



**REPORT ON THE *CHALLENGING ISLAMOPHOBIA ON
CAMPUS INITIATIVE: DECEMBER 2015 – MAY 2016***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Challenging Islamophobia on Campus Initiative (the Initiative)* was developed as a result of the global, violent backlash targeting Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslims, after the deadly attacks in Paris, France in November, 2015. Staff in the Equity and Inclusion Office¹, Khadijeh Rakie and Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan, designed and implemented the *Initiative* during the 2015/2016 academic year, as part of the Office's education and training portfolio.

Although the *Initiative* was in response to the backlash on campus following the Paris attacks, the objectives of the *Initiative* considered the already normalized, subtle and often not-so-subtle and systemic nature of Islamophobia within the campus and broader environments. The objectives of the *Initiative* were to:

- Contribute to the development of a shared understanding of how Islamophobia manifests on campus.
- Offer a supportive space for those who have experienced, or fear experiencing, Islamophobia.
- Identify practical means of challenging Islamophobia on campus.

These objectives were implemented through drop-in sessions, a roundtable discussion, workshops, presentations and self-defence classes.

Key observations arising from participant comments during the *Initiative* included:

- Staff, students and faculty on campus expressed their interest in having a space on campus that is created for them to speak about racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia and to share their experiences, thoughts and questions.

¹ The Office of Human Rights & Equity Services (HRES) changed its name to the Equity and Inclusion Office in August 2016. Equity and Inclusion Office will be used throughout this document.

- Students recalled their experiences of Islamophobia in the classroom and the lack of intervention by instructors.
- Not all Muslims look the same or have the same experience. Race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation and other identity markers impact how Islamophobia is experienced.
- Due to the systemic silencing and lack of public voice of acknowledgement surrounding Islamophobic incidents, reporting is not always considered a viable option. Some participants mentioned reporting “not being worth it” because they believed nothing would come of it. This contributes to the erasure and invalidation of the lived experiences of Islamophobia.
- Participants were concerned that the statements and actions of political leaders gave license to individuals to spew hate in the public sphere.

As the *Initiative* unfolded, it became apparent that there were risks for two visibly Muslim staff members taking leadership of the *Initiative* as evidenced by:

- Social media complaints about the *Initiative* and the Office’s role in naming and challenging Islamophobia on campus.
- The legitimacy, professionalism and competency of the staff leading the *Initiative* being called into question in correspondence sent to the University President, Dr. Patrick Deane.
- Staff leading the *Initiative* being subjected to Islamophobia through correspondence sent directly to them and during in-person interactions by some participants in attendance at the *Challenging Islamophobia on Campus* workshops.

The *Initiative* facilitated an important dialogue on campus and engaged a broad segment of the campus community including students, staff and faculty. The *Initiative* revealed a need for ongoing work to appropriately address the reality and the impact of Islamophobia on our University campus. Consequently, the following recommendations are being made:

1. Dedicated resources for the proactive engagement of marginalized communities to address issues concerning the campus climate.
2. The naming of Islamophobia as a real issue on campus which causes legitimate fear.
3. Institutional mechanisms to ensure adequate University responses to geopolitical issues.

1 CONTEXT

The *Challenging Islamophobia on Campus Initiative* was developed as a result of the violent backlash targeting Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslims, after the deadly attacks in Paris, France in November, 2015. The negative media portrayal of Muslims and Islam² contributed to the global backlash that reverberated locally in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). The backlash created an overall climate of fear within the Canadian Muslim community, and on campus.

The definition of Islamophobia used throughout the *Initiative* was adopted from the 1991 Runnymede Trust³ Report on Islamophobia:

“An exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life”.

Islamophobia affects not only Muslims but those perceived to be Muslim including non-Muslim Arabs, members of the South Asian community, people who are Sikh or Hindu and essentially anyone who looks “Brown”⁴. Islamophobic attacks targeting places of worship are not just limited

² Amir Saeed, “Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media,” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 2, Nov. 2007, pp. 443-462

³ Independent racial equality UK think-tank: <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

⁴ “the category of Brown, once the signifier of an exotic Other, is undergoing a transformation in conjunction with the deepening of Islamophobia, a formation that positions Brown, as a strategy of identification, as alternate to the Euro-Americanness, and as terror and threat.” Mehdi Semati, “Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire,” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, Mar. 2010, pp. 256-275

to mosques. Temples and Gudwaras⁵ have been subjected to arson attacks and vandalism as part of the backlash targeting Muslims. The arson attack on the Hindu Samaj Temple in Hamilton after September 11, 2001 (9/11) is one example of the impact Islamophobia has on those perceived to be Muslim. Many Muslims are perceived as being “different” and “other” and therefore, not belonging to the Western World.⁶ Due to this othering, a process of racialization of Muslims takes place during which Muslims are ascribed a “race” and oftentimes met with racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. The experience of Islamophobia varies depending on one’s identity and social location. Furthermore, the intersections of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia create a unique experience of Islamophobia for Black Muslims.

Although this *Initiative* was developed after the Paris attacks, the issue of Islamophobia has been on the rise since the attacks in New York City on 9/11⁷ and has become a more urgent concern within the Canadian context, particularly, since the proposed 2013 Quebec Charter of Values⁸ and the 2015 Federal Conservative Election campaign⁹. As a result, the media has increasingly portrayed Muslims and Islam as being inherently violent, misogynistic and barbaric¹⁰.

In the immediate aftermath of the violent attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, Canadian Muslims were subjected to an increased number of racist and Islamophobic attacks that were carried out physically, verbally and online ¹¹:

⁵ The Hindu Samaj Temple was burnt down in Hamilton, Ontario after September 11, 2001 and was listed as a hate crime. See article: “Two sentenced for 2001 arson of Hindu temple in Hamilton.” *Metroland News Service* 29 Oct. 2014, <https://www.thespec.com/news/hamilton-region/2014/10/29/two-sentenced-for-hamilton-temple-arson-as-victims-forgive.html>

⁶ Semati, 256-275.

⁷ L.P Sheridan. “Islamophobia Pre-and Post-September 11th, 2001,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2006, pp. 317-336

⁸ Bill No. 60: “Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests,” submitted to The National Assembly of Quebec, 2013, <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-60-40-1.html>

⁹ Safiah Chowdhury, “It’s not just America: Canadian politicians use Islamophobia to make gains in polls,” 5 Oct. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/05/not-just-america-canadian-politicians-islamophobia-gains-polls

¹⁰ Saeed, 443-462

¹¹ “6 anti-Muslim incidents in Ontario since Paris attacks,” *CBC News*, 21 Nov. 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/hate-crimes-ontario-paris-attacks-1.3328660

- [November 14, 2016, the Kawartha Muslim Religious Association Mosque known as The Salaam \(Peace\) Mosque, was subjected to an arson attack.](#)
- [November 15, 2016, the Ram Dham Hindu temple in Kitchener was vandalized; members of the Hindu and Sikh community and their places of worship are often confused for Muslims and Mosques respectively and are also vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks.](#)
- [Weekend of November 13, 2016, a University of Toronto student was spat on in the face and was told to remove his mosque hat.](#)
- [November 16, 2016, a Muslim women was beaten up, punched in the stomach and pulled by her hijab, by two men who called her a 'terrorist' and told her 'to go back home' as she was walking her children to school.](#)
- [November 18, 2016, an Ottawa women found a handwritten note in her mailbox telling her to 'go back home' because Canada 'is no place for terrorists or immigrants'.](#)
- [November 18, 2016, two Muslim women were accosted and verbally assaulted on the Toronto Transit Commission \(TTC\).](#)

These incidents were reported and publicized by the media. It is reasonable to assume that the list is not exhaustive and does not reflect the actual number of incidents in which people who are Muslim, or perceived to be Muslim, were targeted. Furthermore, this list does not consider the systemic nature of Islamophobia or the everyday ways in which Muslims alter their behavior in an effort to mitigate the possibility of an attack or abuse; e.g. removal of hijab, shaving beards, alterations to clothing, being more outwardly 'Canadian', and assimilation.

2 INITIATIVE

The *Initiative* took a proactive approach by acknowledging that hate does not happen in a vacuum and that the demonization and marginalization of Muslims, or those perceived to be Muslim, has normalized a culture of Islamophobia where people feel justified in their discriminatory words and actions. This reality makes it difficult to seek help or even name Islamophobic incidents when they occur. Staff in the Equity and Inclusion Office, Khadijeh Rakie and Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan,

took on the *Initiative* during the 2015/2016 academic year, as part of the Office's education and training portfolio.

Although the *Initiative* was in response to the Paris backlash, objectives were developed to consider the normalized, subtle, not-so-subtle and systemic nature of Islamophobia within a given environment or campus community. The objectives of the *Initiative* were to:

- Contribute to the development of a shared understanding of how Islamophobia manifests on campus.
- Offer a supportive space for those who have experienced, or fear experiencing, Islamophobia.
- Identify practical means of challenging Islamophobia on campus.

These objectives were implemented through drop-in sessions, a roundtable discussion, workshops, presentations and self-defence classes.

Drop-in Sessions

Upon the recommendation of the McMaster Muslim Students Association (MSA), the *Initiative* included two drop-in sessions on December 2, 2015 and January 15, 2016 for the campus community as a means of encouraging students to share their experiences of Islamophobia in an informal setting.

Roundtable

A roundtable for Muslim-identified staff, students and faculty was organized on January 14, 2016 to facilitate a dialogue on the experiences of Islamophobia on campus.

Workshops

Two public workshops were provided to the campus and Hamilton communities on January 21, 2016 and April 14, 2016. The workshops aimed to provide a definition of Islamophobia, explain what it looks like and what can be done to challenge it on campus.

Presentations

The *Initiative* was first presented at the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC) on January 13, 2016. The presentation provided information on Islamophobia and included a spoken word performance on Islamophobia by Toronto-based poet, Nasim Asghari. Another presentation made to PACBIC on February 26, 2016 provided an update and discussion on the themes that emerged from the roundtable. The third and final presentation on May 24, 2016 focused on the challenges experienced in confronting Islamophobia on campus.

Khadijeh and Raihanna presented the *Initiative* on May 19, 2016 at the Canadian Association for the Prevention of Discrimination and Harassment in Higher Education (CAPDHHE) 2016 Conference held in Calgary, Alberta. CAPDHHE is a national organization/association bringing together human rights and equity offices from higher education institutions across Canada.

The Virtual Learning Centre, an eLearning initiative to Ontario secondary schools, invited Raihanna and Khadijeh to deliver a presentation on Islamophobia for one of their classes where Islamophobic rhetoric was prevalent. The presentation was delivered by Raihanna on May 26, 2016.

Wen-Do Women's Self Defence¹²

Violent physical attacks rooted in Islamophobia are often targeted at visibly Muslim women who wear the hijab. These sorts of public attacks are a specific manifestation of the broader societal

¹² Wen-Do Women's Self Defence is a registered charity, and the oldest women's self defence organization in Canada. The fifteen-hour basic course covers a wide variety of physical and verbal self-defence techniques, awareness and avoidance of threatening situations, and discussions of psychological, social, and legal issues.

problem of violence against women/gender-based violence experienced by racialized women. In acknowledgement of this reality, the *Initiative* included a weekend Wen-Do course for Muslim-identified women in the Hamilton area. This 2-day course was offered at the YWCA in downtown Hamilton in collaboration with the Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton and Area (SACHA) on April 2-3, 2016.

Wen-Do is a self defence program developed to help women learn ways to de-escalate situations of violence, draw in bystanders in the face of physically or verbally violent attacks, and help build a safer community. The stereotypical Islamophobic view of a Muslim woman is that she is weak, submissive, vulnerable, and oppressed. Arij Elmi¹³ who led the Wen-Do course is a Black, visibly Muslim, qualified Wen-Do instructor, and was the perfect rebuttal to this notion as she is an empowered, assertive and strong Muslim woman¹⁴. It is important to note that an individual's intersecting/confluence of identities; i.e., race, sexual orientation, gender, citizenship, religion, etc. influences their experiences of Islamophobia. For example, a newcomer to Canada who participated in the course noted her feelings of vulnerability to Islamophobic violence since she was not only a visibly Muslim woman, but was also developing fluency in spoken English which impacted her ability to respond to instances of verbal and physical harassment/violence.

Arij led the 2-day course and successfully engaged participants in a dialogue about the systemic and personal aspects of violence against women, debunked stereotypes about 'stranger danger' and provided practical and accessible techniques to help women and girls physically and verbally defend themselves if needed.

¹³ Instructor Biography: wendo.ca/trainer-list/arij-elmi/

¹⁴ Laura DaSilva, "Self-defence course empowers Muslim women," *Toronto Star*, 26 Nov. 2015, www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/11/26/self-defence-course-empowers-muslim-women.html

3 REACH OF *INITIATIVE*

This *Initiative* was the first of its kind at McMaster University and there was a high level of interest in the *Initiative* from University campuses across North America. The Director of Inclusion Programs at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health applauded the *Initiative* and invited the Equity and Inclusion Office to share information and resources on how to proactively address Islamophobia at Harvard University. The media also picked up on the *Initiative* and Rogers TV for Peel Region expressed interest in the *Initiative* for their show on Islamophobia.

Given the demonstrated need to create a dialogue on campus about Islamophobia, the Equity and Inclusion Office's H.E.A.R.T.¹⁵ Workshop Series now includes a *Challenging Islamophobia on Campus* workshop as part of its programming which will be available to staff, students and faculty on a regular basis. The H.E.A.R.T. Workshop Series is a suite of human rights and equity related workshops offered to the campus community.

4 ISLAMOPHOBIA ON CAMPUS – OBSERVATIONS

Participant comments and feedback throughout the *Initiative* provided insights on how Islamophobia manifests within the campus community and the impact it has on the lives of staff, students and faculty at McMaster University.

Safe Spaces

- Staff, students and faculty expressed their interest in having a space on campus that is created for them to speak about racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia and to share their experiences, thoughts and questions.
- Students, staff and faculty spoke about the concerns that family members have with them living, working or studying on campus particularly after deadly attacks that are often attributed to Islam and Muslims. The family members expressed grave concern over the

¹⁵ Human Rights, Equity, Accessibility and Respect Toolkit (H.E.A.R.T.)

backlash that Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslims, experience following these attacks.

Jokes

- There are often jokes related to ‘terrorism’ made to male Muslim-identified students by their classmates particularly regarding their chosen professions; for example, jokes about fears of them working in the nuclear plant or with explosives. These so-called jokes are framed as humorous but are rooted in harmful stereotypes of Muslim men being inherently violent and prone to carrying out acts of violence.

Teaching and Learning Environments

- Students recalled their experiences of Islamophobia in the classroom and the lack of intervention by instructors. One Muslim student referenced their experience in an English course where the class was required to read *Arabian Nights*.¹⁶ There were Islamophobic comments made by fellow classmates and the student expected the instructor to step in and stop the conversation. This did not happen.
- Students reported that they do not feel comfortable naming Islamophobia in the classroom when it occurs particularly if they are the only visible Muslim in the class.

Intersectionality/Confluence

- Not all Muslims look the same or have the same experience. Race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation and other identity markers impact how Islamophobia is experienced.
- The particular intersections of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia are important to note given the diversity of the Muslim community in general and at McMaster. It was highlighted during the roundtable that attention should be paid to how to challenge Islamophobia in the teaching and learning environment recognizing that Muslims do not experience Islamophobia in the same way.

¹⁶ Summary for the collection *Arabian Nights*, 2008: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/series/arabni/the-arabian-nights.html>

- During the roundtable discussion, a Black, visibly Muslim student shared that following deadly attacks attributed to Muslims and Islam there was an expectation for her to speak up in class and denounce the attacks. She recalled someone telling her, “I’m sure you have something to say”. The automatic connection made between her and the attackers was immediate along with an expectation that she would have something to say. She expressed discomfort about being in spaces where she was not only the sole visibly Muslim student but also the only Black student in class. She expressed feeling pressured to speak when Islam or race were brought up in class.

Model Muslim

- Muslims who participated in the *Initiative* stated that they feel an undue pressure to project themselves in a polite and friendly manner at all times in order to counteract the narrative of Muslims being inherently angry, dangerous and violent.
- The portrayals in the media of the angry/oppressive Muslim man and submissive/oppressed Muslim woman were discourses many participants were aware of and felt they had to contest. They felt they had to model a “good Muslim” so people would not fear them or associate them with the common portrayal of the “bad Muslim terrorist”.

Reporting

- There was a sense that reporting incidents described as "micro-aggressions" or everyday incidents of racism or Islamophobia might not rise to the level of unlawful discrimination or harassment and, therefore, were considered “not worth reporting”.
- Due to the systemic silencing and lack of public voice of acknowledgement surrounding Islamophobic incidents, reporting is not always considered a viable option. Some participants mentioned reporting “not being worth it” because they believed nothing

would come of it. This contributes to the erasure and invalidation of the lived experiences¹⁷ of Islamophobia.

- Historically, the Muslim community has been highly surveilled by the Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and various law enforcement agencies. This surveillance has been well documented particularly since 9/11.¹⁸ The general reporting process to municipal police services or on-campus Security Services was described by a student at the roundtable as a process of “re-traumatization”. Engaging with Canadian security establishments that have historically surveilled the Muslim community has led to feelings of mistrust and a lack of safety when interacting with these agencies.

Never Good News

- The Muslim Students Association (MSA) recalled their desire to create “good news” stories to counteract the negative stories commonly found in the media. The MSA are often approached for comments following ‘terrorist’ attacks but when the MSA reach out to the media to recount “good news” stories such as their anti-poverty work or other initiatives that make Muslim students look and sound like “normal” students, there is little or no response.

¹⁷ “Tracking anti-Muslim incidents reported across Canada,” *National Council of Canadian Muslims*, 2013-2017, <https://www.nccm.ca/programs/incident-report-form/>

¹⁸ Uzma Jamil and Cécile Rousseau, “Subject Positioning, Fear, and Insecurity in South Asian Muslim Communities in the War on Terror Context” *CRS-RCS*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2012, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1755-618X.2012.01299.x>

Matt Jantzi, “‘Stranger Danger’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act,” *WLU Major Research Papers*, no. 6, 2015, scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=soci_mrp,

Imran Khan, “Post-9/11 Anti-Muslim Racism: A Critical Analysis of Canada’s Security Policies,” *Ryerson University Major Research Project*, 2013, https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA%3A3018/datastream/OBJ/download/Post_9_11_Anti-Muslim_racism_a_critical_analysis_of_Canada_security_policies.pdf

Sherene H. Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. University of Toronto Press, 2008

- The MSA has concluded that good news stories about Muslims do not fit the predominant narrative that reinforces negative stereotypes and, consequently, they get little traction in the media for these ‘alternative’ stories.

Being Apologetic

- There was discussion at the roundtable about the need to respond or react following a ‘terrorist’ attack where Muslims and Islam are forced into the spotlight. Frustration was expressed at the constant need and demand to apologize when an attack involving ‘Muslims’¹⁹ occurs even though they have absolutely nothing to do with the ‘terrorist’ attacks.
- Students expressed their desire to be “normal” and live their lives without having to defend their existence as Muslims.
- Campus members who are Muslim state feeling pressure to act in ways that make other people feel comfortable or make themselves appear likeable. They also feel the need to project a happy and friendly Muslim image and are concerned that their hyper-visibility as Muslims means that everyday frustrations cannot be expressed for risk of being perceived as dangerous or a threat.
- Participants were acutely aware of the unfair pressure they bear to always be the ‘model Muslim’ and feel forced into the untenable situation of being the representative of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide.

Smiling Racism

- Racism is often subtle, nuanced and presented with a smile. In one of the workshops on Islamophobia, there were participants who challenged the notion that Islamophobia was an actual form of racism and oppression. During the workshop, two participants - McMaster Professors Emeriti - read out prepared speeches detailing their reasons for

¹⁹ Omar Alnatour, “Muslims Are Not Terrorists: A Factual Look at Terrorism and Islam,” *The World Post*, 9 Dec. 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/omar-alnatour/muslims-are-not-terrorist_b_8718000.html

asserting that the term “Islamophobia is an oxymoron”. They argued that people should be fearful of Islam and Muslims because “Islam is a violent ideology”. Further interruptions were made throughout the workshop and were done so with politeness and a smile.

- After another workshop on Islamophobia, a participant spoke about the need for more information on “non-terrorist Muslims”. The comment was genuinely intended to support the work being undertaken on campus to challenge Islamophobia. The implication, though, is that the majority of Muslims are ‘terrorists’ and while this is obviously untrue, this statement clearly demonstrates how deeply entrenched and seemingly benign Islamophobia can be.

Islamophobic and Proud of It

- Participants in the roundtable noted that in previous years, online forums and comment sections were populated by individuals using pseudonyms so that racist remarks were not attributed to real names and identities. Participants were concerned that the statements and actions of political leaders have given license to individuals to spew hate in the public sphere. They considered the combination of the following as contributing factors to a climate where individuals felt comfortable to publicly share their Islamophobic, racist and xenophobic commentary without cover of pseudonyms:
 - 2013 debate in Quebec on the ‘Charter of Values’ where politicians were advocating for religious symbols to be banned from public life, which would impact Muslim women and other faith communities.²⁰
 - 2015 Federal Election where Islam and Muslims bore the brunt of a tirade of Islamophobic rhetoric and policy proposals by the Conservative Party of Canada.²¹

²⁰ Bill No. 60: “Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests,” submitted to the National Assembly of Quebec, 2013, www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-60-40-1.html

²¹ Safiah Chowdhury, 5 Oct. 2015.

- Public defacing of campaign materials and shaming of Muslim candidates running for political office.²²

The Liberation of Muslim Women

- Participants felt that a hostile environment has been created in ‘multicultural Canada’ particularly for Muslim women whose bodies are constantly being scrutinized and policed by men²³. They objected to the assertion that de-veiling Muslim women is a source of liberation when in fact the removal of a woman’s choice to dress how she chooses is a manifestation of misogyny and violence against women.

With this reality in mind, it cannot be surprising then that after the Paris attacks, Muslim students and staff were fearful of the potential backlash and some made alterations to their classes or work day to ensure they did not have to walk across campus after dark. This type of behavior modification is ‘normal’ within the Muslim community and seldom gets named and acknowledged as a response to Islamophobia.

5 ISLAMOPHOBIA DURING THE *INITIATIVE*

This section will highlight instances of Islamophobia that took place during the course of the *Initiative*. As the *Initiative* unfolded, it became apparent that there were risks for two visibly Muslim staff members taking leadership of the *Initiative* as evidenced by:

- Social media complaints about the *Initiative* and the Equity and Inclusion Office’s role in naming and challenging Islamophobia on campus.

²² Katherine Declerq, “Toronto council candidate’s election sign defaced with words ‘Go Back Home’” *The Toronto Star*, 12 Oct. 2014, www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/toronto2014election/2014/10/12/toronto_councilor_candidate_subject_of_racism_and_xenophobia.html

²³ Dakshana Bascaramurty, “Woman at centre of niqab debate says she’s educated, not oppressed,” *The Globe and Mail*, 8 Oct. 2015. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/woman-at-centre-of-niqab-debate-ready-to-take-oath-vote/article26716420/

- The legitimacy, professionalism and competency of the staff leading the *Initiative* being called into question in correspondence to the University President.
- Staff leading the *Initiative* becoming the subject of Islamophobia through correspondence sent to them and in-person disruption at the *Challenging Islamophobia on Campus* workshops.

The legitimacy of the *Initiative* was also called into question in correspondence to senior University administrators and in a publication in an online newsletter by the authors who challenged the rationale for the *Initiative*, the objectivity of the Equity and Inclusion Office and its staff, and the validity of identifying Islamophobia as a real issue.

This backlash is important to note as it highlights the risks of taking up the work of anti-racism in general, and Islamophobia in particular, on University campuses.

The following themes emerged through the expression of Islamophobia and backlash to the *Initiative*

Muslims as a Threat

Articles were published, and emails were sent to the Equity and Inclusion Office staff leading the *Initiative* and senior administrators at the University questioning the legitimacy and the potential threat of a gathering of Muslims on campus.

The Equity and Inclusion Office was put on notice and told to “expect non-Muslim-identified individuals to attend the roundtable and drop-in sessions”. The tone of the communication was threatening and caused the Office to discuss the possibility of having security present during the aforementioned sessions. The Office has a long history of hosting programs, facilitating dialogues and developing initiatives. Seldom has there been discussions about the need for a security presence during these activities.

Denial of Islamophobia

Questioning the reality of Islamophobia, its causes and its impact is part of the reason why many Muslims are afraid and tend not to engage in public discussions about Islamophobia. There is a fear of the potential threat to student-faculty relations, faculty-management relations and staff-administration relations and oftentimes Muslims feel that engaging in public discussions on Islamophobia is not worth the risk.

The denial of Islamophobia and the erasure of the lived experience of staff, students and faculty on campus with racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia were exemplified in an extract of another email sent to senior administrators.

This content of the email was racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic for a number of reasons.

“Asylum seekers”, “Canadian Muslims” and the “Islamic State” are used interchangeably. This speaks to the homogenizing and framing of all Muslims as “bad” and inherently connected to violence and criminality. There is no such thing as an “Islamic asylum seeker”. Asylum seekers are individuals whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed²⁴. “Islamic” is not a country, Islam is a religion.

Bigotry is intolerance towards those who hold different opinions from oneself. Undermining the experience that Canadian Muslims have with racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia is a good example of bigotry. Police statistics and research studies show empirical evidence that Islamophobia or ‘Canadian bigotry’ is real and not a fabrication ‘...in the minds of Muslims’²⁵.

Providing a platform for students, staff and faculty to share their experiences of marginalization and exclusion on a University campus is legitimate and necessary work²⁶.

²⁴ The United Nations Refugee Agency, “Asylum-Seekers,” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers.html

²⁵ Anna Mehler Paperny, “Hate crimes against Muslim-Canadians more than doubled in 3 years,” *Global News*, 13 Apr. 2016, globalnews.ca/news/2634032/hate-crimes-against-muslim-canadians-more-than-doubled-in-3-years/

²⁶ See the President’s Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC), McMaster U, 2017, <https://pacbic.mcmaster.ca/>

Muslim students at McMaster do not always experience an environment of peace and acceptance which is the reason for the *Initiative*. Categorizing all Muslim majority countries as “closed, repressive and apartheid” is factually incorrect. Sharing a faith tradition does not make Canadian Muslims and the leaders of governments “...their own”.

The assumption that Muslim staff, students and faculty have “old prejudices” that “must be left at the doorstep” is steeped in exaggerated assumptions about who Muslims on campus are, where they come from, and what beliefs, values and practices that they have or adhere to. It assumes that Muslims are not Canadian. This statement erases the diversity and multicultural milieu that is the Muslim community and negatively assumes a monolithic and homogenous entity that encompasses 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. Muslims on campus “need to integrate” assumes that Muslims are not already part of mainstream Canada, that they are outsiders, not from here, and are visitors requiring permission to stay. Unless one has Indigenous ancestry, you are a visitor/settler to Canada. Canadian Muslims have been in Canada since 1854²⁷. The “carnage seen in the Islamic State and elsewhere” has nothing to do with Canadian Muslims²⁸.

You Are Not From Here

Another email talked about the ‘natural’ assumption that the Equity and Inclusion Office staff, Khadijeh and Raihanna, are not from Canada because of the way they look; i.e., racialized, Muslim women who wear the hijab. The assumption that the facilitators are outsiders who do not belong at McMaster or in Hamilton or Canada is based on the fact that Khadijeh and Raihanna are ‘Brown’, visibly Muslim women. The assumption is that those identities do not belong ‘here’. The fact that Khadijeh was born and raised in Toronto and Raihanna was born and raised in the United

²⁷ “The first recorded Muslims in Canadian history were James and Agnes Love, a young couple who had apparently converted to Islam in their native Scotland before they migrated to Canada in 1854, settling in Ontario. These ‘Mohametans’ had several children, including James, who was born just after their arrival. Their youngest son Alexander was born in 1868, one year after Confederation, and secured his spot in history as the first recorded Muslim born in Canada as we know it today.” Hassam Munir, “The History of Muslims in Canada,” *The Link Canada*, 30 Nov. 2015, thelinkcanada.ca/history-muslims-canada/

²⁸ Omar Alnatour, 9 Dec. 2016

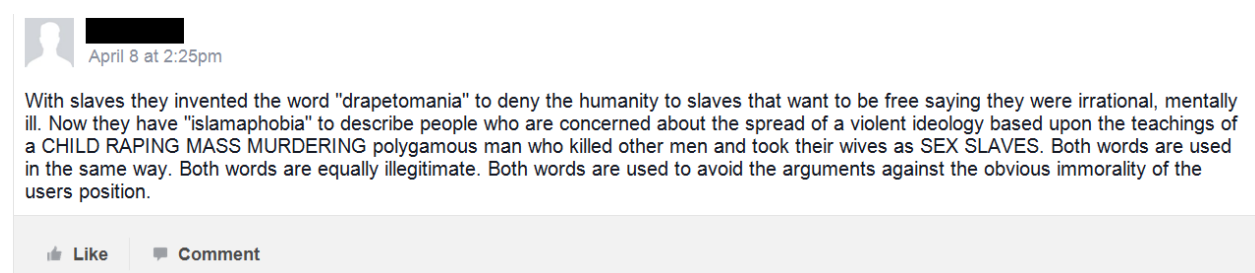
Kingdom does not matter given the ‘otherness’ of their appearance; the colour of their skin and the clothes that they wear – at least in the minds of the email authors.

Non-Terrorist Muslims

The question about “non-terrorist Muslims” after a *Challenging Islamophobia* workshop reinforces the general assumption that Muslims need to be feared and questioned before being accepted as equal human beings who are deserving of dignity and respect. This position is reinforced by the media representation of Muslims and the political arena in North America and Europe. Although this statement was made in ignorance and without malice, it reaffirms the explicit and inaccurate stereotype that the majority of Muslims are ‘terrorists’ and that those are not in fact a minority.

Social Media

Social media communication about the *Initiative* elicited Islamophobic responses. Comments were made about why the organizers of the Wen-Do Women’s Self Defence course were focusing on Muslim women and not women from other marginalized groups. Followers of the Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton and Area (SACHA) Facebook page engaged in Facebook conversations about the problematic nature of the commentary. Although the commentary was rooted in Islamophobia, the conversation was not considered egregious and did not warrant any action by the forum moderator.



6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Initiative* facilitated an important dialogue on campus and engaged many segments of the campus community including students, staff and faculty. The findings of the *Initiative* revealed a need for ongoing work to appropriately address the reality and the impact of Islamophobia on our University campus.

The negative reactions to the *Initiative* from people in positions of authority such as Professors Emeriti were deliberate and purposeful. Their attendance at the *Initiative's* workshop was disruptive as they advanced discourses that endorse and encourage Islamophobia. They made public and incorrect statements about the *Initiative's* intentions, objectives and goals. They made deliberate attempts to delegitimize the two facilitators which made them feel unwelcome and unsafe at McMaster University.

A combination of the reactions to the *Initiative* and the observations made helped to reveal some institutional needs which form the basis of the *Initiative's* recommendations:

- 1. Dedicated resources for the proactive engagement of marginalized communities in order to address issues concerning campus climate.**

Participants expressed a need for consistent and dedicated programming to support the continuation of the *Initiative*. This work requires dedicated and acknowledged time, administrative support, and programming resources, to ensure the work is sustainable and not just a series of one-off workshops. This report highlights the percolating culture of Islamophobia on campus and preventive measures should be put into place to deter and prevent blatant and violent acts of Islamophobia at McMaster.

- 2. The naming of Islamophobia as a real and legitimate concern on campus.**

Building an inclusive community is a lofty goal; however, it is critically important to identify or name the various ways in which students, staff and faculty at McMaster

are made to feel excluded, vulnerable, unsafe, targeted and subjected to discrimination or harassment based on race, creed, ethnicity and other identity markers that differentiate them from the stereotypical 'norm' at the University. Specifically naming instances that are rooted in Islamophobia and/or other "isms", is essential in challenging the systems that serve to exclude, marginalize and "other" communities that are typically subjected to bias, discrimination, and institutional inequities.

3. Institutional mechanisms to ensure adequate University responses to global geopolitical issues.

Mechanisms need to be in place to ensure instances of Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia are explicitly named, addressed and condemned by the University. Entities such as the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC) and the Equity and Inclusion Office are key resources in the identification of such issues on campus. Particular emphasis should be placed on ensuring that threats of Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia are not positioned as individualized, one-off incidents or made acceptable through the focusing on intention rather than impact.

To conclude, this report is intended to give voice to the lived experiences of staff, students and faculty who experience Islamophobia at McMaster University. The recommendations are based on observations made during the *Initiative* and are intended to encourage proactive and deliberate programming and strategic initiatives to further the University's goal of "***building an inclusive community with a shared purpose***"²⁹ .

²⁹ "McMaster University Statement on Building an Inclusive Community with a Shared Purpose," *University Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines*, McMaster University, Human Resources, <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/Statement-on-Building-an-Inclusive-Community-with-a-Shared-Purpose.pdf>

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