



WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Gendered Islamophobia Inquiry

April 2025

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) is a national Muslim women's organisation in Britain (www.mwnuk.co.uk) that has been advancing equality, promoting women's empowerment, and connecting voices since 2003. We are a small national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. Our membership also includes women of other faiths or of no faith and men who support our work. We find out about the experiences of Muslim women and girls through research and our helpline enquiries. We identify policy and practice gaps and use this information to inform decision makers in government as well as informing our community campaigns at a grassroots level.

We also develop resources and train women, so they are better aware of their rights. We have a separate website for our national helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) that provides advice and support on a range of issues including domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, female genital mutilation, hate crimes, discrimination, mental health etc.

1. Why are women more likely to be the victims of Islamophobia, and what common forms does it take?

Muslim women are disproportionately targeted by Islamophobic abuse due to their visible markers of faith, such as wearing the hijab or niqab. These visible indicators make them easily identifiable and, therefore, more vulnerable to targeted harassment. This abuse is often violent in nature, manifesting in verbal insults, physical aggression, and in some cases, 'drive-by' attacks where offenders shout abuse from passing vehicles. The gendered aspect of this abuse is often overshadowed, with Muslim women facing not only Islamophobia but also gender-based violence, which compounds their experience of discrimination.

Moreover, Muslim women are frequently stereotyped as submissive or oppressed, leading to further victimisation. This dynamic is deeply entrenched in societal narratives, where women who visibly adhere to their faith are seen as outliers. Unfortunately, many women choose not to report incidents of abuse due to mistrust of authorities or fear of further victimisation, which exacerbates the lack of attention given to this issue.

2. In what ways does gendered Islamophobia have an intersectional dimension? Are some women more likely than others to be subject to this abuse and prejudice, and if so, why?

Gendered Islamophobia operates on a spectrum of intersectionality, where multiple factors such as ethnicity, faith, class, and immigration status overlap to exacerbate the challenges faced by Muslim women. For instance, women from racially marginalized backgrounds or lower socioeconomic statuses often experience compounded prejudice that is both gendered and racialised. This makes them especially vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks, which are often informed by a broader narrative of racial othering.

Additionally, the discrimination faced by Muslim women is not monolithic. For example, a woman who wears a hijab might be more vulnerable to direct Islamophobic attacks than a woman who does not, but both women could face different forms of stereotyping or exclusion based on their racial background or class. Furthermore, Muslim women who are refugees or immigrants, especially those with limited English proficiency, are doubly disadvantaged, often having fewer opportunities to access support and resources.

The interaction between gender and religion further complicates the picture, as Muslim women are often presumed to be the “moral guardians” of their faith. When they assert agency or challenge gender norms within their communities or society at large, they risk being labelled as rebellious or “Westernised,” which reinforces their marginalization both inside and outside their communities.

3. What impact does Islamophobia have on women and girls, their communities, and wider society?

The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women and girls extends far beyond immediate acts of harassment or violence. The psychological toll can include anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of fear that influences everyday life. For example, women may limit their movements in public, choosing not to wear visible markers of faith like the hijab to avoid harassment. This internalised fear can prevent women from fully participating in their communities, whether in educational settings, the workplace, or social spaces.

The long-term consequences for families can be equally profound, as parents and guardians, particularly mothers, may feel the need to protect their daughters from both external and internal sources of violence. This sense of insecurity can severely restrict opportunities for social and personal development, further entrenching cycles of exclusion and isolation within these communities.

At a societal level, Islamophobia undermines the core values of equality and inclusion, sowing division within communities. The discriminatory narratives perpetuated by Islamophobic incidents negatively affect national cohesion, contributing to a climate of fear, distrust, and alienation. In the broader societal context, Islamophobia reinforces harmful stereotypes of Muslim women as passive, oppressed, and fundamentally different from

others. This misrepresentation denies Muslim women the agency to shape their own narratives and contribute to their communities.

4. Is there evidence of Muslim women being harassed from within their communities? For example, for not conforming to expected community norms or due to generational differences?

While Islamophobia is often perceived as a problem that originates externally, it is equally important to acknowledge the harassment Muslim women sometimes face from within their own communities. This internal discrimination can manifest in many forms, from overt social exclusion to subtle forms of pressure, where women who do not conform to certain expectations—such as specific ways of dressing, behaving, or speaking—may be ostracized or labelled as “inauthentic.”

Generational differences can often amplify these tensions. Younger Muslim women, who may feel more connected to wider society and seek greater autonomy, often find themselves at odds with older generations who hold more traditional views. These women may face pressure to conform to expectations related to modesty, behaviour, and family roles. Additionally, Muslim feminists within these communities, who challenge patriarchal norms or advocate for gender equality, frequently face accusations of betraying their culture or faith.

Lesbian Muslim women face some of the harshest discrimination both externally and within their communities. Often a hidden minority within a minority their existence is often dismissed or erased, and they may be forced to conceal their identities in order to avoid rejection or worse, coercive practices. This can lead to a great deal of psychological distress as these women grapple with the intersections of their faith, identity, and sexuality. They may be forced into secrecy or subjected to corrective practices, such as forced marriage or familial intervention, creating an environment where they feel isolated and unsupported.

In light of this, it is clear that Muslim women not only face external Islamophobic prejudice but also internal pressures within their communities that further marginalise them, limiting their freedom of expression and participation in both public and private spheres.

5. Are there any steps, including legislative, that the Government should take to help address Islamophobia?

Addressing Islamophobia requires a multi-faceted approach that includes both legislative action and broader societal change. The Government should introduce clearer legislation to explicitly address gendered Islamophobia as a form of gender-based violence, ensuring that Muslim women’s experiences of abuse are properly recognised and protected by law. Such legislation should encourage the collection of data specific to gendered Islamophobia to better understand its scale and impact.

Furthermore, the Government should fund and support initiatives that promote better public understanding Muslim women's lives and experiences. Public education campaigns should aim to dispel harmful stereotypes and promote more nuanced portrayals of Muslim women, highlighting their diversity and agency. Training programs for police forces, teachers, healthcare professionals, and employers should also be implemented to reduce unconscious biases and improve responses to Islamophobic incidents.

In addition, there should be an emphasis on better support systems for Muslim women who experience both gendered and racial Islamophobia, including expanded access to mental health services, legal assistance, and safe spaces. Victims of Islamophobia must be supported through accessible and culturally competent reporting mechanisms that do not further alienate or intimidate them.

6. What can schools, sports clubs, community groups, trade unions, places of worship, and workplaces do to help tackle Islamophobia and support Muslim women and girls?

Addressing Islamophobia requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. Schools, sports clubs, and workplaces must foster inclusive environments that actively challenge all forms of discrimination, including Islamophobia. This includes the development of clear anti-discrimination policies, as well as proactive education about cultural diversity and the lived experiences of Muslim women.

Organisations such as ours (MWNUK) play a pivotal role in supporting Muslim women by offering spaces where they can speak openly about their challenges, access support, and participate in leadership opportunities. Trade unions should also advocate for the rights of Muslim women, ensuring they are protected from discrimination and harassment in the workplace and are able to pursue career advancement free from bias.

In all these settings, it is crucial that Muslim women's voices are not only heard but are also integrated into decision-making processes. Empowering them to take on leadership roles in these spaces can help foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members of society.

By providing platforms for Muslim women to thrive, and by committing to dismantling the institutional and interpersonal barriers they face, these institutions can become integral in the fight against both external and internal Islamophobia, creating spaces where Muslim women and girls can lead fulfilling, empowered lives.

On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,

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