incident and the affect it had had on her: “I don’t think [people] understand just how it all feels. They’ve got no idea. They don’t understand the emotional impact”.

CONCLUSION

61. Existing research shows that Muslim women – especially ‘visible’ Muslim women - are disproportionately targeted in relation to real-life Islamophobia.
62. Largely manifested in terms of verbal abuse, harassment, intimidation and aggression so too does the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim women also include acts of violence and physical harm.
63. Irrespective of the type of Islamophobia experienced, the impact Islamophobia has on the individual should not be underestimated nor should the potential impact on the victim’s families, friends, communities and wider social networks.
64. Even more pertinent is the recognition that hate crimes have a greater detrimental impact on the wellbeing of victims than any non-hate equivalent.
65. In line with other forms of hate and hate crime – racism, disablism and homophobia among others – the need to address Islamophobia is a matter of social justice.
66. Irrespective of the ‘numbers’, there is no way of putting a value on the damage done by prejudice, discrimination, bigotry and hate.

67. As a matter of social justice, the most effective way of responding to this is to integrate Islamophobic hate crime and incidents into the existing legislative and policy framework that is in place to tackle other forms of hate crime.
68. In doing so, this would send out an effective message that Islamophobia is not only unwarranted and unacceptable in today's Britain but so too would it go some way to mainstreaming into our collective understanding of what it means to be tolerant and accommodating in an increasingly diverse society.