



Six steps to tackling Islamophobia

Social Change Initiative
September 2020

sci

SOCIAL
CHANGE
INITIATIVE

Introduction

THE ‘what’ is Islamophobia – understood as a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness. The ‘how’ is what we do to tackle it – by naming it; by shaming it and by identifying proactive approaches that go further than merely settling for a strategy of blame.

Social Change Initiative (SCI) organised a trans-Atlantic activist conversation on countering hate and Islamophobia in 2019. Practitioners, researchers and policy-makers shared information and reflections in Washington DC, drawing on their first-hand experiences from across Europe and the USA. As SCI’s Migration & Peacebuilding Executive Avila Kilmurray reports, they came up with six action points and recommendations.



#1 Name It

Naming Islamophobia is an essential starting point. The Runnymede Trust (UK) defined Islamophobia as ‘unfounded hostility towards Muslims and therefore fear and dislike of all or most Muslims’. More recently, the definition offered by the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (November 2018) held that ‘Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness’. Despite questions being raised by the Conservative Party Government this definition has been adopted by a number of local authorities across Britain. Such definitions are a useful first step, particularly where states are reluctant to admit the existence of Islamophobia for fear that it will challenge their state-centred perception of tolerance (such as Sweden) or secular citizenship (France). The Center for American Progress (CAP) in the US highlights the work of the ‘Islamophobia megaphone’ – a tight network of anti-Muslim, anti-Islam organisations, Think-tanks, funders, political lobbyists and misinformation experts that work to stereotype and stigmatise Muslims. If Islamophobes know how to effectively mobilise Islamophobia why can’t governments name it and act to counter it?

#2 Collect Data

Data is power. It is important to collect data about Islamophobic hate crime and attendant policies. The mapping of Islamophobia by the Arab American Institute (AAI) highlighted a spike in hate crimes after the 2016 US Presidential election. CLAIM (an Alliance against Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hate) works to improve data collection in Germany citing the rising number of violent attacks towards Muslim people as becoming normalised thereby representing a major threat to society and democracy. The OSCE [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) argues that anti-Muslim hate crimes comprise two elements: a criminal offence and a bias motivation. It notes that such crimes are under-reported and argues that anti-Muslim hate crimes should be monitored as a separate category of crime, enabling a tailored response. The Coalition of Civil Society Organisations against Islamophobia in Europe has also called for the harmonisation of data collection in areas of hate crime and equality (December 2018) recognising anti-Muslim bias as a category. Governments have a critical role to play in ensuring access to justice for victims.

#3 Educate Society

Highlight the diversity of Muslims and emphasise the many everyday roles that Muslims occupy in society. Muslims in the US are America's most ethnically diverse faith community. The European Muslim population is equally diverse. It encompasses Muslims born in Europe and in a variety of non-European countries. It includes Sunnis, Shiites, Ahmadiyya and Sufis. Some Muslims would not describe Muslim identity as salient in their daily lives, whilst for others Muslim identity shapes their life styles. In short, the category of 'Muslim' is as internally diverse as that of 'Christian' or 'European'. The stories of real people are important to counter negative stereotyping based on simplistic categorisation and related assumptions. All too often Muslims are the objects of national policy debates about inclusion, multi-culturalism, integration, racial equality, rather than as participants in these discussions. Equally, Muslims should not be called upon to constantly justify their presence and position on issues in comparison to people from other religious and/or identity backgrounds.



#4 Support Muslim Women

Champion Muslim women and listen to the diversity of their voices. Muslim women are disproportionately affected by Islamophobia, often being targeted for abuse and assault. They are both seen as ‘the other’ and are portrayed as victims of an alleged Islamic sexism. The reality is the lives of Muslim women are as complex and diverse as any other women, however they are faced with stereotyping that assumes passivity and denies them agency. Muslim women often experience discrimination compounded by a mix of religion, gender and reaction to markers of their identity such as the headscarf (hijab) or face veil (niqab). Alongside not feeling safe, this can result in disadvantage in employment and representation in decision-making. There needs to be support for women who are creating and occupying spaces within their own community as well as in society as a whole. Muslim women should be given the space to develop and project their own narratives through the media, popular culture, the arts and their own lived experience, reflecting the diversity of their lives, beliefs and priorities. New narratives must be led by Muslim women themselves, including Muslim feminists. Surveys carried out in the USA show that Muslim women have higher levels of concerns than Muslim men about the place of Muslims in society, having experienced discrimination directly and reporting that it has become more difficult to be Muslim in the US in recent years.

#5 Engage Communities

Create greater opportunities for positive engagement at community level. Inclusion and integration is a two-way process. There needs to be a range of strategies and approaches to provide opportunities for positive engagement on an inter-faith and community basis in order to facilitate a fuller presence and participation of Muslims within society. Community participation can be built by mobilising people around both single issue (access to language classes) and shared concerns. To be successful there needs to be space and facilitation for members of local communities to have honest conversations together around sensitive issues and fears (such as perceptions of ‘the other’). It is important to take the time to build relationships and trust based in common self-interest across differences resulting in community solidarity rather than fragmentation. Such structures, alliances and relationships that emerge must have the ability to hear Muslim views about the negative impact of specific government strategies (such as the Prevent strategy in the UK or counter radicalisation measures). It is essential to identify those manifestations of Islamophobia that are structural in nature (where discrimination is embedded in institutional policies, laws and practices) to both call these out and lobby for alternate approaches that can build trust rather than reinforce stereotyping and marginalisation.



#6 Challenge Myths & the weaponization of language

White supremacy has been buoyed up by public pronouncements by high profile figures, media commentators and online bloggers who project Muslims, Islamic practices and sites (such as mosques) and Muslim customs as inherently threatening to the European and American way of life. White supremacist myths coagulate around claims we are in times of crisis, the danger of the decline of Western civilisation and fear of the future. The internet is being used to 'crowd source' Islamophobia through a small number of super spreaders using multiple accounts to spread misinformation. It is important to track these drivers of hate but also to hold social media platforms accountable. A combination of US organisations (Center for American Progress, Color of Change, Free Press, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Law, National Hispanic Media Coalition & Southern Poverty Law Center) have developed a Recommended Internet Company Corporate Policies and Terms of Service to Reduce Hateful Activities. Work is also ongoing in Europe to examine possible legislative approaches to tackle online hate and fake news. These need to be supported with additional examination of possible strategic litigation. Mainstream media also needs to be held to account if using anti-Muslim language and/or stigmatising Muslims as a group. It has been suggested in the UK that the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) should issue guidance on accurate reporting of Muslim communities and issues to ensure that faith and identity are not conflated with extremism and radicalisation. Both public figures and the media should also refrain from repeating/supporting often unfounded accusations directed at civil society organisations working against Islamophobia. National and local government policies should also encompass Anti-Rumour strategies which have been effectively pioneered in a number of European cities, commencing in Barcelona, Spain (see [here](#)). The city of Montreal (Canada) has also initiated an Anti-Rumour strategy. Finally, arts, cartoons and popular culture can be very effective in puncturing the self-promoting pomposity of the harbingers of Islamophobic inspired doom and fear.

Useful References

American Muslim Poll 2018: Pride and Prejudice, The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding & Georgetown Bridge Initiative, 2018. <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2018-full-report/>

Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All, Citizens UK. https://dEn*a*pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/newcitizens/pages/243/attachments/original/1540998845/Missing_Muslims_Report_-_Electronic_copy.pdf?1540998845

Factsheet: Common Anti-Muslim Tropes, The Bridge Initiative (December 1018). <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-common-anti-muslin-tropes-2/>

Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States, Dr Amina Easat-Daas & Prof. S. Sayyid, 2018. <https://cik.leeds.ac/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2018/04/2018.04.09-WS2-Meta-Analysis-IL-AED.pdf>.

Communities on Fire: Confronting Hate Violence and Xenophobic Political Rhetoric, South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2018. <http://saalt.org/report-communities-on-fire-confronting-hate-violence-and-xenophobic-political-rhetoric/>

Light on Anti-Muslim Prejudice (LAMP) newsletter, Hope Not Hate. <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/lamp-e-newsletter/>

Curbing Hate Online:

What Companies should do Now, Henry Fernadez, Center for American Progress, 2018. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reoprts/2018/10/25/459668/curbing-hate-online-companies-now/>

Anti-Muslim Bigotry Online & How to Take Action, Muslim Advocates, 2014. <http://www.muslimadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/Click-Here-To-End-Hate.pdf>.

Preventing and Tackling Islamophobia, NASUWT, Teachers' Union, Northern Ireland. <https://nasuwt.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/53722dlf-7274-4965-9bbeea38a5ea011c.pdf>.

Muslim ARC (Anti-Racism Collaborative): <http://www.muslimarc.org/>

The Muslim Wellness Foundation: <https://www.muslimwellness.com/>

Tell Mama (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks): <https://tellmamauk.org/>



SOCIAL
CHANGE
INITIATIVE