Hate Crimes Against British Muslims in the Aftermath of September 11th

Basia Spalek explains the need for the law and victim support agencies to recognise the significance of religious, as well as racial, violence and harassment.

The events that took place on September 11th 2001, when the World Trade Center was destroyed, led to widespread anxiety amongst the general public about the possibility of future chemical, biological or nuclear attacks. Media accounts suggest that in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, churches experienced an increased attendance and the number of people seeking counselling and psychotherapy also rose.

For many Muslims living in Britain, anxiety relating to September 11th was not directly linked to the possibility of future terrorist attacks, but to the threat of being physically assaulted or verbally abused by members of the British public. The aftermath of September 11th has shown them that events which take place in the global political arena can have a significant impact on their safety and well-being. In the words of one Muslim woman that I spoke to:

"As the 'war' progresses each day is uncertain. The outcome of the previous day dictates our lives in the outside world. How safe we feel, how comfortable we feel and the growing concern of what will happen if it all goes wrong."

Muslim experiences of victimisation

This article stems from a research study that I recently carried out looking at Muslim women's fear of crime and experiences of victimisation. Feminist work has highlighted how the negotiation of personal safety is a common feature of women's everyday lives (Stanko, 1985). The Muslim women that I talked to explained how, prior to the events of September 11th , they were also negotiating their security. The act of veiling is a part of this negotiation since the *hijab* (or veil) reduces the potential for men to sexualise women since many women argue that it liberates them from the male (sexual) gaze.

However, the attacks on the World Trade Center have brought into sharp focus how religious and cultural differences can arouse violent and aggressive responses, with Muslim women being particularly targeted for violence and harassment because the act of veiling is a signifier of Islam. Women have had their veils pulled off their heads, been violently attacked and verbally abused. These experiences have had a significant impact upon Muslim women's sense of well-being and the negotiation of their personal safety. The women that I interviewed told me that in the months following September 11th, they changed their everyday behaviour, avoiding places that they had not previously regarded as being dangerous, for example, some started to avoid walking through town centres or past pubs. Increased anxiety is also evidenced by the safety tips produced by the Islamic Human Rights Commission after the attacks in the US, advising women to "travel in groups, to look confident, to tell others of their whereabouts" and so forth (Siddiqui, 2001). Women have not, however, been the only targets of hate crime. Some Muslim men were also physically and verbally abused and mosques were vandalised (in one case firebombed), leading to many Muslim communities investing in private security measures, for example CCTV.

The significance of religious victimisation

The attacks on British Muslims illustrate the pervasiveness of the negative stereotyping of Islam in Western countries. Edward Said (1981) has argued that Islam has often been linked to barbarism and a kind of distasteful exoticism in western academic, political and social discourses. Islam has for many centuries been interpreted as 'the other', as the antithesis of Western society, as inhumane and evil. Indeed, after the attacks of September 11th, the Italian Prime Minister claimed that Western civilisation is superior because of its respect for human rights. Islamophobia, defined as having unfounded hostility towards Islam which results in discrimination against Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs (Conway, 1997), is endemic within British society. This discussion clearly illustrates the importance of introducing the issue of religious identity into criminological debates and social policy-making. Ethnic identity rather than religious affiliation has been the traditional way of viewing issues of multi-culturalism, leading to the insensitive treatment of religious minority groups. Both social welfare and criminal justice policy anti-discriminatory approaches are largely based on anti-racist models, thereby significantly diminishing the importance of religious issues (Sheriff, 2001). Many people who want to make formal allegations of discrimination have to resort to discrimination on the grounds of race or gender even

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though they believe that their religion has been the real reason for their inappropriate treatment. *The Crime and Disorder Act 1998* has been criticised by British Muslims because although it introduced higher penalties for offences which are racially aggravated, no mention was made of offences which may be motivated by religious hostility. In autumn 2001 the British government put together an emergency anti-terror bill which initially had included a ban on incitement to religious hatred. However, this was dropped from the bill in order to secure successful passage through Parliament. This was despite the fact that Muslim communities have for a long time campaigned for protection against anti-religious discrimination and violence, believing that a law against incitement to religious hatred might close legal loopholes that far right groups have been exploiting. The lack of legal and social responses specifically aimed at helping British Muslims has meant that Muslim communities have often had to organise their own support systems.

Islam can undoubtedly provide spiritual and moral help, enabling a victimised person to move from 'victim' to 'survivor' status more easily. There are also Muslim organisations that respond to the spiritual and emotional needs of both Muslim victims and offenders. However, these often get little (if any) governmental financial support and have to rely upon their own fund-raising abilities. It is crucial to expand victim services specifically aimed at Muslims, since secular-based support systems are not likely to adequately address their needs. It is time for policy makers to view diversity not only in terms of race or gender but also in terms of religious affiliation since only then will we be able to offer more sensitive and valid responses to Muslim communities.

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