Chapter 2
Unveiling Islamophobic Victimisation

The chapter examines the nature and extent of Islamophobic victimisation and explores explanations behind this type of victimisation through the lens of gender. Evidence suggests that veiled Muslim women are at heightened risk of Islamophobic victimisation by virtue of their visible 'Muslimness'. Popular perceptions that veiled Muslim women are passive, oppressed and powerless increase their chance of assault, thereby marking them as 'easy' targets to attack. Furthermore, attacks towards veiled Muslim women are justified because of the conflation of Islam with terrorism. Collectively, these arguments highlight the gendered dimensions of Islamophobic victimisation. The chapter emphasises that there is no single monolithic Muslim experience of Islamophobia. Recognising the interplay of different aspects of victims' identities with other personal, social and situational factors is highly relevant to understanding the vulnerability of veiled Muslim women as victims of Islamophobia.

Conceptualising Islamophobia
In the current climate, Islam and Muslims find themselves under siege. The Orientalist roots of the process of 'Othering' of Islam and Muslims paved the way for the current climate of Islamophobia, although the 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks have played a major role in heightening Islamophobic perceptions of Muslims in the West. In other words, contemporary Islamophobia is a reflection of a historical anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic phenomenon which was constructed in colonial times but which has increased significantly in recent times, creating a deeper resentment and fear of Islam and of Muslims than existed before. Seen through the prism of security risk, incompatible difference and self-segregation, Muslims in the West have emerged as the new 'folk devils' of popular and media imagination. Within this paradigm, Islam is understood as a violent political ideology, religion and culture; Muslim men are perceived as the embodiment of terrorism, fundamentalism and extremism; and Muslim women are viewed as the personification of gender oppression in Islam, especially if they are veiled. Ultimately, such stereotypes provide fertile ground for public expressions of Islamophobia including verbal abuse, threats and intimidation, harassment, physical assault and violence, property damage, hate mail and literature, as well as offensive online and internet abuse.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to differentiate between the terms 'Islamophobia' and 'Islamophobic victimisation'. According to Mythen, Walklate and Khan (2009), the concept of 'victimisation' is understood as the act by which someone is rendered a victim, the experience of being a victim in parallel with the socio-cultural process by which this occurs. This conceptual framework indicates that victimisation can be 'ideological' (for example pertaining to ideas and concepts that victimise individuals or groups) or it can have material consequences for those who are victimised (for example through verbal and physical abuse). From this perspective, it could be argued that the concept of Islamophobia is 'ideological' as it refers to an abstract notion of antipathy to Islam whilst the notion of Islamophobic victimisation refers to the material dimensions of this anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim hostility. Under this interpretation, Islamophobic victimisation refers to manifestations of Islamophobia on the basis that it is the acting out of that antipathy.

In 1997, the publication of the Runnymede Trust report entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* was the first report to raise awareness about the problem of Islamophobia in the UK and elsewhere. It defined Islamophobia as 'the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims' (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 1). Building upon this definition, we have described Islamophobia as ''a fear or hatred of Islam that translates into ideological and material forms of cultural racism against obvious markers of 'Muslimness'' (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012: 271). Using this framework we emphasise the link between the ideology of Islamophobia and manifestations of such attitudes, triggered by the visibility of the victim's (perceived) Muslim identity. This approach interprets Islamophobia as a 'new' form of racism, whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to the Western way of life.

It is important to recognise that racism can occur in situations where neither the reality nor concept of race actually exists. As Meer et al. (2010) point out, understandings of racism should not focus exclusively on race thereby overlooking religion and culture. According to this line of argument, conceptualising racism exclusively as a form of 'biological determinism' ignores the ways in which cultural racism draws upon other markers of 'difference' to identify minority groups and individuals that do not conform with mainstream society. Modood (1997: 165) explains that:

Cultural racism is likely to be particularly aggressive against those minority communities that want to maintain – and not just defensively – some of the basic elements of their culture or religion; if, far from denying their difference (beyond

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the colour of their skin), they want to assert this difference in public, and demand

that they be respected just as they are.

Taking a similar position, Law (2010) highlights the complex chameleon-like character of racism, which changes in terms of form and content across different times and contexts. For Zebiri (2008), colour racism has ceased to be 'acceptable'; nevertheless, a cultural racism which emphasises the 'other', alien values of Muslims has increased, especially in light of popular debates of national identity, immigration and community cohesion. For advocates of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, there is a cultural war between Islam and the West. In the British context, Islam and Muslims have increasingly been seen to be 'culturally dangerous' and threatening 'the British way of life'. Whilst recognising that Muslim minorities differ in the context of European countries – predominantly Algerian in France, Turkish in Germany and Austria, Pakistani in the UK – it is increasingly Islamic religion, tradition and culture that have been seen as a 'threat' to the Western ideals of democracy, freedom of speech and gender equality. At the same time though, it is often argued that Islamophobia 'does not exist'. For example, atheist Richard Dawkins stated that racism against a religion cannot exist on the basis that 'It is not a race … Islam is a religion', whilst British journalist Andrew Gilligan stated that anti-Muslim hate crime has been exaggerated by 'the Islamophobia industry' (Shackle, 2013). Our previous work has acknowledged that the prevalence of Islamophobic victimisation is difficult to measure, as it is both an under-researched topic and under-reported phenomenon (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012). Nevertheless, existing evidence lends weight to the view that Islamophobia does exist, as can be seen in the following analysis of the existing literature.

Nature of Islamophobic victimisation

In their ground-breaking report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, the Runnymede Trust (1997) examined the extent and forms of anti-Muslim hostility and prejudice in Britain. It was established that Islamophobic attitudes had become 'more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous … prevalent in all sections of society' (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 1). The report also noted how Islamophobia was becoming a 'fact of life' for many British Muslim women. Focusing on Islamophobia in the European Union (EU) following 9/11, Allen and Nielsen (2002) found that typical manifestations of Islamophobia included incidents of verbal and physical abuse targeted towards Muslim women. In particular, Muslim women who wore the hijab were the most likely targets for verbal abuse, being spat upon, having their

headscarves torn from them and being physically assaulted. Mosques were also attacked, ranging from minor vandalism to arson and firebombs.

Moreover, the Home Office (2001) report *Religious Discrimination in England and Wales* noted that for the majority of Muslim respondents verbal abuse and hostility had become commonplace, especially post-9/11. Along similar lines, McGhee (2005) observed that there was a four-fold increase in the number of racist attacks reported by British Muslims and other Asian, ostensibly 'Muslim-looking', groups in the UK during the months immediately after 9/11. This heightened sense of vulnerability since 9/11 has also been reported in Garland and Chakraborti's (2004) studies of racism in rural England. In the three weeks following the 7/7 bombings, police figures showed a six-fold increase in the number of religiously motivated offences reported in London, the vast majority of which were directed against Muslim households and places of worship, whilst in the same three-week period over 1,200 suspected Islamophobic incidents were recorded by police force across the UK (BBC News, 2005).

Similar findings were evident in the report *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action* published by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (2004). The Commission emphasised the high levels of anti-Muslim hostility targeted towards Muslims. It also highlighted the vulnerability of Muslim women wearing hijabs as victims of Islamophobia. In a similar vein, the report *Muslims in the UK: Policies for Engaged Citizens* highlighted that post-9/11 Muslim women had suffered high levels of discrimination (Open Society Institute, 2005). In particular, 'practising' young Muslim women were likely to face discrimination because of their affiliation to Islam. In this regard, religion rather than race or ethnicity was recognised as being a more important marker upon which discrimination was based, echoing Allen and Nielsen's (2002) finding that individuals were being increasingly targeted on the visibility of their (perceived) Muslim identity. Further evidence of the prominence of Muslim women as targets of anti-Muslim discrimination was published in the report *Data in Focus: Muslims* by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2009). The report found that approximately 26 per cent of Muslim women across a number of different European countries had experienced discrimination in the preceding year. Weller (2011), who examined religious discrimination in Britain over the previous decade, found that Muslims experience religious discrimination with a frequency and seriousness that is proportionately greater than that experienced by those of other religions.

Evidently, 'visible' Muslims in general and veiled Muslim women in particular emerge as 'ideal' targets for those who wish to attach a symbol of Islam. In this regard, the visibility

of their 'Muslimness' is key to rendering them 'ideal' victims for Islamophobic attacks in public. In a report published by the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia, Allen and Nielsen (2002) found that the stimulant behind the vast majority of Islamophobic incidents was the fact that victims were identified as Muslims by 'visual identifiers', namely something that could be recognisably associated with Islam. Within this paradigm, the visual identifiers of Islam are the tools for identification upon which Islamophobia can be expressed and demonstrate why certain individuals and groups are more likely to become targets for hostility than others. Examples of such visual identifiers include veiled Muslim women, bearded men as well as Islamic buildings and property. However, as Allen (2010b) observes, when the visual identifiers of Islam hold such primacy in determining who or what become the targets for violence, it is veiled Muslim women in particular – possibly the most visually identifiable religious adherents in the West – who become the primary *foci* for retaliation. This ties in with the suggestions of Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010) who documented the heightened sense of vulnerability of veiled Muslim women by virtue of their 'visible' Muslim identity in public places in London.

As of 2014, official figures and academic research indicate that anti-Muslim hate crimes are currently at record levels compared to the beginning of the decade. From the period between September 2001 and 2010 successive Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) racist incident monitoring reports highlight that Muslims accounted for more than half of all incidents of religiously aggravated offences at 54 per cent, whilst up to 60 per cent of mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim organisations suffered at least one attack (Ahmed, 2012). In 2011, over half of British Muslims reported having experienced at least one incident of Islamophobic abuse, harassment or intimidation in public (Ahmed, 2012). From April 2012 to April 2013, the Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks project (MAMA, 2013) found that 58 per cent of all reported incidents were against Muslim women, whilst 80 per cent of the Muslim women targeted were visually identifiable as being Muslim because of their dress. Following the murder of British army soldier Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich, London by two Islamist extremists in May 2013, there was a clear spike in attacks on Muslims. For example, more than 140 anti-Muslim hate crime incidents were reported to the Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks project in the 48 hours following the Woolwich murder (The Independent, 2013). The preceding discussion not only supports the very real existence of Islamophobia but also highlights the targeted victimisation of 'visible' Muslims and particularly of veiled Muslim women. However, even when its existence is acknowledged, Islamophobic victimisation is frequently discussed in gender-neutral ways.

The gendered dimensions of Islamophobic victimisation

Despite the link between the visibility of Islam and incidents of Islamophobic victimisation in public, the vulnerability of veiled Muslim women remains a largely ignored phenomenon. It is important to recognise that issues around the 'Muslim veil' are intersectional: the term suggests that the garment in question is religious in nature but it is also gender-specific, as only Muslim women (and not Muslim men) adopt the practice of wearing it. Nevertheless, the intersection of gender and religion in relation to the 'Muslim veil' has not been adequately considered or analysed. As Vakulenko (2007) observes, there is a noticeable tendency to overlook or underestimate the connection between gender and Islamophobic victimisation. Recognition and analysis of the key role of the veil in relation to public manifestations of Islamophobia is essential in order to understand the nature and impact of this type of targeted victimisation.

At a general level, social constructions of gender are central to the imagination and reproduction of national identities whilst at a more fundamental level women may be seen as biological reproducers of members of ethnic groups and, by extension, as reproducers of boundaries of national collectivities. According to this line of thinking, women are perceived as 'the signifiers of national differences in the construction, reproduction and transformation of national categories' (Meer *et al*., 2010: 85). Although men are more likely to monopolise the nation's political and military representation, it is women who come to 'embody' the nation as such (Lutz, Pheonix and Yuval-Davis, 1995). From this perspective, women are seen as vehicles for transmitting national and cultural values. Ultimately, the veil emerges as the typifying content of Islam based on the premise that the practice of veiling makes the abstract and universal concept of Islam more concrete. Reflections such as these may help to explain why the image of the veiled Muslim woman has become such a visual representative of Islam.

Clearly, the veil is the most visible symbol of Islam in the West. By virtue of the fact that it draws together different anti-Muslim themes, the veil serves as a focal point for antipathy towards Islam and Muslims. In particular, the 'gendered' dimensions of Islamophobic victimisation are premised on five different, yet interrelated, arguments. First, gender precipitates anti-Muslim hostility on the basis that the wearing of the veil marks Muslim women as particularly vulnerable to Islamophobic victimisation in public. In this regard, stereotypes about Muslim women's passivity (particularly if wearing the veil) render them 'ideal subjects' against whom to enact Islamophobic attacks. As already discussed in

Chapter One, the wearing of the veil is routinely seen as an oppressive and subordinating practice which is not 'welcome' in the West. Based on the Western perspective, veiled Muslim women are routinely perceived as submissive, passive and with very little power over their lives. Thus, popular perceptions that veiled Muslim women are deemed 'passive' increase their chance of assault, thereby marking them as an 'easy' target to attack.

Secondly, despite the actual or perceived degree of agency of the wearer, the visibility of the veil in the West provokes public manifestations of Islamophobia by virtue of its symbolism as a sign of self-segregation, either imposed or chosen. Although freedom of choice and individual agency are amongst the most cherished values in contemporary Western societies, the woman who freely chooses to veil often provokes public hostility. According to Goffman (1963) individuals whose stigma is visible experience more discrimination than individuals with concealable stigmas. Given that the majority of Muslim women do not wear the veil, Muslim women who do wear it are likely to be perceived as having a 'controllable' stigma for choosing to wear it (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013). Correspondingly, in cases where women choose to wear the veil, they are seen as purposefully isolating themselves and rejecting Western values. As such, individuals who have such controllable stigmas are more likely to be subjected to stigmatisation based on the premise that they are perceived as being 'responsible' for their own condition. Consequently, veiled Muslim women are likely to experience Islamophobic victimisation not only because of the visibility of the veil, but also because of its perceived controllability.

Thirdly, the 'refusal' of veiled Muslim women to conform to the expectation of being 'the object of the gaze' constitutes a disruption of power relations in the public sphere. It was contended in Chapter One that the visibility of the veil confounds public norms, partly because of the veil's message of sexual unavailability. This symbolism brings the veiled Muslim woman very visibly into the public sphere where she simply cannot walk by unnoticed. In this context the veil symbolises the sexual non-availability of Muslim women, and consequently men (and women) may find it difficult to forgive those who 'disrupt' the 'pattern of the masculine gaze' (Franks, 2000: 920). Ultimately, veiled Muslim women may be attacked for failing to conform to Western expectations of how women should behave and dress.

Fourthly, the image of the veiled Muslim woman represents 'Islam', the religion of the perpetrators of high profile terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and 7/7. In this sense, the beliefs and practices of veiled Muslim women are unthinkingly equated with those of the terrorists: as such, attacks towards veiled Muslim women are justified because of the conflation of Islam

with terrorism. Moreover, veiled Muslim women might be seen as 'terrorist' bodies on the basis that their face is covered and therefore the veil could be used as a camouflage for a terrorist. This link legitimises Islamophobic attacks toward veiled Muslim women when they are seen in public. In this context, the veil is completely separated from the individual wearing it; rather, it is seen as part of an Islamist agenda that aims to impose Sharia law in the West. The effect is to construct and maintain the particular identity and meaning ascribed to veiled Muslim bodies, thereby contributing to a hostile environment towards women whose Muslim identity is visible through the process of veiling in a non-Muslim country. Allied with the repetitive effects of erroneously linking Islam to Islamist terrorism, this rhetoric provides the justification for the targeted victimisation of veiled women whose 'Muslimness' is visible in public places.

Finally, veiled Muslim women may be targeted because they are seen as more visually 'threatening' than Muslim men as it is more difficult for their Muslim identity to be mistaken, denied, or concealed. A key theme emerging from the available research literature is that veiled Muslim women are more vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks in public because they are easily identifiable as Muslims. Indeed, respondents in Tyrer and Ahmad's (2006) study reported that men and women experience Islamophobia in different ways and this was linked to the greater visibility of Muslim women wearing the veil.[6] Afshar *et al.* (2005: 262) state that veiled Muslim women 'are publicly branding themselves as Muslims at a time when such a label carries the potential fear of making them vulnerable to open hostility'. In the eyes of the perpetrators, the image of the veiled Muslim woman evokes mixed emotions of fear and hostility. As such, the wearing of the veil is read in a uniform, linear manner as a practice which is adopted by the Muslim 'Other'. In this light, the image of the veiled Muslim body challenges or 'threatens' hegemonic socio-cultural norms. Along similar lines, the veil is seen as a cultural threat to 'our' way of life. It is in such a context that Islamophobic victimisation emerges as a means of responding to this 'threat'.

Collectively, these observations demonstrate that the veil has simultaneously become a 'visual identifier' of Islam and an embodiment of what is in itself stereotypically Islamophobic: namely, the veil as a symbol of Muslim 'otherness'. As such, for girls and women who adhere to Islamic dress codes which visibly mark them as Muslims, public expressions of Islamophobia are particularly salient. Against the backdrop of the 'war on terror' and the perpetual debates on the oppression of Muslim women, the visibility of the

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[6] This was a qualitative study of Muslim women's experiences of studying in Higher Education Institutions across the UK.

veil in the West renders the veiled Muslim woman the 'ideal' target against whom to enact Islamophobic attacks. In other words, the veil marks Muslim women more readily visible as 'soft', 'easy' and 'convenient' targets to attack. In this light, the vulnerability of veiled Muslim women *vis-à-vis* Islamophobia is premised on their perceived subordination and passivity, dangerousness and self-segregation, coupled with the visibility of their Muslim identity. This line of argument can help us to recognise that Islamophobia, implicit as it is in contemporary media, political and public discourses, offers 'us' (the 'ideal' spectators) a vehicle with which we are expected to envisage the Muslim 'Other'. In this context, manifestations of anti-Muslim hostility against 'Other' Muslim women are accepted, even expected. That said, it should be acknowledged that not every veiled Muslim woman will be a victim of Islamophobia. This observation is echoed by Mythen (2007: 466) who states:

> *Being, or becoming a victim is not a neat or absolute journey. Acquiring the status of victim involves being party to a range of interactions and processes, including identification, labelling and recognition.*

Essentially, becoming a victim is a social process which requires a cognitive decision by the person(s) against whom it is directed to view themselves as victims, as part of their strategy for coping with it. However, not everyone who has been victimised will necessarily regard themselves as a victim. Indeed, the research literature demonstrates that some recipients of abuse and harassment do not appreciate being referred to as 'victims' (see, for example, Bowling and Phillips, 2002). Moreover, some people may not recognise that they have been victimised. Islamophobic victimisation may form such an intrinsic part of their everyday experience that the individuals or groups against whom it is directed consider it to be 'normal' and as a result, may not appreciate that they have been victimised. At the same time, the term 'victim' is not always an appropriate one to use when referring to the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women, not least because it tends to perpetuate an imagery of inevitability about the process of 'Othering' and passivity on the part of the recipient. However, in the context of the present discussion, the term has been used deliberately to give emphasis to the 'invisibility' of Muslim women as victims of anti-Muslim hostility, thereby raising awareness about the vulnerability of women who look 'different', and overtly 'Muslim', in the current climate of Islamophobia.

Chapter One demonstrated that Islamophobia is not a distinctly post-9/11 phenomenon, but one which evolved out of Orientalism. It was argued that both colonial and contemporary

stereotypes of Islam and Muslims have promoted the construction of the Muslim as 'Other' to the non-Muslim Self. Crucially in this context, a common image that resides in public perceptions of Muslim women (particularly if wearing the veil) is the image of the oppressed female body. Chapter Two has examined the nature and extent of Islamophobic victimisation. The review of the literature suggests that veiled Muslim women are particularly vulnerable to public manifestations of anti-Muslim hostility in the UK, as elsewhere in the West. Readers will note that we have deliberately drawn attention to the fact that Islamophobic victimisation is highly 'gendered'. In this regard, gender precipitates expressions of Islamophobia on the basis that the visibility of the veil, coupled with popular perceptions of gender oppression in Islam, marks veiled Muslim women as 'uniquely' vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks in public places in the West and elsewhere.