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Islamophobia in Europe

A historical and gendered account

Introduction

What is Islamophobia?

Islamophobia is a form of racism in the post-colonial era, whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a threat to European values. Singling out Muslims as exceptional others creates a powerful repertoire of anti-Muslim sentiments that feeds into the contemporary Islamophobic discourse. This gives the white supremacists a chance to systematically exclude minorities from decision-making at social, political, and economic levels.

Where does it come from?

While Islamophobia existed before September 11 attacks, the macabre incident exacerbated the hatred and skepticism for Islam and the practitioners of this very faith. For example, 'Muslims' in post-war Britain were configured as 'non-white', then 'black' and 'Asian', then 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' before they appeared as 'Muslims'. The label has changed over the years but the racial content and disrespectful behaviour do not seem to retire. Islamophobia seems to be one compartment in the otherwise wider spectrum of racial stereotypes in European society.

Origins of the term

The word 'Islamophobia' was first used in print in 1991. It was defined in the 1997 Runnymede Trust to describe the nature of anti-Muslim prejudice and draw a key distinction between closed views of Islam on the one hand and open views on the other. Islamophobia was equated with closed views and contained eight main features. The follow-up report published in 2004 captured how the September 11 attacks as well as Afghanistan and Iraq wars have made life difficult for British Muslims. This has been said not only for the Muslim immigrants but also counts the people who were born and brought up as British citizens and converted to Islam.

Introduction

Definition

There are numerous definitions of Islamophobia that are influenced by different approaches such as racism and prejudice studies or decolonial perspectives. According to Professor Drmrn Awan and Dr. Irene Zempi, Islamophobia can be defined as:

“a fear, prejudice, and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that lead to provocation, hostility, and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement, and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.”

Muslims in Europe: an overview

A brief history

The presence of Muslims in Europe is not a new phenomenon. Starting in 711, Muslims conquered large swathes of Northern Mediterranean shores and set up Caliphates and Emirates mainly in the Iberian Peninsula for more than seven centuries. The fall of the last Emirate of Granada, in 1492, marked the end of Muslim political rule in Spain. Later, the Inquisition led to the expulsion of Muslims, Sefardi Jews and converted Spaniards.

The Ignored Diversity

Today, some 25 million Muslims live nowadays in the 27 Member States of the European Union. The vast majority of these Muslims came seeking work in the 1960s and worked in sectors usually referred to as “difficult, dirty and dangerous”. Among these Muslims most were Sunnis with some Shiite minorities with other strands like Alevis and Sufis. The demographic profile of the Muslim population is today reportedly younger than the general population indicating that the policy implementation would have a stronger impact on them.

The Construction of a “problem”

From the very beginning of labour migration in the 1950s and 1960s, European states have adopted different policies with respect to their migration flows. Some countries, like

Germany, did little in the first decade to facilitate the integration of its migrants. It viewed them as temporary “guest workers” (geist arbeiter). Others, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, embraced the notion of multiculturalism, by which the governments sought to maintain distinct cultural identities and customs. France, by contrast, professed a policy of assimilation by imposing its model of secularism.

Institutionalisation of Islamophobia

European Muslims are a diverse combination of different political inclinations, philosophical convictions, religious affiliations, cultural fabric, and languages spoken. They constitute the second-largest religious group of European multi-faith societal structures. A series of horrific events like the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States, the killing of 12 journalists and cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo in France for their satirical attack on prophet Mohammed, the London and Madrid Bombings, and the killing of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherland for making a film on apostate Ayaan Hirsi Ali has constructed, and to a large extent, institutionalised Islamophobia in all walks of life.

Is there freedom of religion in Europe?

Cuius Regio Eius Religio vs Freedom of Religion

The controversial principle of *cuius regio eius religio* has long prevailed in Europe. The latter literally means "whose realm, their religion" – meaning that the religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those ruled. However, European countries witnessed in the early 20th century the rise of the individual's right to choose, manifest and change their religion and faith. Freedom of religion progressively became a fundamental human right that protects the conscience of all people. It allows us to think, express, and act upon what we deeply believe in.

Legal bases

This freedom is nowadays recognized by the majority of countries around the world and in all European states. Indeed, freedom of religion or belief is notably guaranteed by:

- Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights
- Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

- The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.
- Articles 10 and 21 of EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Freedom of Expression: A Tool to Vilify Muslims

Although freedom of expression is the foundation of European societies, people sometimes use racism and xenophobic languages in the name of freedom of expression. Reaction and counter-reaction sparked by the cartoons published in Danish newspapers is a perfect example of that. Freedom of expression is not an absolute right. EU member states have imposed certain limitations to safeguard the other fundamental rights of European society. Freedom of expression and protection from xenophobic language are both important for a democracy to thrive.

Islamophobia in practice

1

Employment

Muslims tend to have high unemployment rates and are often employed in jobs that require lower qualifications. As a group, they are over-represented in low-paying sectors of the economy. Many of them, particularly young people, face barriers to their social advancement. This gives rise to a feeling of hopelessness and social exclusion. It is particularly the case of Muslim women who face a double discrimination on account of religion and gender.

2

Housing

Migrants, including those from predominantly Muslim countries, generally appear to suffer poorer housing conditions and comparatively greater vulnerability and insecurity in their housing status. There has been some improvement in patterns of housing conditions, but inequalities in housing

remain largely due to the inadequate stock of social housing for low income groups, such as migrants or migrant descended persons.

3

Education

Poor levels of educational achievement are another factor in the discrimination faced by European Muslims. In several Member States where a notable part of the migrant population consists of Muslims, migrants and descendants from third countries show lower educational completion rates and attain on average lower qualifications than the majority population. Particularly in countries where the educational and socio-economic status of migrant families – many with Muslim background – is comparatively low, the performance gaps between students with and without migrant backgrounds tends to be larger.

Islamophobia in practice

4

Politics

Islamophobia has become quite mainstream in the political discourse of many European countries. The racist discourse of the far right, even if in opposition, has an impact on the overall debate about Islam and Muslims, and continuously extends the boundaries of reasonable and acceptable speech. Far-right politicians, claim to mobilize against an alleged "preference for Islam". When the far right is in power, Islamophobia becomes legalized.

5

Media

European media largely convey a negative opinion of Muslims, especially since the event of 9/11. While some deliberately frame Islamic coverage positively to counter Islamophobia, many of the portrayals of Muslims contributed to the formation of harmful Islamic media stereotypes. The most prevalent Islamic stereotype is the radical Muslim

insurgent, bent on waging jihad, or holy war, against the West. This stereotype usually represents violence as an inseparable part of being Muslim, as well as religion as justification for violent actions.

6

Online

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the anti-Muslim incidents reported to monitoring bodies, were online. Since private life shifted largely into the digital realm, the Internet and social media became the primary space for interpersonal relationships. Social media and especially Facebook have become a hotspot for the documentation of anti-Muslim hate crime.

The case of Muslim women

Intersectional discrimination

Muslim women are by far the first victims of Islamophobia as race, religion, ethnicity, and gender very often intersect to reinforce discrimination. Muslim women wearing hijab are easily identifiable and have been at particular risk. They bear the brunt of a situation they are in no way involved in. They are at the receiving end of criticisms for wearing hijab and are often driven to a point where they are left with no other choice but to choose between career and belief. This curtails their hopes and ambitions.

The Headscarf: A Discomfort for a Christian Society?

The Islamic headscarf has appeared to be a heated topic of debate in Europe in recent years as many see it as a tool for the oppression and subjugation of women. The wearing of a headscarf has many layers and the reason might differ from person to person. While some women involuntarily wear it for social or peer pressure, many others consider it as a cultural display of modesty, surrender to their faith, and at times as an assertiveness of their Muslim identity.

The instance of Belgium

The Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium (CIIB) estimated that there were 90.6% of female victims of Islamophobia, against 9.4% of men in Belgium in 2020. Since 2007, teachers in Flemish public schools have been banned from wearing such symbols, and the Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Community is debating on a similar ban. Some private employers, such as banks and other financial institutions, allow the display of religious symbols only for staff in the back office position where direct contact with clients is not required. Other employers like cleaning companies restrict the wearing of religious symbols to satisfy the requirements of their clients. These women end up in a position where they have to choose between on the one hand employment, and thus access to financial security, and on the other end their freedom of religion and expression.

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