

Media Diversity Institute Submission: Report on Anti-Muslim Hatred and Discrimination Issued by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Media Diversity Institute (MDI) works internationally to encourage accurate and nuanced reporting on race, religion, ethnicity, class, age, disability, gender and sexual identity issues in media landscapes around the world. While our work is grounded in the principles of freedom of expression and values of diversity and inclusion, our day-to-day work focuses on cultivating practical skills to combat negative stereotypes and disinformation, improve media and information literacy, and influence the conversation on diversity and the media.

Introduction

In response to the call for submission for the report on anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination, issued by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Media Diversity Institute (MDI) hereby submits information and experience on some points mentioned in the call which relate closely to our work. Specifically, we will provide insight into patterns and examples of anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination, and the effects of this discrimination. Since our work primarily focuses on the media, we will share examples, experiences, and good practices within the context of this industry.

Before providing specific examples, we would like to explain what we understand by the terms Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred. At its core, we see these terms as referring to acts of violence and discrimination, as well as hate speech, directed at individuals for their real or perceived Muslim identity. In understanding these terms, we take into consideration structural discrimination, as well as historical abuses and negative stereotyping that lead to exclusion and dehumanisation of Muslims. This is not to be confused by criticism of Islam as a religion or criticism of individuals who happen to be Muslim (but are not being targeted due to their religion). When countering anti-Muslim hatred in our work, we also bear in mind national legislation on anti-discrimination, hate crimes, and hate speech, as well as community guidelines on social media platforms.

Intersectionality, Gender-Based Discrimination and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The intersection between anti-Muslim hatred and xenophobia is one we have observed for several years throughout Europe. When migration flows started to increase in Europe in 2014, due to ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle-East, some media outlets started to focus on the fact that many refugees happened to be Muslim and portrayed them as “other” who do not belong to Europe. As some of the examples below will show, some news outlets try to be more underhanded with making these claims, whilst others are very direct in their hatred. Within the COVID-19 pandemic, we observed some media outlets using the situation to spread hate and misinformation about Muslim and migrant communities in Europe. When it comes to gender, our media monitoring work has revealed that Muslim women are being disproportionately targeted by anti-Muslim hatred compared to Muslim men. This is particularly evident in the use of images, where Muslim women are often misrepresented or stereotyped as submissive.

Media examples

One of MDI's projects, [Get The Trolls Out! \(GTTO\)](#), aims to reduce hate speech, discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in the European media space. Our consortium of partners in Germany, Belgium, Greece, France, the UK, and Hungary monitors the media for anti-religious cases and react through complaints, educational content, and reactions on social media. For this submission, we have selected 14 examples of anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination in the media identified by the GTTO Project that are particularly relevant. To read a more in-depth analysis of each case, please follow the links:

Blaming Minorities for a Spike in Coronavirus Cases – UK (2020)

Right-wing news outlet Politicalite published two inflammatory articles on a spike of coronavirus cases in the English city of Leicester: "CORONA CLUSTER: Over-Populated Pakistani Ghettos in Lancashire See HUGE Rise In Corona Cases" (16 July) and "REVEALED: UK's Immigrant Ghettos Suffer HUGE SPIKES in Coronavirus Cases." The articles were in relation to. A few weeks prior, several news outlets incorrectly reported that "Half of UK imported coronavirus cases 'originate from Pakistan", as per an article by The Sun. These articles focused only on communities made up of majority Muslim immigrants and refugees, seeking to put the blame of COVID-19 cases on them.

News outlets focusing on minorities breaking coronavirus restrictions – Greece (2020)

In Greece, news website Proto Thema ran an article with the title: "Coronavirus: Unspeakable images of crowds at a Muslim wedding in Alexandroupolis - The groom was arrested." The article was about a wedding which broke Greece's coronavirus restrictions and originally appeared on a regional news website called evros-news. In the original piece there is only one reference to the religion of those who attended the wedding; however, in the Proto Thema reproduction, the fact that the wedding was a Muslim one is highlighted not only in the headline, but throughout the text. There were several cases of weddings in Greece which broke coronavirus restrictions. It is important to note that Proto Thema only covered this one case of a Muslim wedding.

The Independent using an inappropriate image misrepresenting young Muslim girls – UK (2020)

The Independent published an article: "In Pakistan, sex workers face a cruel dilemma." The article explored how sex workers in Pakistan are affected by COVID-19 and social distancing measures. When promoting the article on Facebook, The Independent used an image of young girls wearing headscarves. The article at no time mentions underage girls or Islam, so the choice of image was confusing. Cases like this show how something which may seem insignificant, like an image, can have a significant impact on discrimination against a minority group. An example like this can play into the hands of those who already hold dangerous ideas about a group of people, and only reinforces their discriminatory ways of thinking.

Eid al-Adha Described as Barbaric in National Media – UK and Germany (2020)

German blog PI-News, which actively promotes itself as anti-‘Islamisation’, wrote an article about the Eid al-Adha festival, stating: “The blood of countless cruelly tortured animals runs through the streets of Islamic countries. To the applause of the onlookers and with Allahu-Akbar-blubbing, mostly sheep, cattle or camels are literally massacred to death.” The author takes time to paint a particularly gruesome image for the reader. The article also talks about German politician Heiko Maas, who wished Muslims a happy Eid al-Adha. According to the author, this is a sign of ignorance and weakness from the government and will lead to supposed ‘Islamisation’: “as long as we have politicians who regard disgusting Islamic rituals as a reason for blessings, these bad habits will continue to spread in Germany - with the consequence that we will soon wade ankle-deep in blood lakes of maltreated animals on our streets during the time of Eid al-Adha.” Similarly, in the UK, the Daily Mail published an article titled “Muslims slaughter cattle, camels and sheep in bloody sacrifice to celebrate Eid al-Adha during scaled back festivities because of the coronavirus crisis.” The article was extremely emotive and sensationalist.

Anti-Muslim tropes of criminality and submission in Belgian public radio – Belgium (2020)

In October 2020, Fabrice Grosfilley, a journalist at BX1+, a local public radio station in Brussels, reinforced anti-Muslim stereotypes during the programme he was hosting. He did so when asking prejudiced questions that reinforced negative perceptions of the Muslim headscarf. The incident happened on 7th September, when the topic of the programme was on the recent motion that passed in Molenbeek, Brussels, allowing public administration employees to wear religious symbols. When interviewing the guests, programme host Grosfilley asked a series of bigoted questions to Imane Nachat, member of a collective combatting discrimination against women who wear the headscarf, including asking her to confirm that some Muslim women wear the headscarf as an act of submission. “There are indeed people who do it for conviction, others who do it for reaction and those who do it a little bit for submission”, he said.

Media coverage of the brutal murder of Samuel Paty murder fuelled hatred against Muslims – France (2020)

The murder of a teacher in the Paris suburbs sparked a wave of anti-Muslim rhetoric across France, with politicians and media commentators popularising far-right narratives about the ‘Islamisation of Europe’. Instead of instigating a respectful debate about extremism and freedom of expression, much coverage failed to distinguish between Islam and the tiny minority that carry out acts of terror. When discussing the terrorist attack on BFMTV news, the Minister of the Interior, Gérald Darmanin, said that supermarket “ethnic food” aisles are a threat to the nation. “It’s always shocked me to enter a supermarket and see an aisle of communitarian cuisine on one side. That’s my opinion, this is how communitarianism starts,” the minister said, calling instead for a “patriotic capitalism”. On TV channel CNEWS, Elisabeth Levy, Editor-in-Chief of the French conservative magazine Causeur, said that Muslim women should have taken their headscarf off for a week in honour of Samuel Paty. “I

am surprised none of them have today [removed their veil] in honour, or tact, of Samuel Paty, because the veil is also the uniform of the enemies of France,” Levy said.

Political party Vlaams Belang referred to the city of Antwerp as “Antwerpistan” in a national campaign – Belgium (2020)

Vlaams Belang (a Flemish nationalist, right-wing populist political party) faction of Antwerp has launched a campaign with clear anti-Muslim and xenophobic themes. The campaign is titled “Proud to be a Flemish from Antwerp” and it leads with the statement: “Antwerp is a city of steal and cathedrals. Not of Mosques and minarets.” The campaign is based on the belief that Antwerp is suffering from a replacement of its people, as more and more immigrants are replacing the natives in the city. In a video shared on Twitter by Filip Dewinter, various Vlaams Belang politicians are shown saying inflammatory remarks, stating that Antwerp is not a city of “headscarves, halal and couscous” and referring to the city as “Antwerpistan.”

Boris Johnson claiming Muslim women who wear the full-face veil to “letter boxes” and “bank robbers” in the Daily Telegraph - UK (2018)

Boris Johnson, the former British foreign secretary and current British Prime Minister, has compared Muslim women who wear the full-face veil to “letter boxes” and “bank robbers” in his previous role as a journalist. In a column published on The Daily Telegraph on the 6th of August, Johnson warned against implementing a “burka ban” in Britain similar to the one that was just approved in Denmark. In expressing his opposition, however, he mocked women who wear the niqab and the burka. Apart from remarking that women in full-face veils “look like letter boxes”, he said he found the Islamic garment worn by some Muslim women “oppressive”. He also added it was “weird” and “bullying” to “expect women to cover their faces”. This resulted in a steep rise of 375% in anti-Muslim hate against Muslim women in the UK in the two weeks after the publication of the article. This is a clear example of how hate in the press leads to real life cases of discrimination.

Rod Liddle column in The Sunday Times inciting violence against British Muslims - UK (2018)

On the British newspaper The Sunday Times, columnist Rod Liddle comments on the release of Anjem Choudary, imprisoned for inviting support for the Islamic State. In the piece, Liddle urges “British Islamists” to “blow themselves up – somewhere a decent distance away from where the rest of us live. Tower Hamlets, for example.” Tower Hamlets is one of the UK’s most diverse boroughs, with an estimated 38% of Muslim residents and an established Bangladeshi community. Whilst indirect, this can be interpreted as a call to violence and is a clear case of discrimination against the Muslim community of London, with potentially dangerous impacts. No action was taken by the self-regulatory body in the UK (IPSO) against this publication.

The Spectator article by Rod Liddle suggesting Muslims should be prevented from voting - UK (2019)

In November 2019, columnist Rod Liddle published an article in The Spectator suggesting that “Muslims should be prevented from voting in the next general election”. Liddle proposed that holding the general election on a day when Muslims are forbidden by their religion to vote, in order to improve the Conservatives’ chances of victory. Following the backlash prompted by his article, Riddle defended himself by saying that his suggestions were ‘patently a joke’, despite the multiple previous examples of Islamophobia in his work. This case is a clear form of discrimination against British Muslims, by calling for a restriction to their electoral, and human, rights.

PI News using dangerous ‘Great Replacement’ narrative - Germany (2019)

PI News (‘Politically Incorrect News’), a far-right German news website, discussed the latest birth rate figures and suggested that the rise in foreign-born babies reflected the ‘Islamisation’ of Germany and Europe. It also stated the number of ‘true’ Germans is lower than what the figures reveal. Using these far-right tropes, the article spreads strong anti-Islam ideas and encourages its readers to agree with them about the scale of the ‘problem’. Such tropes are dangerous as they play into the hands of those discriminating against minority groups.

Politicalite pushed violent xenophobia and anti-Muslim ‘Great Replacement’ theory - UK (2019)

British far-right news site Politicalite published an article which read like a conspiracy theory and used many of well-known far-right tropes, such as the ‘Great Replacement’ theory. It is written by Bethany Helmsley, who also writes for a blog called ‘Spotting The Serpent’s Tail’ which recently published a post calling for ‘the “cleansing” of those who make Britain multicultural.’ As with the case above, such unethical pieces of news only further the notion that discriminating against certain minority groups is acceptable.

Hirado repeating Hungarian government press conference's fabrication - Hungary (2019)

Hungarian public service website Hirado reported on a government press conference which discussed the distribution of migrant cards in Brussels (read European Commission). Despite the government spokesman suggesting that the recipients of this financial assistance were ‘anonymous’ and that there might be some ISIS members involved, Hirado decided not to critically report on this discriminatory rhetoric, thus allowing the Islamophobic statements to appear factual. By not countering such statements made by officials, news outlets are facilitating greater discrimination to take place.

Online newspaper ‘Atlantico’ making sensationalist unfounded claim - France (2019)

French online newspaper Atlantico published an article about the controversy around the sports chain Decathlon which created a running hijab in order to offer more inclusive options in their activewear range. This move caused backlash on social media with people claiming

it was an example of the 'Islamisation' of France. The article's headline suggested the hijab was a 'victory for the Muslim Brotherhood', thus spreading anti-Muslim sentiment.

Good Practice and Conclusion

More training is needed for journalists on issues related to religion to ensure nuanced and ethical reporting. This religious literacy training should occur not only through education, but also in-house in news organisations. Civil society organisations also play an important role in not only identifying these issues but helping remedy them. One of the partners in the GTTO project, The European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), submitted several complaints to the Belgian news site DH.be for using images of Muslim women that did not accurately reflect the content of the article, prompting the retraction of the stereotyping images. In October 2019, ENORB wrote to the editor of DH.be on the subject of an article using an image of a woman in a niqab to illustrate 'hostility of Belgian residents to the wearing of head coverings'. The image was removed and replaced by a woman wearing a hijab - a much more common and representative item of clothing worn by Muslim women. In December 2019, the same website published an article titled: 'Wearing the veil prohibited in two schools in Antwerp' also used a niqab as their display image. ENORB contacted DH.be again saying 'a mainstream media spreading this image misleads readers, it reinforces stereotypes and removes an understanding of the nuances and the diversity which exist within the Muslim community'. The editor responded within half an hour, briefly stating that they changed the image in question following ENORB's request. In June 2020, a photo chosen by DH.be to illustrate an article on covid-19 infections depicted Muslim women wearing the veil, which may mislead readers and imply, although indirectly, a link between these women and the resurgence of the virus. The image was edited following ENORB's complaint to the news media. These relationships between media platforms and civil society organisations as well as marginalised communities are essential in creating a more positive and accurate media environment.