

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research
and Publications

Social and Cultural Sciences, Department of

11-2019

Taking on Hate: Muslim Women Build a Community-Driven Hate Watch

Louise Cainkar

Janan Najeeb

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs_fac



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; but the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript. The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation below.

Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, Vol. 15, No. 3 (November 2019): 402-408. [DOI](#). This article is © Association for Middle East Women's Studies and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Association for Middle East Women's Studies does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Association for Middle East Women's Studies.

Taking on Hate: Muslim Women Build a Community-Driven Hate Watch

Louise Cainkar

Janan Najeeb

In 2017–18 the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition (MMWC) partnered with Marquette University sociologist Louise Cainkar to conduct research on the need for and best practices around the development of a community-driven hate-watch mechanism. The MMWC is a Milwaukee-based nonprofit community organization run by Muslim women that engages in outreach, education, and advocacy. The research project was supported by a grant from Marquette University's Office of Community Engagement.¹ The idea behind this initiative was to improve reporting of hate incidents experienced by members of the Muslim community. As MMWC director Janan Najeeb noted at the outset of the project, their organization often learned about hate-based experiences suffered by community members by happenstance, as the details circulated through the community mainly by word of mouth. Few instances of hate and harassment are formally reported, because there has been no one to report them to and because many of them do not take the form of reportable criminal acts.

This situation gives the false impression that all is well and good for Muslims in greater Milwaukee. To uncover what community members experience and to discern what can be done to improve reporting, the MMWC recruited participants for a series of focus groups mainly composed of women. These focus groups revealed widespread taunting and harassment of women in hijab and heightened nativist antipathy toward Muslims, who are often presumed to be immigrants and refugees; that is, they are seen as foreigners. Women in hijab additionally reported being perceived as oppressed and treated as if they were uneducated, illiterate, and unable to speak English.

Background

Hate crimes against American Muslims and persons perceived to be Muslim have reached disturbingly high levels nationwide. In 2015 hate crimes increased 67 percent over their 2014 level and for the first time exceeded the rates of the immediate post-9/11 period. In 2016 and 2017 they increased further, and no letup is projected in the context of the current political climate, characterized by rising white nationalism and an openly anti-Muslim president ([Southern Poverty Law Center 2017](#)). In addition, the number of anti-Muslim hate groups in the United States more than tripled between 2015 (34) and 2017 (114), the largest growth sector of all US hate groups ([Southern Poverty Law Center 2017](#)). A 2018 report by South Asian Americans Leading Together covering the first year after the 2016 presidential election documented 302 hate-related anti-Muslim incidents, including 213 violent incidents and 89 instances of xenophobic political rhetoric, a 45 percent increase from the prior year. The latter had four main sources: white supremacist groups, President Donald Trump or Trump administration officials, other elected or public officials, and, to a lesser degree, the mainstream media. Anti-Muslim hate crimes have a pattern of rising during election cycles, as many candidates use anti-Muslim sentiments to energize their base and propel their campaigns. We thus worry that the period leading up to the 2020 elections will witness a further rise in hate crimes against American Muslims.

The 2012 mass shooting at the Oak Creek Sikh Temple is the most notorious hate crime in Wisconsin's recent history. While the shooting targeted Sikhs, many in Milwaukee believe that it was intended for Muslims, as these groups are often conflated by members of the US public. While most of those victims were men, research has shown that Muslim women, especially women in hijab, experience the highest rates of anti-Muslim hate acts and harassment in the United States ([Cainkar 2009, 2019b](#)). [Cainkar \(2019a\)](#) argues that attacks on women in hijab are not only Islamophobic but also efforts to enforce conformity to gender hegemonies of the dominant culture. That is, they are acts of gender policing not unlike those experienced by members of LGBTQ communities. Cainkar's argument thus takes aim at the often-repeated claim that women in hijab are selected as victims mainly because they are hypervisible and perceived as weaker than men. Instead, she maintains that women in hijab are insulted and assaulted out of fear of their gendered embodiment of strength, not weakness.

Data Collection and Findings

We conducted four focus groups during the summer of 2018 with a total of twenty-eight participants. The groups were recruited by Amanda Ali of the MMWC and included immigrant, second-generation, and reverted Muslims (*reverted*, a term based in the hadith, describes those who have converted to Islam). Our study found that harassment of Muslims in the greater Milwaukee area is widespread and

that women in hijab are the most common, though certainly not the only, victims.² We also confirmed that while Muslims speak about these hostile acts with one another, few take further steps, in large part because there is no simple and "safe" way to report. Since most acts do not fit the definition of a crime, respondents felt that much of the harassment they endured was not severe enough to involve the police. In addition, they questioned the police's ability to empathize with Muslim victims. Participants are well aware that many US police departments have undergone antiterrorist trainings that are highly biased and deploy negative stereotypes of Muslims, thus producing little sympathy for Muslims' sense of vulnerability in public space (see [Center for American Progress 2011](#), [2015](#)). A number of salient themes from these focus groups are discussed below.

"It's Not Everyone, But It's Every Day"

Immigrant Muslim women in particular, most of whom wore hijab, reported being harassed "all the time." Such incidents include being sworn at, pursued while driving, asked questions like "Why do you cover your hair?" or "Did your husband make you do that?" in a hostile tone of voice, verbally abused with the use of epithets such as "raghead," and shouted at with expressions such as "No good" or "Why don't you take that thing off; it is hot today?" These incidents occurred at the workplace, at the airport, in stores, at their children's schools, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and while driving. In other words, they occurred anywhere Muslim women engaged with non-Muslim publics.

A participant in one of the focus groups reported in detail about being pursued while driving for an hour and fifteen minutes by a white woman in sunglasses talking on her phone. The pursuer followed her every lane change and off and on every highway exit. She said, "I finally escaped. I was so scared I panicked. I thought she might have a gun." She explained that she called the local police and gave them the car's license plate number. As she noted, the officer refused to investigate, telling her that he did not need the plate number because she was not injured. When he asked her, "So what's the problem?," she responded, "I'm Muslim." She summed it up to focus-group participants by saying that "he did not get it." She asked the other participants to consider how this scenario might have turned out differently if a Muslim had been chasing a white woman.

"We Are in Their Country"/"I Am Glad to Be Here So I Just Accept It"

The notion that Muslim women are foreign interlopers in the United States is communicated incessantly to women in multiple ways and commands a code of quiescence that instructs Muslim women not to speak out because "we are in their country." Focus-group participants discussed several scenarios that they felt enforced this silence. In many cases, hostile looks and expressions were interpreted to convey the unspoken idea that "if you don't like it here, you should just leave," or "if you want to stay here, you need to dress like we do," or "we don't want you Muslims living here anyhow, so keep your mouth shut." These messages communicated the idea that Muslims are perpetual foreigners in the United States and have no right to stake claims or demand respect. These unobtrusive gestures of exclusion were reported by women as diverse as medical doctors, homemakers, and university students.

Muslim women who were recent immigrants said that they report hostile incidents only to members of their families because they do not want to appear ungrateful for living in the United States. Syrian refugees in particular noted their reluctance to complain about life in the United States, which was

linked to their newness and sense of relief at being safe from war. The underlying message they interpreted from the hostile looks and gestures they received was "just grin and bear it because you are lucky we took you in, but do not expect us to treat you well." In light of these disempowering contexts, Muslim women reported feeling that they could not do anything to change these conditions and thus opted to stay quiet. Yet it was clear from their stories that they lived in fear and felt that most Americans and the authorities were oblivious to this reality. These fears are not minor and are exacerbated by the murders of American Muslim men and women, most of which have a white supremacist motive ([Cainkar 2019b](#)). Even when there is evidence that these killings were hate crimes perpetrated by individuals holding white supremacist views, some of them have been deemed "disputes" by the local police (see [Southern Poverty Law Center 2017](#); [Cainkar 2019b](#)).

"Everyone Is Getting It Now"

Muslim reverts reported being treated with hostility on a daily basis—mostly by white Americans—and being spoken to as if they were unable to comprehend English or lacked an education. Focus-group reverts were mainly African American and white US-born women, most of whom wore hijab. The majority of them reported being sworn at, asked ignorant questions, and called traitors. They noted that hostilities have moved beyond immigrants, a point captured in one participant's statement that "everyone is getting it now." They also reported that harassment occurs in public and private spaces: in stores, on the streets, and at the workplace. Another participant said, "They want to give you a hard time, to break you." Participants said that they were tired of people making assumptions about who they are, what they think, and their skills and competencies based on a single piece of clothing.

Women in this group understood that these forms of harassment are not considered hate crimes, and thus they did not report them. At the same time, however, they were also the most forceful of all the focus-group participants about their right to be treated with dignity in the United States. This is perhaps because they are not immigrants and feel strongly about something that the Muslim American comedian Hasan Minaj calls the "audacity of equality."³ As white former Christians or as African Americans, reverts either have occupied a more privileged position for most of their lives or have prior experience mobilizing in defense of civil rights. As a result, these participants exuded a sense of strength in the face of daily challenges. One woman said, and others agreed, "If you let it get to you, you will fear leaving the house." Feeling very strongly about what they called "the peacefulness and good in Islam," women in this group were saddened by the misperceptions people have of Islam and Muslims. Therefore they advocated for education campaigns in the form of talks at schools and open houses at mosques as an important strategy in conjunction with reporting acts of hate.

"We Are Not a Stereotype"

US-born, second-generation Muslim college students reported enduring constant stares, being persistently confronted with ignorant questions, and periodically experiencing hostile actions, such as hand gestures (the finger), racial slurs, and vandalism of their property. They said that these events are everyday experiences they encounter at school, in shopping malls and grocery stores, and on the street. Additionally, they reported feeling pressure to prove their loyalty to the United States at sporting events, parades, museums, and theme parks. Reflecting on this question, one woman said, "We always have to prove that we are American." She described the situation as follows: "If we do

something patriotic, they ask us why are you doing that? If we fail to do something patriotic, they ask us why aren't you doing that?" Some reported dropping out of honors college or switching majors because of ill-informed comments by professors that created an antagonistic atmosphere in the classroom. Members of this group resented being treated in a one-dimensional way, as a stereotype, whether personally or in university curricula. Their sense of being watched, scrutinized, and interrogated as if they were dangerous aliens was palpable, denying them a sense of belonging. One woman recounted how she was initially frustrated by the persistent hostility she faced, which led to painful self-reflection, and how she later came to the realization that "I have a right to take up space." As with the other groups, participants coped with persistent questioning of who they were and what they believed. In general, they also did not report Islamophobic acts to anyone.

Community-Accessible Hate Crimes Reporting

All the women we spoke with blamed the mainstream and right-wing media as well as the current US administration for the prevalence and recent rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and hate crimes. They were aware of systemic and ongoing Islamophobia and thus saw a need for accessible hate-incident reporting to bring their experiences to light. Aware of the significant variations in the Muslim community in terms of age, immigration status, language, and social class, study participants recommended different venues for such reporting. While all suggested a smartphone app, some advocated for a recorded hotline that could better respond to the needs of a multilingual and multigenerational community. Based on these recommendations, the MMWC plans to conduct further research on different options. Once these additional resources are developed, this organization will conduct outreach to inform community members of their availability and provide staffing for data collection and follow-up. The MMWC's long-term vision is to create a statewide resource covering all of Wisconsin. Yet as many focus-group participants observed, the organization also recognizes that work for change has to occur at multiple levels, from promoting more accurate representations of Muslims in the media, in school, and in university curricula to addressing increasing US nativism and racism.

Conclusion

Since most focus-group participants were women, our study most accurately conveys female experiences with Islamophobia, especially those of women in hijab. They confirm [Al-Saji's \(2010: 891\)](#) observation that non-Muslims interpret hijab as a "material prison" that disables women physically, affectively, psychically, and intellectually. The veiled body is thus "over-determined as an 'oppressed' body . . . in ways that exclude its subjectivity or agency" (891). These ideas about Muslim women and hijab, anchored in colonial and imperial discourses, have long been propagated in the West by a wide range of political and social actors. They emerge from a binary that posits Western Christian women as smart and free and Muslim women as their binary opposite, their other. According to the women we spoke with, these ideas are not just the thoughts of outliers and extremists; they are widely held. They are notions not only repeated in the news media but also replicated in the common fare of Western romance novels ([Jarmakani 2015](#)). These ideas are not innocent, as they support specific interests and put Muslim women in danger. Transforming these daily experiences with hostility from the level of private talk to that of public documentation is a critical component in a strategy to end the

pervasiveness of assaults on and murders of Muslims driven by the hate-promoting propaganda of global white supremacy.

[Louise Cainkar](#)

louise cainkar is associate professor of sociology and of social welfare and justice and directs Peace Studies and Arab/Muslim American Studies at Marquette University. She is author of *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (2009) and numerous articles and is an Association for Middle East Women's Studies board member. Contact: louise.cainkar@mu.edu.

[Janan Najeeb](#)

janan najeeb is president of the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition and a frequent lecturer at area universities. She directs the Islamic Resource Center and launched the *Wisconsin Muslim Journal*. She was recently awarded a grant for the first domestic violence program run by a Muslim organization in Wisconsin. Contact: jnajeeb@mmwconline.org.

Notes

1. Adhering to best practices for community-engaged research, the community partner organization received both acknowledgment and fair compensation for its work. Cainkar and Najeeb received no compensation for their work on this project.
2. This finding is not simply an artifact of largely female focus groups, as women reported on the experiences of others, including male family and community members.
3. See his comedy act "Homecoming King."

References

- Al-Saji, Alia. 2010. "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 8: 875–902. doi.org/10.1177/0191453710375589.
- Cainkar, Louise. 2009. *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.
- Cainkar, Louise. 2019a. "Hegemonic Femininity and Hijab as a Human Right." In *Arabs at Home and in the World: Human Rights, Gender Politics, and Identity*, edited by Karla McCanders, 3–24. New York: Routledge.
- Cainkar, Louise. 2019b. "Islamophobia, White Supremacy, and Hate Crimes in the US." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, edited by Irene Zempi and Imran Awan, 239–62. London: Routledge.
- Center for American Progress. 2011. *Fear, Inc.* August 26. www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc.
- Center for American Progress. 2015. *Fear, Inc. 2.0*. February 11. www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2015/02/11/106394/fear-inc-2-0.
- Jarmakani, Amira. 2015. *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror*. New York: New York University Press.
- South Asian Americans Leading Together. 2018. *Communities on Fire: Confronting Hate Violence and Xenophobic Political Rhetoric*. saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Communities-on-Fire.pdf.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. 2017. *The Year in Hate and Extremism*. www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/issues/2017-spring-year-hate-extremism.

