

***“We are accused of being ISIS terrorists”:  
The experiences of non-Muslim men who  
suffer Islamophobia because they look  
Muslim***

**A Briefing Paper prepared  
For the Special Rapporteur on freedom of  
religion or belief**

***Preparation for the report to the 46<sup>th</sup> Session of  
Human Rights Council***

**November 2020**

## Contents

---

1. Executive Summary
2. Research aims and design
3. Nature of the problem
4. Causes of the problem
5. Impacts upon victims and communities
6. Experiences of reporting anti-Muslim hate crime
7. Recommendations

## Executive Summary

---

Existing research on Islamophobic hate crime has examined in detail the verbal, physical and emotional attacks against Muslims. However, the experiences of non-Muslim men who suffer Islamophobia because they look Muslim remain 'invisible' in both official statistics and empirical research. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with 20 (non-Muslim) men based in the UK, we examine their lived experiences of Islamophobic hate crime in person and online. Our findings show that participants experienced Islamophobic hate crime because of the intersections between gender, race/ethnicity, appearance and space. Participants described being verbally and physically attacked, threatened and harassed as well as their property being damaged (for example, graffiti and smashed windows). These incidents usually happened in public spaces, on trains, buses, shopping centres as well as workplace – often when other people were there yet did not intervene. Attacks against participants also took place near mosques or areas with high population of Muslims. The impacts upon victims included physical, emotional, psychological, and economic damage. These experiences were also damaging to community cohesion and led to polarisation between different communities. Our recommendations are based on participants' views and opinions for tackling this problem.

## Recommendations

---

### **Making public transport safer – *Stand Up and Challenge Hatred***

We argue that much more public awareness campaigns on public transport need to be considered.

### **Training for bystanders - *Speak up and ACT NOW Campaign***

We argue that there needs to be training and workshops for bystanders (this could include front line public sector workers).

### **Increasing reporting of hate crime with a *New App* that offers real time live help**

Whilst there are a number of excellent online resources in tackling hate crime, we do feel there is a need for a social media App that offers live support and assistance.

### **Monitoring online hate speech – *Click and Report It***

We feel that the online platform and social media reporting requires further measures to improve its tools and capacity for victims of hate crime.

**Increasing awareness of cultural diversity – *Learning to Live Together***

As all our participants were not Muslim, we feel that more work could be done in helping increase cultural diversity and awareness training.

**Policing/recording religiously motivated hate crime – *Challenging and Recording Hate***

In our study, the majority of participants were wrongly identified as Muslim because of their similarities in the manner in which they dress. We argue that police officers should be trained on recognising religiously motivated hate crime.

## Research aims and design

---

The report derives from a qualitative study, which set out to record the experiences of non-Muslim men who suffer Islamophobia because they are perceived to be Muslim. Specifically, the study involved individual, in-depth interviews with 20 male participants, who have been victims of anti-Muslim hate crime. Participants were recruited through engagement with (non-Muslim) religious and secular organisations in the UK.

The main aims of the research were to:

- (a) Examine the nature of anti-Muslim hate crime directed towards non-Muslim men who are perceived to be Muslim;
- (b) Consider the impact of anti-Muslim hate crime upon victims and wider communities;
- (c) Examine the coping strategies, which are used by victims in response to their experiences of anti-Muslim hostility;
- (d) Offer recommendations on preventing and responding to this hostility.

The interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions related to these research questions. Interviews typically ranged from one to two hours, with an average interview length of one hour. Interviews were undertaken by the authors. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed thematically. In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their real names have been replaced by pseudonyms whilst any personal information that could identify them has been removed. The sample was diverse in terms of age, race/ethnicity and religion. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 59. In terms of race/ethnicity, participants included those from Asian heritage (fourteen), Black (three), White Other (two) and White British (one). In terms of faith/belief, participants included those of the Sikh faith (nine), Christian faith (six), Hindu (three) and Atheist (two) background. However, the sample is not statistically representative. The aim of the study was not to quantify participants' experiences in a statistical fashion but to understand the nature and impact of anti-Muslim hate crime amongst the participants.

## Nature of the problem

---

Research indicates that hate crimes spike following ‘trigger’ events<sup>1</sup>. Evidence shows that hate crime surged in the UK in the following weeks after the EU Referendum vote, and still remain significantly high. For example, reports of hate crimes had risen in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, according to the National Police Chiefs’ Council<sup>2</sup>. Our participants spoke about feeling vulnerable after the EU vote on social media sites.

On Facebook, someone wrote on my timeline “Shouldn’t you be on a plane back to Pakistan? We voted for you being out.” (Joshua)

Two weeks before the EU Referendum vote, I received messages on WhatsApp like “Vote out. Kick out the Muslims.” (Dalbir)

People have been calling me names on Twitter like “You’re a p\*\*i c\*\*t”. I have also been threatened on Facebook like “Today is the day we get rid of the likes of you!” I feared for my safety when I read this. (Vinesh)

For me it’s more online than offline. People leave comments like “Go home, you f\*\*\*king Muslim” on social media. If you check my timeline on Facebook, you’ll see the horrible comments people leave underneath my comments. (Parminder)

As well as the proliferation of cyber hate, accounts of racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia have become ‘normalised’ to the extent that people who are perceived to be ‘visibly’ Muslim are targeted on public transport, at the shops and within their own local communities.

I was walking late at night, and someone came from behind. I had a rucksack on my back. I felt a knock on my back, and when I looked back, I saw that a knife had gone through it. Luckily, I had some

---

<sup>1</sup> Awan, I and Zempi, I. (2015) ‘Virtual and Physical World Anti-Muslim Hate Crime’, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57 (2): 362–380.

<sup>2</sup> EU Referendum: Reports of hate crime increase 57% following Brexit vote, *The Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-hate-crime-racism-reports-eu-referendum-latest-a7106116.html>

clothes in the rucksack so they had stopped it going any further.  
(Parminder)

It happens a lot to me, sometimes by the same people if they see me outside they will yell sometimes 'Black terrorist is here'. (Nick)

It happens multiple times, verbal abuse on the street and on the train. Specifically I've been called 'P\*\*i terrorist'. People often say 'Go back'. People call me a 'bastard'. The other day some people threw bottles at me. (Dalvinder)

Another driver overtook my car shouting "You've killed innocent people, go back to Syria, you ISIS terrorist". But the most horrific incident was when a group of white lads punched me and broke my teeth on my way back from work. While they were punching me, they shouted "all Muslims should be killed". I was working in a chip shop at the time. I have now left my job since this incident happened. (Richard)

Our participants also highlighted how travelling at airports had become problematic following terrorist attacks and described how recent events regarding the Rotherham sexual abuse case, had meant they were being targeted as pedophiles.

After 9/11, travelling has been difficult due to airport security. I was travelling to America and they even asked us to take our shirts off. We asked for a room but they refused. I was scared, I did not know what would happen next. (Ramandeep)

I've had experiences where people have made comments, for example, "you P\*\*i Muslim" or swearing about Prophet Mohammed. They think I'm Muslim because of my skin colour but I'm not Muslim, I'm Sikh. They also call me names like "paedo", they associate paedophilia with Islam (Deepak).

Hate crimes are not solely manifested in verbal and physical abuse directed against the victim. In some cases, hate crimes can target someone by vandalising their property with racist graffiti because the perpetrators believe the victims are Muslim. In our study, participants described how the places where they lived were also targeted because they looked Muslim.

I live on a rough estate. I had dog excrement shoved through the mailbox. They also threw paint over my door. (Paul)

Slogans including “Muzzies out” were painted across my house. A week later, I received anti-Muslim hate letter in the post. My parents were concerned for my safety, given these threats. (Joshua)

## Causes of the problem

---

Participants differentiated between external and personal factors that contributed to their experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime. External factors included issues unrelated to them (such as Brexit and ISIS-inspired terrorist events around the world) whilst personal factors entailed aspects of their appearance that contributed to them being perceived as Muslim. Within this context, participants reported that they experienced a spike in hate crime attacks after the Brexit vote in June 2016. Participants also noted how the Trump administration – and its stance towards Muslims – had promoted anti-Muslim sentiments nationally and internationally.

I’ve noticed that abuse has increased on social media after Trump coming into power. I’m on a lot of sites having discussions with people, and I find that racism and Islamophobia are very prevalent. Trump’s views are very extreme like banning Muslims to enter US. You could not make this up five years ago. (Richard)

Trump really changed everything, didn't he? He is so blatantly racist and anti-Muslim that he changed the climate completely. (Paul)

Participants also noted how Islamist terrorist events around their world led to an increase in anti-Muslim hate crime attacks.

Every time there's a major terrorism incident there's a sharp rise in hate directed at me and my family. (Vinesh)

I’ve noticed a rise in abuse when there is a terrorist attack. Sadly the overall situation is deteriorating. Islamophobia is having an increasing impact on the lives of Asian men who look Muslim. The hatred that lies behind Islamophobia is spreading. (Deepak)

With respect to personal factors, some participants argued that their beard was a key aspect of their appearance, which led to being perceived to be Muslim.

On a daily basis, I get people on the streets calling me 'traitor' and 'Ginger Terrorist' because of my beard. They think I'm Muslim, a convert to Islam but I'm not, I'm an Atheist. Having a beard is part of my style, not for any religious reasons. (Paul)

It's happened to me ever since I grew a beard. I'm not a Muslim but people stare at me because they think I am. After the Woolwich terrorist attack, people kept giving me bad looks, even the bus driver stared at me. I sit down on the bus, there are actually people who need a seat but they never sit next to me. (Cameron)

Some participants also felt that their skin colour contributed to being perceived as Muslim.

I suffer hate crime whenever I'm travelling on public transport. Once I was getting on the train and someone just shouted at me "f\*\*k off you P\*\*i Muslim" and I told him I was not a Muslim and he started laughing saying 'you all look the same' ... It's because I'm brown and I look like a Muslim. Although I don't have a beard, still people look at me and think 'he must be a Muslim'. (Govinda)

Being held at the airport consistently and being treated as a suspect. Because I'm mixed race and I look Muslim, I always get stopped and get abuse at airports. The association of looking like a Muslim is the problem for me. (Samuel)

Sikh men who wore the turban felt more vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks on the basis that the turban was usually mistaken for a Muslim cap.

Because of being a Sikh man with a beard and turban, people see me as an ISIS terrorist. (Dalvinder)

Asian men who wear the turban and have a beard suffer more abuse because they are more visible. (Dalbir)

Finally, participants argued that their gender was crucial to being seen as a Muslim 'threat'.

We face Islamophobia because of our gender, race and perceived religion. (Raj)

As I am a male, and all these Islamist terrorists are males too, that's probably why they target me too. (Nick)

## Impact upon victims and communities

---

The research data illustrate the emotional, psychological, behavioural, physical and financial impacts of experiencing anti-Muslim hate crime upon our participants. Correspondingly, many individuals reported that they suffered anxiety, depression, physical illness, loss of income and employment. Specifically, experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime had provoked feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and anxiety amongst participants.

We live in fear every day. We face abuse and intimidation daily but we should not have to endure this abuse. (Raj)

It does have an impact on me. When you have these kinds of experiences, you feel insecure. (Mark)

Feelings of insecurity were exacerbated by the fact that these incidents usually took place in public places in view of people passing-by who did not intervene to help them. The fact that no one would normally intervene to help victims had culminated in feeling of loneliness and isolation, as indicated in the following quote.

I was verbally abused by another passenger on the bus who branded me an "ISIS terrorist" while passengers looked on without intervening. In another incident, I had 'Brexit' yelled in my face ... I feel very lonely. No one has come to my assistance or even console me. (Mark)

Some participants argued that they suffered from depression, eating disorders and sleep pattern disturbances.

After the latest incident I went into depression. I didn't want to talk to anybody for a few days. In addition to depression, my sleeping pattern changed. Sometimes eating is a problem, I don't normally eat that much [obesity]. I didn't realise I was having a problem with my diet. (Ranveer)

A key finding was the fact that participants constantly felt the need to prove their identity, and differentiate themselves from Islam and Muslims. They explained that this was an attempt to prevent future victimisation; however, this was also

emotionally draining for our participants. As the following quote indicates, the need to constantly 'prove their identity' had resulted in a cumulative experience of emotional burnout over time.

Because of my beard, I need to explain why I have this and that I'm not Muslim. I think 'why do I need to prove who I am?' Every second, every minute, every day I have to prove myself. (Dalvinder)

Relatedly, a common feeling amongst our participants was a feeling of resignation, a lack of hope that anything would change.

We are now resigned to the fact that we have to endure anti-Muslim harassment on a daily basis. (Dalbir)

My identity is always questioned because I look like a Muslim. It does make me feel low but I got used to it. As a Black man with a beard you always get associated as being a Muslim terrorist. (Samuel)

Experiences of anti-Muslim hostility and harassment had affected and sometimes seriously damaged the quality of life for both participants and their families. Participants explained that their partner and children were often targeted. For example, one of our participants, Paul, argued that because he is perceived to be Muslim, his partner also suffers abuse. This resulted in his partner suffering from panic attacks whilst another participant, Taranjeet, argued that his wife now suffers from depression after repeated incidents of criminal damage of their Asian shop.

It is dangerous, I fear for my safety and for my partner's safety as she also gets abuse for being with me. It is upsetting the way people think and act. My partner now suffers from panic attacks. (Paul)

I'm worried because my wife is now suffering from depression. She said "let's close the shop down" but my dad made this shop, we can't just leave! (Taranjeet)

Taranjeet also noted the effects this had upon his children. As the following quote indicates, he felt helpless, as he did not know how to justify this abuse to his children.

Both my wife and kids have had it really bad. When the shop windows were smashed, they were inside and I was out. My wife is always scared now. Actually, she did not want to go back to the

shop for a whole month. My kids at home always say “Daddy why are they hurting us? Is it because they don’t like us? But we haven’t done anything wrong to them”. What should I say to them? That they are hitting us because they think we are Muslim? (Taranjeet)

Participants noted that fellow members of their religious communities were also fearful for their safety; they knew that they themselves were equally vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse as (perceived) Muslims. Some participants argued that some individuals were angry, upset and frustrated as they felt it was unfair to be targeted because of their perceived affiliation to Islam. This had led to feelings of polarisation and hostility between the Muslim community and other religious groups such as Sikhs and Hindus. In the words of one of our participants: ‘Communities are polarised’. Similar views were expressed below.

This is a divided society. Some Sikhs blame Muslims for the abuse they get. We are facing a huge challenge is cohesion in our communities. Local councils need to do more to bring the Muslim community and the Sikh community together. (Parminder)

## **Experiences of reporting anti-Muslim hate crime**

---

Some participants who had experienced online abuse decided to take action and report their abusers to social media providers namely Twitter and Facebook. However, they unanimously reported that ‘nothing happens’ when they report their abusers to social media providers.

On Twitter I just report the accounts that verbally abuse me but I still see those people on there so I’m confused why Twitter fails to remove them. (Govinda)

I don't use Twitter. My social media presence goes as far as Facebook. If I was to write something on Facebook against another religious group, I'd be blocked straight away. But when I get abuse, nothing happens even if I report to Facebook. They are hesitant to block my abusers. (Raj)

Some participants argued that when they reported their experiences to the police, they did not feel satisfied.

The last incident included being verbally abused by a taxi driver in Manchester. When I got into the car, he said “Get out! I don't put

Muslims in my car”. I said I’m not Muslim but then he came out and dragged me out the car. I reported it to the police but they said that the CCTV outside the train station did not work so it was my word against his. They did not believe me and the case was closed.  
(Mark)

Some participants argued that they would not normally report their experiences to the police.

Friends and family are like ‘you should tell the police’ but I’m stuck because I think the police will just laugh at me. Don’t forget, the police haven’t really helped Black people so I don’t trust them.  
(Cameron)

## Recommendations

---

### **Making public transport safer – *Stand Up and Challenge Hatred***

A number of our participants highlighted how their abuse had happened on public transport. For example, this included participants being abused at bus stops, on the train and during the night-time economy. We argue that much more public awareness campaigns on public transport need to be considered. For example, visibility is important and our participants wanted more use of posters with information and reporting mechanisms for hate crime.

### **Training for bystanders - *Speak up and ACT NOW Campaign***

A number of participants spoke about the abuse they suffered and lack of public intervention. We argue that there needs to be training and workshops for bystanders (this could include front line public sector workers). We feel that bystander training could help form part of the new hate crime action plan. This training can help bystanders inform and recognise situations and be able to intervene safely and deal with them.

### **Increasing reporting of hate crime with a *New App* that offers real time live help**

Whilst there are a number of excellent online resources in tackling hate crime, our participants did feel there is a need for a social media App that does not only facilitate online reporting on an incident but offers actual advice and also somewhere that victims of a hate crime can actually read news feeds and articles on how and what is a hate crime. The App could be used within a real time scenario, and thus act as an App that allows a person to report an incident quickly and also provide feedback on how they were dealt with. This could also be used with a live chat with a trained practitioner dealing with hate crime. We feel the App could also be used as a repository of information and key guidance.

**Monitoring online hate speech – *Click and Report It***

A number of our participants reported how they had been abused online as well as offline. We feel the online platform is something that requires further measures to improve for victims of hate crime. For example, there needs to be a more coherent and consistent way of monitoring hate speech. Our participants felt that in most cases there needs to be a more joint up effort from the police with social media companies. We argue that the police require further training in how they deal with online hate speech and that social media companies should not only sign a new code of conduct but actually be fined where they have failed victims of online hate speech. We do feel that counter-messaging is important and can be an effective tool in creating an alternative message though hashtags such as #SayNo2Hate.

**Increasing awareness of cultural diversity – *Learning to Live Together***

As all our participants were not Muslim, we feel that more work could be done in helping increase cultural diversity and awareness training. We feel this would be beneficial to front line workers who should be better informed about diversity and also people with different religious backgrounds. Increasing cultural diversity also means that organisations and the police will have a better awareness of understanding the impacts of this type of hate crime and how to deal with it effectively.

**Policing/recording religiously motivated hate crime – *Challenging and Recording Hate***

We argue that police officers should be trained on recognising religiously motivated hate crime. Sadly many of our participants felt that if they did report incidents to the police that they would either be ignored or that they would classify this as Islamophobic hate crime. We argue that with new measures in police recording of hate crime that this could lead to swifter prosecutions and give confidence to victims of hate crime.

## Additional Information

---

### Professor Imran Awan

Professor of Criminology, Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Criminology

Address: Birmingham City University, The Curzon Building, 4 Cardigan Street, Birmingham, B4 7BD

Email: [imran.awan@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:imran.awan@bcu.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 121 331 6548

Twitter: @ProfImranAwan

### Dr Irene Zempi

Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University

Address: Nottingham Trent University, Department of Sociology, Chaucer 3101, Nottingham, NG1 4BU

Email: [irene.zempi@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:irene.zempi@ntu.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 115 848 5155

Twitter: @DrIreneZempi

