



**ISLAMIC
RELIEF
CANADA**

Islamic Relief Canada Written Submission to Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights Re: Islamophobia in Canada

What constitutes Islamophobia?

- Islamophobia is a form of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness by virtue of name, language, accent, choice of dress, colour of one's skin or worldviews. In practice, Islamophobia is hate, hostility and discrimination against Islam or people who practise Islam (Muslims). Islamophobia can take place as verbal or physical violence.
- Over 70% of Canadians understand what Islamophobia is, consider Islamophobia to be a grave problem, and want the government to take action against Islamophobia in Canada (EKOS Research, 2018).¹
- We need a defined term such as Islamophobia because, just as with anti-Semitism, sexism or racism, we need to give name to the broad spectrum of expressions given to anti-Muslim feelings and behaviour — not only for purposes of legislation and definition, but also to help people identify, analyse and change thought and response *patterns that may have previously gone unnoticed even to the self*.
- Does this mean any criticism of Islam is Islamophobic? Absolutely not. Rational discourse and criticism is a very important tradition both within the Muslim community and with other faiths, and has often been encouraged. The Quran itself says, "*Do not argue with the People of Scripture except in the best manner...*" Rational discourse differs from Islamophobic expression in its terminology, manner and — most importantly — if the intention is to vilify, discriminate and create hostility towards the Muslim community.

Islamic Relief Canada Observations on Islamophobia with Respect to Online/offline Violence Against Muslims

According to Statistics Canada, while the number of faith-motivated hate crimes reported to police in 2019 decreased overall by 7% compared to the year before, anti-Muslim hate crimes *increased* by 9% from 166 to 181 incidents. It is an upward trend consistently seen over the last ten years. In fact, Canada currently *leads the world* in publishing far-right, white supremacist online content - surpassing even the U.K. and the US in spreading extremism online.

In a report this year to the UN Human Rights Council, a UN expert concluded that, globally, anti-Muslim hatred has reached "epidemic proportions," with Muslims often targeted based upon visible characteristics such as "names, skin color and clothing." Urging states to act, he said it was "essential to identify and evaluate how state structures perpetuate and legitimize Islamophobia and actively discriminate against Muslim individuals and communities."

As one of the country's most prominent Muslim NGOs, Islamic Relief Canada has also been on the receiving end of hate — especially online hate. Over the years, it has increased in all forms and

¹https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cjpme/pages/4101/attachments/original/1517850987/CJPME-CMF_Survey_on_Islamophobia_-_2018-02-06-FINAL.pdf?1517850987

volume. We receive hateful and threatening comments both online and offline — with our office the target of hateful letters in the mail and staff and volunteer teams being physically harassed and attacked while carrying out their jobs.

Throughout our encounters with Islamophobia, we have observed that Islamophobia plays a huge role in on and offline violence – mainly because it is seen as an acceptable form of racism and bigotry. Whereas direct expressions of racism and homophobia may often no longer be expressed freely in public, Islamophobia still passes the ‘the dinner-table test’ and can be readily mentioned in polite (and impolite) society. It is the go-to place for those who would otherwise be more circumspect about their bigotry – because, somehow, Islamophobia can be seen as patriotic, non-racist, and even grounded in reason. Pro-Islamophobic tropes give succour to the hate-mongers in search of a cause and embolden their expressions of bigotry.

It is for this reason such apparent self-justification and self-deception of Islamophobes has to be called out and countered at every turn – in the same way racism and sexism have been combated in the post war era.

Islamophobia is also cultivated and used strategically: Whether expressed by individuals’, groups or in structural and legislative ways, Islamophobia is cultivated and nurtured as a strategic political and cultural tool to mobilise the mainstream of society against a perceived minority enemy and threat.

Notable Findings from IRC’s 2021 Islamophobia Report

In February 2021, Islamic Relief Canada published a report entitled, “[*In Their Own Words – Untold Stories of Islamophobia in Canada*](#)”² which featured compelling stories from Muslims across the country and from all walks of life about their experiences with Islamophobia in Canada.

A few illustrative highlights include:

- A teacher in Quebec who was asked to remove her hijab in the workplace due to Bill 21 and — following a lengthy suspension — only kept her job on a HR technicality for refusal to comply
- A man who stopped participating in organized sports in Alberta after he experienced repetitive racial slurs and discrimination
- A hijab-wearing Ontario woman who was physically and verbally attacked on a university campus simply for being Muslim
- A survivor of the Quebec Mosque shooting, Aymen Derbali, who was shot seven times and left paralyzed and unable to support his family

Islamophobia is Gendered

Some of the key findings from the report were that Islamophobia is not only systemic and normalized but also *gendered*, with Muslim women disproportionately being victims of Islamophobia.

In Canada, we have several laws that have been accused of being discriminatory, including the federal *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act* (2015), Quebec’s Bill 62 (2017), and more recently, Bill 21 (2019).³ All of these laws fixate upon Muslim women as their primary target, perpetuating Orientalist and colonial imaginations of Muslim women as ‘oppressed’ and in need of

² https://issuu.com/islamicreliefcanada/docs/islamophobia_report_en?fr=sNTkyNzQ1NjA3ODQ

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/Islamophobia-AntiMuslim/Civil%20Society%20or%20Individuals/Noor-ICLMG-ISSA.pdf>

‘saving’ from the State. These laws and their related discussions⁴ are obsessive about the prohibition of the hijab and/or the niqab. As a direct result, many visibly Muslim women in Canada — those that wear the hijab and/or niqab — are disproportionately experiencing anti-Muslim violence.

This trend of gendered Islamophobia can be seen in our report, as the majority of those who responded to our call for research participants were women rather than men. Many of these women’s encounters with Islamophobia revolved around their choice to wear the hijab.

Islamophobia is Normalized in Canadian Society

Notably, nearly every single person we interviewed for this report prefaced the discussion with statements like, *“I’m not that much of a victim,”* or, *“I haven’t experienced that much discrimination compared to others.”* While much of this could demonstrate a disdain for the sensational — a trait that is highly valued in Islam — it became clear from the interviews that hatred and discrimination has become *so routine* in Canada, that many victims felt these experiences are simply to be expected when living as a religious minority in Canadian society.

This normalization is evident as participants often did not consider incidents such as discrimination at work, microaggressions at school or racist remarks at the dinner table as being worthy of mention when put alongside the physical attacks we hear about in the media.

Islamophobia, however, is a continuum of aggression and hatred with every incident — big or ostensibly small — emboldening the next. As Aymen Derbali pointed out in his interview, we need to be aware of the gravity of all incidents. *“Before the terrorist attack on the mosque, we noticed some hate crimes at the mosque ... for example, the month of Ramadan right before the attack, after the prayer we found a pig head ... another time we found graffiti at the back of the mosque ... it was like a sign of what was to come.”*

Accepting any form of hatred or intolerance — no matter how small one might think it is — legitimizes Islamophobia and provides a platform for this hatred to foster and grow.

Islamophobia and Discrimination in Employment

We have recently embarked on a pioneering study entitled, *“Muslims at the Margins: Islamophobia & (Un)Employment.”* It is a twelve-month, Canada-wide project exploring the intersection of race, religion, class and gender in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Muslims in Canada are experiencing Islamophobia in their respective fields of (un)employment.

The project’s long-term and societal outcome is Islamophobia’s eradication in the Canadian workplace— something presently often unnoticed and largely acceptable.

In the short term, the project’s aim is an increased practical awareness of how to combat Islamophobia in respective fields of employment — which will be achieved through working towards individual, collegial and institutional behavioural changes — by addressing systemic racism, hate speech, microaggressions, and improving HR processes and representation.

This current research was inspired by our earlier *“In Their Own Words”* report (above), which was fraught with stories of workplace discrimination. In fact, our report revealed that many of these

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-barbaric-cultural-practices-law-1.3254118>

incidents in Canada are presently *not even reported to the employee's HR unit*, a phenomenon that parallels Statistics Canada data on police-reported hate crimes (2019),⁵ which states that *over two-thirds* of hate crimes go unreported.

Throughout the development of this earlier report, we spoke to a number of individuals who identified their workplace as the location in which they experienced the greatest degree of Islamophobia. Notably, some of these workplaces included government offices.

Workplace discrimination can be formal, clearly evident, and even institutionalised. For example, we heard from one woman in Calgary who was the subject of verbal harassment for months before being physically attacked by a coworker, having her hijab torn off her head. In another instance, we spoke with a teacher from Quebec who was suspended from her teaching position — and came very close to permanently losing her job — because of her choice to wear the hijab.

Notably, workplace discrimination can also be informal and much more subtle, through the form of microaggressions. In these cases, workers can be left out of critical decision-making, made to be a social outcast, passed over for promotions, or the subject of condescending conversations, among other things.

These hard realities are causing economic disparities and *further marginalisation* of Muslims in Canada.

Examining the sources of Islamophobia

Although there have been negative tropes in Western society surrounding Islam and Muslims since the Middle Ages — and especially when used to justify the Crusades — the specific term 'Islamophobia' dates from around the start of this century, but the meaning and our understanding of the term continues to develop over time.

While Muslims are not a 'race,' Islamophobia is racism. Scientifically, no population is a race; races are created by bundling together common features and mapping them on to a population. Resulting racial hierarchies treat outsiders as an inferior 'Other'. When Muslims are treated as such, it is an articulation of racism and Islamophobia.

As a form of racism, it is widely recognized that Islamophobia is closely linked to white supremacy, which seeks to maintain white dominance and privilege over other races and beliefs. It is, for that reason, related to other forms of racism and discrimination including anti-Semitism and anti-Black, anti-Asian, and anti-Indigenous racisms.

However, Islamophobia is not just a "Muslim" issue; it is a Canadian problem of injustice, inequality and discrimination facing Canadian and global citizens.

Islamophobia's impact on individuals

Our 2021 report revealed that short and long-term consequences for those who experience Islamophobia can include emotional and mental trauma, stress in personal and professional relationships, and even long-term physical injury.

⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.htm>

As a Muslim NGO with predominantly Muslim staff, we have experienced Islamophobia directly and have held many internal discussions about Islamophobia with staff. Throughout these discussions we have learned that for many, Islamophobia brings up an array of emotions of varying intensity and type – ranging between grief, anger, frustration, anxiety and a lowering of self-esteem. This can be triggered by being personally attacked and/or from seeing others in our families and community subjected to the impacts of Islamophobia.

In general, the acute and chronic impacts can include the following:

- Feeling of marginalisation and exclusion from society
- Demoralisation, resentment and a loss of self-worth
- Anger and frustration at not being understood or listened to
- Increased anxiety for the well-being of children and other family members
- Non-participation in mainstream social events
- Fear of wearing visibly Muslim dress, going to mosque, etc.
- Ghettoization of cultures, neighbourhoods and social cliques
- Frustration at perceived government and police inactivity
- Loss of faith in prevailing establishment and political systems
- Post traumatic stress disorders of varying degrees and types

Possible solutions and government responses

Islamic Relief Canada presented its recommendations to the federal government at the National Action Summit on Islamophobia last year; (see Appendix below). Below are additional guidelines we recommend the government follow in order to provide proper support to Canadians impacted by Islamophobia and effectively uproot Islamophobia from Canadian society.

- The federal government must be proactive — as opposed to reactive — in its response to Islamophobia in Canada.
- It is essential that any and all measures be actioned in an appropriate manner that does not allow for any new initiative or commitment to be perceived as ‘special treatment’ for the Muslim community — which, as we know, is a favored trope of white supremacist groups
- Islamophobia is one of the many consequences of white supremacist ideologies. In order to eradicate Islamophobia, the government must take a whole of government approach to uprooting white supremacy from every level of society.

APPENDIX

Islamic Relief Canada's Recommendations to the Federal Government

re: National Action Summit on Islamophobia (July 2021)

- 1) Establish a working definition of Islamophobia through a six-month consultative process with key community stakeholders and town hall meetings. We need a unified broad-based definition of Islamophobia supported by universities, political parties, civil society, and Muslim organizations. In this context, all such measures should be adopted with the perspective of not immunising a religion from criticism — but, rather, protecting believers and others associated with a religion. Any definition should relate to the protections afforded by the legal definition of racism — but here extended to apply to the racialization of a community associated with Muslims and Islam
- 2) The federal government must initiate a plan to strengthen race and hate crime legislation under the criminal code.
- 3) The federal government should establish a well publicised national reporting hotline on Islamophobia and other hate crimes. In our research, many individuals told us that there is a lack of know-how on reporting anti-Muslim hate, and there is a fear that reports would not be acted upon or taken seriously by relevant parties. Any such hotline should be inclusive of all hate crimes and should be heavily advertised and accessible. It should respect anonymity and work with the necessary public safety bodies across the country. All data should be disaggregated and presented monthly by this body to analyze trends and patterns — including information on non-Muslims affected by Islamophobia. (It might be preferable for the hotline to be managed by a NGO, Muslim or non-Muslim so that people are not intimidated in any way — but with adequate government funding).
- 4) The federal government should immediately launch an independent investigation into the Canada Revenue Agency's (CRA) unfair profiling of Islamic charities for audits. A report released by the National Council of Canadian Muslims/University of Toronto and the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group shows

evidence of the CRA disproportionately targeting Muslim charities in audits. As one of the world's most prominent Muslim NGOs, we consider the findings of the NCCM report very concerning and feel that it undermines the intentions and commitment of Canadian Muslims to humanitarian causes both here and overseas. The reports by the National Council of Canadian Muslims and the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group together provide vital recommendations that the government should act upon immediately to remove the practical targeting and social stigmatization of Muslim charities.

- 5) In partnership with universities and local community organizations, the federal government should establish a national research lab on Islamophobia. The purpose of the lab would be to collect evidence-based research and data on Islamophobia, conduct extensive research into root causes, and provide recommendations on effective counter-programming.
- 6) In partnership with media institutions and local governments, the federal government should commit to working with community organizations to launch public awareness campaigns about Islam and Muslims through radio, television, and social media. Local governments should pave the way to outfit public transport and other public venues with decals that raise awareness of Islam and Canadian Muslims. Such campaigns have been successful in the United Kingdom in bridging gaps and educating communities on Muslims, as well as in raising awareness about hate crimes and how they can be reported.
- 7) Federal, provincial, and municipal governments should implement systemic changes to eliminate Islamophobia in police services and national security agencies. In our conversations, many individuals told us that when they reported incidents in the past, they have often been dismissed and not taken seriously. As with all incidences of hate, anti-Muslim hate incidents should be actioned by police, with the relevant authorities being held accountable for failures to take action on reports. Authorities should also be working closely with any national hotline, (as mentioned in point 3).

- 8) Provincial governments should include anti-Islamophobia awareness and basic learning on religions/religious communities in Canada in education curriculums.
- 9) The federal government should allocate funding to an organization specializing in handling Islamophobia and diversity to devise and roll out a training program for faith-based and other community organizations. The training should cover all forms of hate, such as islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia and should include education around relevant legislation and language. All organizations that receive government funding for programs should be mandated to undergo training as part of their contractual agreements.
- 10) We need a revision of the national security threat assessment and stricter controls on countering, preventing and banning white supremacy in Canada. Currently, Canada is among the top producers of online hate content from white supremacist groups. Governments should be clear on where Canada stands on white supremacy. We need more security, better preventative measures, and a crackdown on groups and individuals promoting white supremacist ideology. This includes continuing to add more white supremacist groups to the terrorist entities list. Currently, the terrorist threat disproportionately and inaccurately primarily focuses on Muslim and racialized communities.