Briefing Paper

Gendered Islamophobic Victimisation: Experiencing Misogyny, Harassment and Threats of Violence

By Imran Awan[1] and Irene Zempi[2]

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1. Associate Professor in Criminology and Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Criminology, Birmingham City University

Email: imran.awan@bcu.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 121 331 6548

2. Director of the Nottingham Centre for Bias, Prejudice & Hate Crime, and Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University

Email: irene.zempi@ntu.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 115 848 5155

Introduction

Evidence shows that hate crime surged in the UK in the following weeks after the EU referendum vote, and still remains at significantly higher levels than a year ago. Reports of hate crime have risen 58% in the aftermath of the EU referendum vote, according to the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC, 2016). Police have linked the spike in hate crime incidents immediately after the June referendum directly to the Brexit vote, saying people had taken the vote to leave the EU as a 'licence' to behave in a racist or discriminatory way. Against this background, we consider the role of the visibility of Muslim identity in triggering manifestations of Islamophobia in public spaces in the UK. In doing so, we draw on our different experiences of employing 'autoethnography' in order to research Islamophobic victimisation.

Methodology

This briefing paper is based on two independent research projects that we are attempting to bring together in order to compare our experiences of researching Islamophobic victimisation. Specifically, we employed autoethnography in order to research Islamophobia through adopting a 'visibly' identifiable Muslim identity in public spaces. In short, autoethnography relies on using and analysing the researcher's own experiences. From this perspective, Irene wore the full veil – including jilbab (long dress), hijab (headscarf) and niqab (face veil) – in public in Leicester whilst Imran grew a beard, wore the Jubba (male Islamic dress) and Islamic cap in public in Birmingham. By adopting this dress code, the aim was for both researchers to become 'insiders' and thus feel part of visible Muslims' reality. The main research question was 'how does the researchers' perceived identity as Muslims render them vulnerable to Islamophobic victimisation in public?' Throughout the fieldwork, both researchers kept a personal diary in order to write their reflections.

Summary of findings

- We both experienced persistent staring, name-calling, swearing, being followed, threats of physical violence and low-level physical attacks. Underlying all these forms of abuse and harassment was a clear sense of anti-Muslim hatred and hostility, which was made apparent through the language used by the perpetrators. For example, typical examples of name-calling were 'Muslim terrorist', 'filthy terrorist', 'suicide bomber' and 'You lot are terrorists', which indicated the perpetrators' perceptions of Muslims as a security or terrorist 'threat'.

- We both received racist and xenophobic sentiments such as 'F*** off back to Afghanistan' and "You're not welcome here, go back to where you came from".

- Using autoethnography allowed us to gain 'insider' knowledge. In this regard, gaining 'insider' knowledge contributed to the process of understanding visible Muslims' experiences of Islamophobic victimisation in public.

- However, there were certain 'costs' involved in both cases. Feelings of emotional and physical distress emerged because of the intimidation, abuse and hostility we experienced from members of the public. Thus doing autoethnography allowed us to experience many of the emotions that victims feel when they experience Islamophobia such as depression, sadness, fear, anxiety, suspicion, anger, helplessness and isolation. Moreover, there were ethical as well as moral issues involved such as putting ourselves at risk and doing covert research.

Recommendations

1. 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. We argue that our experiences are shaped by the manner in which bystanders did not intervene in some cases where a telephone call would have assisted us and other victims. We believe frontline workers should be trained in how best to respond for victims who have reported a hate crime.

2. Anti-Muslim hate crime awareness and visibility

Better awareness of what a hate crime is and what people can do to help reassure them and build confidence. We found that in many public spaces the visibility and awareness of what victims of hate crime should do was not visible. Posters, videos from victims and information leaflets that help victims on third-party reporting mechanisms are important.

3. Improving the lives of victims of hate crime

We feel much more work should be done to better understand the causes and drivers of anti-Muslim hatred. In particular, we feel the emotional stress and anxiety factors require further action from within a cross-range of partners such as the health sector. We feel that such services can be shaped within each geographical location and be used by community and third party organisations to help reassure communities.

4. Public transport should be made safer

Both our experiences showed that on public transport we were more likely to be victimised. We argue that public transport staff should be given appropriate training with regards helping victims of hate crime. In particular, we feel that the night time economy which involves taxi drivers and restaurant owners, should be linked with crime prevention strategies across the UK. A campaign of powerful stories and posters should also be used across public transport, such as on buses and the tube.

5. *The quality of support provided to victims*

We feel that the services provided to victims of hate crime needs to be improved. In particular, in many cases for victims of hate crime they are unaware as to who they can approach to assist them. We feel that local and community based interventions should be properly resourced.

6. *Training provided for frontline workers*

We argue that for those on the front-line such as teachers, transport services and the police that they also should be provided with training and educating on how best to respond to hate crime incidents. We believe this could assist the general public in feeling safer and therefore more willing to report hate crimes.

7. *Social Media Training in tackling online hate speech*

We argue that for a long-term sustainable change of attitudes, social media training should be provided for teachers and children in schools which can help equip young people from an early age in tackling cyber bullying, cyber harassment and cyber incitement. Whilst we did not suffer any direct online hate, we have argued throughout our research that online hate speech manifests itself offline and that more needs to be done with respect to training people about the possible dangers.