

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Consultation with Civil Society

Joining hands to end racial discrimination

Response to Question 1 of the questionnaire:

What are the key challenges and issues of racial discrimination in your country/region today and how do you work to address them?

Prepared and Submitted in 14 November 2016 by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (UK)



Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is a not-for-profit campaign, research and advocacy organisation founded and based in the United Kingdom. It was set up in 1997 and works for redress of human rights violations and a better understanding of rights and norms across confessional, ethnic, national, political and other boundaries.

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For the last 20 years and particularly since 2000 the rise of anti-Muslim discrimination in Europe has represented some relatively new challenges for policymakers. Among these has been to properly define the phenomenon and correctly locate it within the nexus of power relations that exist between majority and minority groups.

Unfortunately, most of the time anti-Muslim discrimination has been seen as an isolated phenomenon, distinct from and separate to the wider racially-based discrimination that is a common feature of European societies.

In our view, based on our extensive documenting and analysis of anti-Muslim and racial discrimination, we believe this approach is misplaced.

The kind of prejudice and discrimination suffered by Muslim communities today should be seen as an outgrowth of the same historical processes that gave rise to racial discrimination. An increasing amount of academic literature now exists to support such a view led by decolonial studies experts.

"It is absolutely impossible to de-link the hate or fear against Muslims from racism against non-European people. Islamophobia and cultural racism are entangled and overlapping discourses. The association of Muslims with the colonial subjects of Western empires in the minds of white populations is simply a given in the core of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system.

This links Islamophobia to an old colonial racism that is still alive in the world today, especially in the metropolitan centers. In Great Britain, Muslims are associated with Egyptians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (subjects from old British colonies); thus Islamophobia in Britain is associated with anti-Black, anti-Arab and anti-South Asian racism. In France, Muslims are mostly North Africans (from old colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, etc.). In the Netherlands, Muslims are mostly 'guest workers' and colonial migrants coming from Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia and Suriname so Islamophobia in the Netherlands is associated with racism against guest worker migrants and old colonial subjects. In Belgium, 90% of the Belgian population uses the term 'vreemdelingen' or 'étrangers' ('foreigners') to refer specifically to Moroccan, Turkish or Arab immigrants, i.e., cultural others that can be defined as Muslims (Billiet & Carton & Huys 1990:432). In Germany, Islamophobia is associated with anti-Turk racism, and in Spain with anti-Moor racism. Thus Islamophobia as a fear or hatred of Muslims is associated with anti-Arab, anti-Asian, and anti-Black racism."

(<http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol5/iss1/2/> The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist/Patriarchal World-System: An Introduction by Ramon Grosfoguel)

Islamophobia is inextricably linked to European racism in its origins but the association is also manifested in practice. As the quote above indicates, Muslim communities in Europe have immigrant origins and are therefore vulnerable to discrimination that can take on a religious

and/or racial colour. The level of overlap varies from case to case but to deny an association exists is implausible.

An important study in this regard was carried out in 2014 by Nabil Khattab and Dr. Ron Johnston (Ethno-religious identities and persisting penalties in the UK labor market). Analysis of data from the UK Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey of more than half a million people revealed that Muslim men were up to 76% less likely to have a job of any kind compared to white, male British Christians of the same age with the same qualifications. For Muslim women falling in the "other" and "Pakistani" ethnic category the corresponding figure was 65%.

Interestingly, the authors conclusions point to discrimination having both an ethnic and cultural (which includes religious) element: "It is then possible that Islamophobia, on the one hand, and the attempt to racialize them culturally and phenotypically, on the other, have pushed Muslims as a group toward lower positions within the British ethnic-racial structure."

The authors quote from a study by J. Rana (The story of Islamophobia. Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society) to corroborate their findings: "Without a doubt, the diversity of the Islamic world in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, and other markers of difference, would negate popular notions of racism against Muslims as a singular racial group. Yet, current practices of racial profiling in the War on Terror perpetuate a logic that demands the ability to define what a Muslim looks like from appearance and visual cues. This is not based purely on superficial cultural markers such as religious practice, clothing, language, and identification. A notion of race is at work in the profiling of Muslims. "

In our own experience of dealing with discrimination, since 2000 Islamophobia has become a preferred channel of expression for racists across Europe. Instrumentalising a series of "high principles" (secularism, gender equality etc), states have erected a formidable system of anti-Muslim exclusion. At the same time the continuing economic crisis in Europe has made fashionable the scapegoating of minorities such as Blacks, Muslims and Roma.

Our most recent UK hate crime project published in 2015 (Environment of Hate: The New Normal for Muslims in the UK) highlighted an alarming rise in levels of antipathy towards Muslims. Between 2010 and 2014 the number of people who reported seeing Islamophobia directed at someone else spiked from 50% to 82%. In the same period the number of people stating they had witnessed negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims jumped from 69% to 93.3% suggesting these experiences have become almost universal for Muslims.

This rise in Islamophobia is set within the political shift from acceptance of structural racism to the idea that minorities, especially Muslims, with their inherent deficiencies/differences are the cause of social tensions. In the UK and elsewhere the melting pot has widely been replaced by an assimilationist agenda which in itself is part of a wider discourse of hate that underpins discrimination.

France is home to western Europe's biggest Muslim minority but their relative numerical strength has not served to inhibit Islamophobia, especially against women who are reckoned to bear the brunt of government anti-hijab and niqab policies and also discrimination and abuse/violence.

Muslims and ethnic minorities in France face structural discrimination from a state which veils its prejudices behind an alleged indivisibility of the French national identity into any component parts, be they religious, ethnic or racial. While this allegedly 'colourblind' approach is said by the state party to protect the principle of equality and ensure its application, the reality is that it is in and of itself a driver of discrimination.

IHRC's 2012 report 'France and the Hated Society: Muslim Experiences' describes the state party's approach to national identity thus: "To be French, then, is to be an abstract, unencumbered individual, free from any public manifestation or affectation of difference. It is only as an assimilated individual that a person can express himself as a French citizen. This abstract individual.....not only represents the ideal of French republicanism, he represents an idea of state neutrality and, therefore, equality against the incursions of divisive notions such as religion. Grosfoguel and Mielants variously argue, however, that this abstract individual is in fact gendered, elite and racialised as a white, upper class male ('communautaristes masculine blanc') whose gendered, racialised class interests are the foundational values of the republic (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006 and Grosfoguel, 2006) operating invisibly to institutionalise and normalise their privilege."

That Muslims face systematic discrimination in France is beyond dispute. Cultural and religious expression remains restricted by the draconian state ban on wearing the hijab in schools or universities and the niqab in public. The state also systematically discriminates against private Muslim education. Muslims in France have found it nearly impossible to put on the policy agenda such things as state aid for separate Islamic schools under the same conditions that govern aid to Roman Catholic schools.

In 2012 research conducted by Stanford University's David Laitin found evidence of discrimination against Muslims in employment. Published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the study concluded that a Christian citizen with an African heritage was two-and-a-half times more likely to get called for a job interview than an equally qualified Muslim citizen with the same ethnic background. So while discrimination is bad for non-white Christians it is far worse for non-white Muslims.

It is important to guard against treating Islamophobia in isolation from cultural/biological racism not least because many on the right and increasingly the left employ the distinction to justify discrimination against Muslims. They argue that as a regressive and socially repressive worldview Islam should have no place in the western and modern world. Islamic practices and values by extension should not be allowed to play any role in the personal or public lives of citizens, even if they are shared by a significant minority of the population. Much of the

xenophobia and Islamophobia emanates from leftist forces who find themselves in an unholy anti-Muslim alliance with the extreme right, leaving Muslims isolated and unable to draw on support from much of the traditional anti-racism sector.