

Offline and Online Experiences of Anti-Muslim crime

**For the Special Rapporteur on freedom of
religion or belief**

***Preparation for the report to the 46th Session
of Human Rights Council***

November 2020

By Imran Awan and Irene Zempi

All correspondence about this report should be directed to:

Professor Imran Awan

Birmingham City University

imran.awan@bcu.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 121 331 5640

Dr Irene Zempi

Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Nottingham Trent University

Executive Summary

This report is a joint collaboration with the authors, Professor Imran Awan and Dr Irene Zempi, and Tell MAMA. The overall aim of this report is to examine the impacts of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime. The report concludes with a list of key recommendations that participants suggested to us, which we describe as the 'victims charter'.

The reports principle findings are as follows:

- Both online and offline incidents are a continuity of anti-Muslim hate and thus should not be examined in isolation.
- Participants described living in fear because of the possibility of online threats materialising in the 'real world'.
- The prevalence and severity of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by 'trigger' events of local, national and international significance.
- The visibility of people's Muslim identity is key to triggering both online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime.
- Muslim women are more likely to be attacked in comparison to Muslim men, both in the virtual world and in the physical world.
- Victims of both online and offline anti-Muslim crime suffer from depression, emotional stress, anxiety and fear.
- The victims of online anti-Muslim hate crime remain less 'visible' in the criminal justice system.
- Muslim men are unlikely to report an incident of anti-Muslim abuse for fear of being viewed as 'weak'.

Recommendations

1. *Anti-Muslim Hate must be challenged from within Muslim communities.*

The report found that participants would like the community to speak out against the hate crime that they suffer.

2. *Media training around reporting stories to do with Muslims.*

The media must portray a more balanced viewpoint when discussing Muslim stories as this could impact upon the way they are viewed by wider society.

3. *The police can work better to improve the way in which they handle cases of anti-Muslim hate crime.*

Participants who reported incidents to the police felt that they were not taken seriously.

4. *The public should intervene and assist victims of anti-Muslim hate.*

Victims do not necessarily want physical action but just a phone call to assist the police.

5. *Anti-Muslim hate crime awareness and visibility.*

Better awareness of what a hate crime is and what things people can do to help reassure them and build confidence.

6. *Social media companies should make their systems of reporting hate crime more user friendly.*

Social media companies can do much more to help tackle online prejudice and bigotry through specific systems that help victims report anti-Muslim hate crime.

7. *Diversity in the Criminal Justice System.*

A more diverse criminal justice system with people of all backgrounds could help assist in breaking down barriers that might exist for victims reporting anti-Muslim hate crime.

8. *Challenging the language and engaging schools in the debate.*

To tackle anti-Muslim prejudice seriously then we need to start to at schools and begin challenging the language and engaging schools in the debate.

Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Tunisia in 2015, and in Woolwich, south-east London where British Army soldier Drummer Lee Rigby was murdered in 2013,

we have seen a sharp rise in anti-Muslim attacks (Littler and Feldman, 2015)¹. These incidents have occurred offline where mosques have been targeted, Muslim women have had their hijab (headscarf) or niqab (face veil) pulled off, Muslim men have been attacked, and racist graffiti has been scrawled against Muslim graves and properties. Moreover, there has been a spike in online anti-Muslim attacks where Muslims have been targeted by campaigns of cyber bullying, cyber harassment, cyber incitement and threats of offline violence. Specifically, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with British Muslims who have been victims of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime and had reported their victimisation experiences to Tell MAMA. Participation to this study was voluntary. Also, participants' names have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity.

Determinants of anti-Muslim hate crime incidence

Hate crime is the umbrella concept used in its broadest sense to describe incidents motivated by hate, hostility or prejudice towards an individual's identity. The prevalence and severity of anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by 'trigger' events of local, national and international significance. As From this perspective, hate crimes increase following 'trigger' events as they operate to galvanise tensions and sentiments against the suspected perpetrators and groups associated with them. Indeed, evidence shows that anti-Muslim hate crimes have increased significantly following 'trigger' attacks including terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam. Spikes in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents following 'trigger' events are not confined to offline settings; rather, the offline pattern is replicated online (Awan, 2014).²

Participants reported that the prevalence of both online and offline anti-Muslim hate crimes increased following high-profile terrorist attacks around the world such as Sydney, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, and attacks in Copenhagen and Tunisia. Reflecting a spike in both online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime, Hamza stated '*I have received Islamophobic abuse in social media and on the street on various*

¹ Littler, M. and Feldman, M. (2015) *Tell MAMA Reporting 2014/2015: Annual Monitoring, Cumulative Extremism, and Policy Implications*, Teesside: Teesside University Press.

² Awan, I. (2014) 'Islamophobia on Twitter: A Typology of Online Hate Against Muslims on Social Media' *Policy & Internet* 6 (2): 133-150.

occasions. *After the Sydney incident, I received Islamophobic remarks on four separate occasions in the space of two weeks*. Asma argued *'After the Paris attacks, I got a lot of nasty comments especially on social media'*. Aisha noted *'Anti-Muslim hate crime does rise as soon as an incident occurs like the attacks in Sydney, the Copenhagen shootings and the Tunisia attacks'*.

In a globally connected world, the actions by one terrorist group such as ISIS can lead to counter-reactions and impacts on Muslims in the UK. Participants pointed out that they were *'bombarded with online abuse and offline threats'* with the prominence of ISIS, especially following the release of videos showing beheadings carried out by ISIS or when there was a terror threat made against the UK from ISIS members. Sophie stated *'I keep my Facebook account private but I get a lot of abuse on twitter especially if something has happened like when ISIS killed Alan Henning'*. She added *'I recently posted a comment on Channel 4 News webpage saying that the ISIS actions are bad and then I got loads and loads of abusive comments like 'you are part of a terrorist religion'*. Sarah told us *'I was on my way to the shops and people shouted at me 'why don't we chop your head off?'* In another case, people on the street shouted *'Your head will be much better on the floor'*. Along similar lines, Aisha stated *'The cancer of ISIS and the atrocities that Boko Haram commit in Nigeria, when these incidents happen anti-Muslim hate crime does rise too'*.

A couple of participants pointed out that certain Muslim individuals have failed to condemn these 'trigger' attacks and therefore they were to some extent 'responsible' for the rise in anti-Muslim hostility. Adam argued *'There are Muslims like Anjem Choudary who are proverbial thorns in the side of Islam who refuse to condemn the Woolwich attack and the killings committed by ISIS. More generally, there has been an implicit failing in Islam to defend itself. Muslims do not speak out about the wrong things that people do in Islam. I am comfortable to speak out against the abhorrent actions of ISIS. These people are doing so much damage to the image of Islam that not to speak out is a bad thing'*.

At the same time, some participants highlighted the role of media in reporting of these 'trigger' events as *'adding fuel to the fire'*.

Online anti-Muslim hate crime

One of the more disturbing Twitter hashtags that appeared after the Paris shootings in January 2015, was the #KillAllMuslims hashtag. The hashtag, which was 'trending' in the UK, was accompanied by a number of provocative and racist comments targeting Muslims and Islam. Similarly, after the terrorist attack in Tunisia, a number of messages indicating online anti-Muslim hate were shared on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, myspace, hi5 and bebo. Some examples of hate messages have been documented below.

Within this context, Muslim women are also deemed to be part of the 'Islamic problem'. This was true, when discussing the hijab and niqab and the comments used to describe Muslim women as a 'national security threat'. The hate images and posts in particular contained a number of loaded generalisations with respect to Muslim women and Muslim communities. As a result, whilst it may look as though only Muslim women are considered a 'threat', it in fact shows that the perpetrators of online hate messages stereotype and demonise all Muslims in the same manner, and therefore consider them as a group that should be ostracised, deported or killed by using hostile imagery and depicting them in an innately negative fashion.³ For example, Hira mainly uses Facebook but had to make her online profile private because of the consistent online anti-Muslim abuse she has suffered. She noted that *'I have had to re-adjust all my security settings, so that only friends can contact me or see my profile because of the abuse I have suffered.'*

This sense of fear and pervading insecurity online is also personified by Kelly, who stated that *'These trolls are not the stereotyped EDL, they come from all walks of life and all backgrounds which is alarming. They will set up a hoax ID and from there they can abuse anyone with complete anonymity and hiding behind a false ID.'* The relentless online abuse Sophie suffered was because of her 'visible' presence online as a White Muslim convert. She told us that *'People will message me and try to start arguments, for example, a troll messaged me to say that we are all a bunch of terrorists, and that we have been brainwashed to convert to Islam.'* Halima has also been the victim of the EDL cyber mob and had to report the online abuse that she had suffered because of the direct threats that were made to her life. In Halima's case, an

³ See Iganski, P. (2008). *'Hate Crime' and the City*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

EDL sympathiser had threatened her with physical violence. Below is the conversation that took place online:

'Hahahhahaa I told you my agenda hunny. Don't worry I will knock you out.' 'Babe let's do a meet and greet. We're not far from each other.' 'Save your smart mouth for Saturday. I can't wait.' Online spaces often leave a footprint that is difficult to erase and can cause a lot of damage when images and pictures are used to target individuals. For example, Halima had her picture tweeted, with the accompanying text: *'You Burqa wearing slut.'* As noted above, the use of pictures can magnify the abuse and hostility victims suffer online. The above case is not an isolated one as Amin has also suffered similar online anti-Muslim abuse. In his case, an image was used of him with the caption; *'suspended child grooming taxi drivers'*, despite the post being false and malicious. Amin stated that *'I don't even have a beard but they targeted me. I reported it to the police but they weren't interested. They should have protected me but they didn't.'* The examples below also show how Twitter has been used as a vehicle for individuals to create a 'them versus us' narrative.

Offline anti-Muslim hate crime

Similarly to the virtual world, where actual and potential victims are identified through the visibility of their Muslim identity, Muslims are equally vulnerable to intimidation, violence and abuse on the street, particularly when their Muslim identity is visible offline. Evidence suggests that 'visible' Muslims – such as Muslim men with a beard and Muslim women who wear hijab or niqab – are at heightened risk of anti-Muslim hostility in public by virtue of their visible 'Muslimness'.⁴ Specifically, popular perceptions that veiled Muslim women are passive, oppressed and powerless increase their chance of assault, thereby marking them as an 'easy' target to attack. We found that whilst online stereotypes were used to depict Muslims in a negative manner, in the physical world such effects were used to characterise Muslims with strong verbal abuse.

For example, Sarah noted how *'When I became identifiably Muslim I got nasty looks, threats and abuse, and that's an everyday experience, especially because I am a white British Muslim.'* These views were reinforced by comments that were made against

⁴ Taras, R. (2012). *Xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe*, Edinburgh University Press.

Sarah who on a daily basis had to hear the following comments *'Oh you are a Paki lover.'* These comments were not isolated to Sarah, but a number of other participants had also experienced racist abuse, which they suffered because of their visible identification as Muslim. Ahmed stated that *'They call me 'terrorist', they call me 'Paki', I've been told 'Fuck off go away', I get sworn at, and that's mainly because I'm Muslim. The thing is, I am born in this country. I want to live here.'* Mohammad talked about how his children have also been targeted by anti-Muslim abuse in schools. He noted that *'Other pupils call them names like 'Paki get lost', swearing, 'go back home', 'you don't belong here', 'Muslim monkeys', other pupils have pulled their headscarves.'* Sophie stated that *'On my previous school placement, my hijab was sharply pulled by a child, this was witnessed by a teacher but was not challenged by them'.* Along similar lines, Hamza stated that *'I was called a 'Muslim groomer' while Mohammad also argued that 'I have been called 'Muslim terrorist' and 'Here come's Osama Bin Laden'.*

Impacts of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime

Crime can incur a number of different 'costs' following a victimisation experience that involve emotional, psychological, physical and financial liabilities. We found that participants suffered a range of psychological and emotional responses to anti-Muslim hate, from lowered self-confidence and insecurity to depression, isolation and anxiety. Given that they were targeted because of the 'visibility' of their Muslim identity – which is easily identifiable because of their Muslim name and/or Muslim appearance either in the virtual world or in the physical sphere – participants were unable to take comfort in the belief that what happened to them was simply random and 'could have happened to anyone'. Rather, they were forced to view this abuse as an attack on their Muslim identity and this had severe implications for their levels of confidence and self-esteem as well as their feelings of belonging and safety in the UK.