



The Association of
Muslim Lawyers (UK)

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION: THE REALITY OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

Khalida Khan

In a recent debate in the House of Commons concerning the *Crime and Disorder Bill*, Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, seemed to suggest that there is no such thing as an attack motivated by *purely* religious hatred in our society. Unlike many who have contributed to the various debates on the *Crime and Disorder Bill*, I am neither a lawyer nor a politician, but as someone with a long-standing involvement in community safety and participation work, I would like to differ with the Home Secretary on this issue. My purpose in this article is to paint a picture of the reality of violence and harassment that Muslims face on a daily basis simply and purely because they are Muslims; it is to highlight some of the practical, human dimensions of the whole issue.

I work with An-Nisa Society, an organisation managed by women working for the welfare of Muslim families. Many of you may not have heard of this organisation. Because we work quietly and efficiently - despite our very meagre resources - it is not well known that it is our work that first identified the inadequacies of the *Race Relations Act* with regards to religious discrimination. Our approach to these issues emanates directly from our knowledge and experience of working within the community at a grassroots level.

With all the legalistic and technical jargon of legislation, it is easy to forget that what we are talking about affects real people. In fact, it is we, the women, who bear the brunt of the consequences of the way Muslims are perceived and treated in our society. After all, we are the most visible and identifiable as Muslims because of our distinctive dress. It is our sons and daughters that have to go out there and face the prejudices and violence directed towards them and their Muslim identity.

In my view, the experience and traumas of Muslim women, children and young people have been neither recognised nor articulated adequately either within the Muslim community or in the mainstream. As women and as mothers, we are greatly aware and concerned about the consequences that legislation like the *Crime and Disorder Act* have on us, and our young people in particular, where attacks directed against Muslims because of their faith are not accorded the same severe penalties as 'racially aggravated' crimes.

The lack of recognition of the existence of Islamophobia and its consequences affects us directly and disastrously. If there is no recognition of the problem there can be no solution. This is precisely why the *Crime and Disorder Act* does not address it: it does not recognise or understand it.

And yet, it is a fact that Muslims are being vilified, abused and attacked every day in this country and in Europe because of their identity as Muslims. There may be no records or statistics to prove this, simply because they have not been kept - but this is not to say that it does not exist. Muslims know and experience it, as victims, each and every day. The onset of certain worrying new problems in the community, particularly with regards to the sudden increase in criminality and extremism amongst sections of Muslim youth, are directly linked to the rise of Islamophobia, and its various manifestations, and the lack of government will to recognise and address it.

How does it feel to exist in a living nightmare which no one else outside your own community experiences, acknowledges and understands?

I would like to give a personal example. As a former Race Equality Worker, I felt disillusioned as my work did not address the discrimination and harassment faced by my community. These feelings came to a head when a white Muslim woman wearing the *hijab* (the headscarf), and clearly identifiable as a Muslim, was attacked whilst in a bed and breakfast hotel awaiting re-housing. She was attacked by a white man who chanted anti-Muslim abuse as he beat her with her children cowering under the table. As far as I was concerned I felt that she should be given priority for re-housing as a case of racial harassment. I was told that it was a case of white on white and hence did not qualify to be a case of racial harassment. The lack of sensitivity and recognition of this woman's experience left me appalled. And of course this case was not recorded as an anti-Muslim case. I was the one who saw the tears of this woman and the terror on the faces of her young children; the bitter feelings of injustice have still not left me to this day.

In another case, a white Muslim woman living on one of our estates was spat at and verbally abused by workmen on the estate who shouted anti-Muslim abuse. On another occasion, some workmen who came to her property to carry out some repairs had the temerity to abuse her in her own home. She felt humiliated and traumatised as did her teenage children. The husband, a Malay, experienced feelings of helplessness and anger at his inability to protect his wife. The system as we know it was of no assistance to this family, and since then, the whole family seems to have lost all confidence in the system.

Recently, I got a phone call from one of my colleagues who had just been asked to support a Somali Muslim woman and her family following a brutal physical attack in the local estate. The woman was so severely hurt that she was unrecognisable and had to be hospitalised. The attack, the eighth, was carried out by a gang of youths who were regularly terrorising this single mother and her seven children. The family and the people helping them know they were attacked because they are Muslims, and they can cite all the reasons why they think so to me as a Muslim. But the family and helpers will not say this to the agencies involved, as they cannot prove it – and who will believe it anyway? As one of them said to me: “It is easier to say that it was a racial attack”. And then he added: “Even when we said that, the police dismissed it because the attackers included some non-whites”. Another case that will not be recorded as anything.

What do these people feel whilst they are going through such trauma? In that particular case, for many days, four of the woman's sons stood vigil at their home; they could not go out even to get food. They were terrified to let the younger children out to school for fear they would be attacked too. They were barricaded in their flat, frightened and helpless. The helper, despairing at the lack of help and support, said to me: “It was terrible, really terrible. But what do we do? We have to protect ourselves. But if we do, then we will be the ones in trouble”.

It is not long before fear turns to frustration and anger. These feelings are magnified a thousand-fold in young people who do not hesitate to take matters into their own hands. I was talking to young Muslims from Tower Hamlets recently who recounted many horrific instances of the harassment and violence they suffer, particularly instigated by the National Front, and they are in no doubt that this is directed towards them as Muslims. Some of them carry weapons to protect themselves in case of attack.

When you are suffering and there is no public recognition of it, no redress for it, the injustice engenders a sense of marginalisation and alienation. In my own borough of Brent, we had a huge event last year to highlight racism, as part of the European Year Against Racism and Xenophobia, but it pained us that there was no recognition of the harassment and abuse suffered by Muslims on a daily basis.

I can give many more examples. One that stands out clearly is when the whole country was gripped in a paroxysm of anti-Muslim feeling fuelled by the media during the Gulf War. I can recall that Wembley High Road was eerily deserted of Muslims. We were all indoors, fearful to go out. Everyone had a story to tell about attacks or abuse. News came through of a young white Muslim woman wearing the *hijab* being pushed under a train and killed. My own five year old said that he did not want to wear a T-shirt to school any more with Islamic writing on it as someone might hit him. The feelings of oppression and injustice were tangible. Did nobody understand what we were going through?

Some years later, whilst taking my daughter to the hospital I saw graffiti which read ‘bloody Muslims get out’. Can you imagine how this made my daughter and I feel; I am second generation and she is third generation in this country.

Many mosques are routinely vandalised – the mosque committees rarely reporting the incidents as ‘they don't want to cause trouble’. A few years ago, one local mosque was attacked at the same time as a Jewish synagogue

in an identical manner. Nazi graffiti was scrawled on the walls and pigs heads thrown in. Under Jack Straw's new *Crime and Disorder Act* one would incur stiffer penalties than the other. Where is the justice in this?

I can quote still more examples. However, it needs also to be recognised that Islamophobia is not only about direct attacks and abuse, it can take many subtle forms, from the way services are provided to conditions in employment. Several days ago I spoke to an Irish Muslim woman who rang and said that she wished to re-train. She was qualified and worked in the finance sector, but now wished to re-train as a nursery nurse since she faced tremendous prejudice and hostility because she is a Muslim and wears the *hijab* at work. She told me: "They see my scarf and their attitudes change. And then it gets worse when I open my mouth and my Irish accent comes out". The fight against Islamophobia needs to be fought on many fronts.

In conclusion, what is clear is that it cannot be healthy when a substantial section of British society is vilified and subjected to discrimination, abuse and harassment which remains unrecognised and undealt with. The government's wider aims of eradicating inequalities will only work if all communities are treated fairly and equally.

There can only be major problems for the future when large numbers of young people, with a huge chip on their shoulders, either opt for a life of criminality or join extremist groups as a reaction to a society that abhors and attacks them. In our work on drugs in the Muslim community we were amazed by the far-reaching consequences of Islamophobia. Young people told us that they use drugs to 'be hard' and to 'fit in', because as Muslims they are seen as outsiders.

It is time, we believe, and so do a lot of good people, that the government recognises the issue of Islamophobia - *an ugly word for an ugly reality* - and takes the necessary steps to combat it. Part of our agenda today must be to out the evil of Islamophobia, just as outing the evils of racism and anti-Semitism have been on our agenda in the past. The *Crime and Disorder Act* must be supplemented to include 'religious groups'. This will not only reflect the reality of modern Britain, but will also contribute towards making our society more harmonious, just and fair.

Khalida Khan is a founding member of An-Nisa Society, for which she has worked for the last 15 years. She has previously worked in Housing and Race Equality for the London Borough of Brent.