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'You are essentially forced into being an activist': the interplay between Islamophobia and Muslims' civic engagement in Australia

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‘You are essentially forced into being an activist’: the interplay between Islamophobia and Muslims’ civic engagement in Australia

Mario Peucker

Introduction

The extensive scholarship on Islamophobia, especially over the past two decades, has shed light on the various manifestations and implications of this multifaceted phenomenon, which the influential Runnymede (1997, 1) report defined as a ‘shorthand way of referring to dread and hatred towards Islam – and, therefore, fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’. Given the depth and breadth of this conceptual and empirical work (Allen 2010, 2020; Bleich 2011), there are very few facets of Islamophobia that have not received significant academic attention. One of them, I argue in this article, is the way in which personal or collective experiences of Islamophobia affect Muslims’ civic participation and community activism.

During my previous work on Muslims’ civic and political engagement in different non-Muslim majority societies, I have hardly ever completed an interview with a person of Islamic faith who did not share their personal encounters with anti-Muslim stigmatisation, exclusion, and Othering. Islamophobia, it seems, is something that is always there, on people’s minds and in their everyday lives, sometimes subtly and subconsciously, sometimes more tangibly and physically. In many cases, these experiences have had implications for the way in which my interlocutors have become actively engaged in society.

This article explores the complex interplay between Islamophobia and Muslims’ civic engagement and community activism in Australia. It synthesises existing research, which has primarily examined how experiences of Islamophobia affect – positively or negatively – Muslims’ propensity to civic or political participation. Building on this review, the second part presents findings from a multi-method study that explores Muslim volunteering specifically within a Muslim community context in Australia. The findings illustrate how Islamophobia has encouraged and motivated Australian Muslims in different ways to get involved in volunteer community work and how it has affected their decision to do so specifically in Muslim community organisations. Community work, partially aimed at combating racist misconceptions and Islamophobia, has been a central element of my interlocutors’ lives – although some of them have expressed concerns that, ironically, their community work may increase the risk of Islamophobic exclusion from the formal labour market.

As this article explores in particular the civically activating effects of Islamophobia, it is important to emphasise that I am not suggesting in any way that there is anything ‘positive’ about Islamophobia, or downplaying the severe harm anti-Muslim racism has caused, and continues to cause, to individuals, communities, and the society at large.

Defining Islamophobia

How to define and conceptualise Islamophobia remains a contested question in academia, and many definitions have been critiqued for being simplistic and too narrowly focused on negative attitudes or emotions such as fears or hatred (Allen 2013; Shyrook 2010). Proposing a more nuanced understanding, Allen (2017, 299) argues that

Islamophobia is not restricted to any specific action, practice or discrimination but is instead evident in a vast array of different social, political and cultural processes whereby the identification and recognition of Muslims and Islam as both “Other” and “problem” are routinely consumed without question or contestation.

Such a broader conceptualisation aligns with the working definition of the British All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims, developed on the basis of extensive community consultations across the UK (All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPG) 2018, 11): ‘Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness’. Given the empirical section of this article focuses on the Australian context, it is worth noting that this definition has also been adopted by one of Australia’s largest and most influential Muslim umbrella organisations, the Islamic Council of Victoria (Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) 2020). As a form of racism, Islamophobia manifests itself in various ways, from structures, systems, and discourses to attitudes and actions, exerting hegemonic power of marginalisation and exclusion.

Muslim communities and Islamophobia in Australia – an overview

Although the initial Muslim presence in Australia predates the European colonial settlements in the eighteenth century, the Muslim communities today have primarily evolved as a result of immigration and humanitarian refugee intake since the 1960s and 70s (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 8–14). According to the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016), there are around 604,000 self-identified Muslims in Australia, which constitutes around 2.58% of the total population, the majority of them living in the capital cities, especially in Greater Melbourne and Sydney. Around 36% of them were born in Australia, and around 31% arrived between 2005 and 2016, which points to recent and ongoing processes of Muslim immigration to Australia. Around seven in ten Muslims in Australia hold full citizenship.

Research has identified an education divide within Muslim communities, which is starkly reflected in Muslims’ overrepresentation among both those with a university degree and those with no post-secondary degree or no educational attainment at all (Hassan 2018; Peucker et al. 2014; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). Unemployment rates have been consistently double the national average for many years, and household income has remained significantly lower compared to the Australian average. While the reasons for their disadvantaged

socioeconomic positions are manifold (Peucker et al. 2014, 294), Booth, Leigh, and Varganova (2012) found robust empirical evidence for labour market discrimination against Muslims in Australia.

Like in other western societies, Muslims in Australia face Islamophobia in various ways, beyond these discriminatory employment barriers. In a recent large-scale survey among Australian Muslims, Rane et al. (2020, 13) found that respondents' top four concerns were all related to some manifestation of Islamophobia: (1) media portrayal of Islam and Muslims (96% concerned or very concerned); (2) discrimination against Muslims (95%); anti-Islam sentiments in society (94%); and right-wing terrorism (93%).

Research has shown that these concerns are well founded. Several studies found, for example, that a large proportion of Muslims frequently experience (anti-Muslim) racism. According to a Monash University study (2009), 56% of Muslims surveyed in Melbourne reported personal experiences of discrimination because of their race, ethnicity, or religion in the two years prior to the survey. Another study, conducted a few years later among Muslims in Sydney, found similarly high levels of racism and discrimination experiences, especially in the context of employment (62%) and education (55%) (Dunn et al. 2015). A recent analysis of 349 reports of Islamophobia, systematically recorded over a two-year period by the Sydney-based specialised NGO Islamophobia Register, highlighted that most of these cases occurred in public spaces and that women were vastly over-represented as the targets of Islamophobia (Iner 2019).

The concerns Australian Muslims express about negative media reporting and anti-Islam sentiments in the population are also not unfounded. A range of media studies conducted over the past two decades consistently confirm that Muslims and Islam are often depicted in a biased way, often associated with violence or terrorism (for an overview, see Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 78–90). Similarly, representative population surveys have repeatedly found high levels of negative attitudes towards Muslims, between 25% (interview-administered survey) and over 40% (self-administered survey) (Markus 2019).

Research further highlights that, on an institutional level, Australia's post 9/11 counterterrorism 'hyper-legislation' (Roach 2011) has fuelled Australian Muslims' sense of being 'under siege'. Hartley and Cherney (2016, 5) argue that 'there is a growing perception among Muslim communities that they have been unfairly singled out by the discourse and practice of counterterrorism'. Cherney and Murphy's empirical study (2016, 492) concludes that Australian Muslims have been 'stigmatised as a suspect community' and they 'have had to carry the burden of this labelling and manage its effects'. The Islamic Council of Victoria expressed concerns about the stigmatising effects of Australia's antiterrorism legislation and related Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) approaches in its formal Islamophobia Statement (Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) 2020).

Synthesis: Muslims' civic and political engagement in the face of Islamophobia

Islamophobia fundamentally contradicts the core principle of substantive equality and full citizenship for all in a liberal democracy (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2004; Marshall 1950). This unfulfilled promise of equality has ramifications for individuals, inter-group relations, and society at large. Most severe and immediate are the effects on the community and everyday

lives of those at the receiving end of this form of anti-Muslim racism, marginalisation, and exclusion. Borrowing from Nancy Fraser's (1995) work around social justice and political struggles, Islamophobia maintains and reinforces barriers to social mobility and socioeconomic resources ('redistribution') as well as challenges Muslims' 'recognition' as equal citizens, hampering subjective processes of multilayered identification and seeking to domesticate Muslims and Islamic identities (Humphrey 2009; Sunier 2014). It is primarily within this struggle for recognition where personal and collective experiences of Islamophobia affect Muslims' inclination to enact their citizenship through civic and political participation.

Scholars who have examined this interplay between Muslims' experiences of exclusion and their civic-political activism agree on what Finlay and Hopkins (2020, 11) call the 'paradoxical impacts of Islamophobia'. Encounters with Islamophobia can become both a motivational driver and a deterring barrier for active engagement. Moreover, such experiences influence Muslims' decision of how and where they become active through traditional means of civic and political participation or by developing new 'scripts' and 'scenes' (Isin 2008, 38) of performed citizenship.

A barrier to active citizenship

Islamophobia, by definition, is not only irreconcilable with the modern citizenship principle of equality, paraphrased by Marshall (1950, 6) in his seminal *Citizenship and Social Class* as the 'claim to be accepted as full members of society'. It also hampers Muslims' inclination to active citizenship in their everyday lives, as several scholars have argued. Al-Momani et al. (2010, 39), for example, concluded in their study on the political participation of Australian Muslims that anti-Muslim narratives and discourses can hamper Muslims' political engagement. In another Australian study, Gendera, Pe-Pua, and Katz (2012, 106) identified anti-Muslim stigmatisation and media discourses as factors that negatively affect some Muslim mothers' confidence and, in effect, discourage them from becoming active in school-related volunteering. Similarly, my previous research on civically and politically active Muslims in Germany and Australia found that several interlocutors highlighted how some or even many of their fellow Muslims refrain from civic or political activism in response to anti-Muslim discourses and personal and collective experiences of Islamophobia (Peucker 2016, 240).

Finlay and Hopkins (2020, 548) argue in their study on the political participation of young Scottish Muslims that Islamophobia, conceptualised as a tool of governmentality, can 'discipline and marginalise political agency' among Muslims:

The disciplining nature of Islamophobia significantly revolves around creating a public sphere that young Muslims are fearful of, which works as a significant barrier to political participation. Exclusion from the public sphere is a process of silencing young Muslims, diminishing their citizenship claims and marginalising involvement in the structures of representation (Finlay and Hopkins 2020, 564).

This 'silencing' effect of Islamophobia is, however, only one facet of its 'paradoxical impacts'. 'Islamophobia can [also] result in political resistance and motivates participation', as Finlay and Hopkins assert (2020, 557).

A motivating force for active citizenship

Historically, and until the present day, experiences of racism and exclusion have triggered and fuelled civic-political protests and other forms of collective and individual activism, aimed at tackling these injustices – from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, to name only two of many examples. As Modood (2012, 46) maintains, ethnic minorities tend to ‘mobilise around identities of cultural difference’ to call for equality and recognition. Muslim communities have been no exception. In the British context, for example, many Muslims were politically mobilised in the course of the divisive and for many Muslims deeply hurtful Rushdie Affair, which ‘created [. . .] an awareness of the need for greater engagement’ (Baxter 2006, 184) and political action among British Muslims in the late 1980s (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 126–127). Werbner (2000) argues that it was a significant moment ‘in the development of a Muslim British civic consciousness and capacity for active citizenship’.

Against this backdrop, it may not surprise that some scholars have argued that Islamophobic discourses, politics, and actions can encourage Muslims’ civic and political engagement. Finlay and Hopkins (2020, 558) found in their study of young Muslims in Scotland that several of their interlocutors expressed the view that the ‘current climate of increasing Islamophobia and pervasive negative stereotyping of Muslims makes political participation an urgent and important activity for young Muslims’. Drawing on Foucault’s notions of resistance and power, Finlay and Hopkins (2020, 560) describe young Muslims’ resistance to negative external labelling of the Muslim subject as ‘a struggle to gain control of their identities and to undermine and resist how hegemonic powers seek to construct and control them’.

Similarly, my previous study on Muslims’ civic and political participation in Australia and Germany (Peucker 2016) found that many interviewed Muslims considered it as a major goal behind their civic (and to some extent their political) engagement to tackle anti-Muslim misconceptions and externally constructed stereotypes. The study identified two common approaches to pursue this goal, either by publicly presenting themselves as a positive ‘active citizen’ role model – what Van Es (2019, 375) recently called “‘ambassadors’ of Islam’ – or by engaging in interfaith or cross-community dialogue initiatives aimed at breaking down Islamophobia and stereotypes (Peucker 2016, 209–214).

The findings of the *American Muslim Poll: Pride and Prejudice* (Mogahed and Chouhoud 2018) point to a politically mobilising effect of anti-Muslim discourses and Islamophobia. Mogahed and Chouhoud draw a link between Muslims’ dissatisfaction with and disapproval of Trump’s presidency (which involved anti-Muslim rhetoric and decisions) and their political participation, measured as voter registration, which grew significantly between 2016 and 2018. ‘In addition to anxiety and anger, the response to the Trump presidency, especially among women and minority groups, has also featured a call to action – one particularly focused on the ballot box’, the authors assert, adding the rather rhetorical question: ‘Are Muslims prepared to heed this call?’ (Mogahed and Chouhoud 2018, 9).

The increasingly Islamophobic public and political discourses in the US under Trump’s presidency have also led to an intensified collective mobilisation of American Muslim organisations. Cury’s (2018) analysis concluded that anti-Muslim Othering during the 2016 election campaigns and after Trump’s election has led many US Muslim advocacy organisations

to shift their efforts towards 'constituent empowerment strategies, mobilise in demand of Muslim American group rights, defend their constitutional rights, and claim their place as an American minority' (Cury 2018, 1). These findings lend further support that collective experiences of Islamophobia can encourage intensified civic and political responses from members of the targeted Muslim communities.

Shaping active citizenship

Islamophobia not only has the potential to both deter Muslims from and motivate them to civic-political participation and activism; it can also shape the ways in which Muslims seek to engage as civically or politically active subjects. The increased voter registration, for example, suggests that conventional forms of electoral political participation are on the rise among Muslims in the US in response to heightened Islamophobic discourses (Mogahed and Chouhoud 2018). This does not seem to be the case in other national settings. Martin's (2017) statistical analysis of the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study points to different effects on Muslims' political activism in the UK. Martin found that Muslims who have experienced religious discrimination and those who report anti-Muslim prejudice in general are significantly less likely to vote. They are, however, substantially more likely to engage in other, non-electoral forms of political participation, such as signing a petition or boycotting certain products and services (Martin 2017, 363).

This resonates with findings from several UK studies that explore the diminishing space for British Muslims to become politically active in a post 9/11 era where Muslims have become further marginalised as 'suspect communities' through extensive anti-terrorism policies and discourses (Spalek 2011). O'Loughlin and Gillespie (2012, 131) argue that the governance of hyper-securitisation and stigmatisation of Muslims since the 7/7 London bombings has 'pushed [Muslims] out of the public arena' and led them 'to self-censor and, in some cases, retreat into Muslim only spaces of political and public debate'. This is part of a broader development among British Muslims towards 'dissenting citizenship' (see also Maira 2009). The two British scholars describe this as an 'expectant citizenship, not a revolutionary citizenship' (O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2012, 132), which manifests itself in creative 'local and translocal personalised forms of political action' (O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2012, 115). The Muslims in their study have developed and deployed new 'scripts' and 'scenes' in performing what Isin and Nielsen (2008) coined 'acts of citizenship', instead of engaging in conventional space of political participation, which is seen as being tainted by the national securitisation and antiterrorism agenda.

Mustafa's (2016) ethnographic work on young British Muslims comes to similar conclusions. In the face of anti-Muslim exclusion and the ubiquitous securitisation agenda, her participants have become aware of the scrutiny they are under as active citizens. This seems to 'place limits on the choice of political activity and expression of critical views', but it has 'not dissuaded [them] from becoming engaged in civil society, nor prevented them from expressing dissent' (Mustafa 2016, 461). Rather, they have carved out alternative spaces for their civic engagement 'with reference to a very different set of values and priorities in contrast to nationalist and neoliberal normative ideas' (Mustafa 2016, 454).

Some of these studies explicitly highlight Muslims' civic and political participation within Islamic community contexts as alternative and safe spaces. In my own research on civically and politically active Muslims in Australia, I also found evidence suggesting that some Muslims respond to Islamophobia by 'turn[ing] their back to mainstream-oriented forms of participation and instead focus on intra-community volunteering, where they can avoid potentially anti-Muslim confrontations' (Peucker 2019, 257).

Such a civic (re-)orientation towards intra-community engagement is not only a response to the public stigmatisation and anti-Muslim Othering. Scholars have consistently argued that ethnic or ethno-religious minorities often gravitate towards organisations within their 'own' community when looking for a place to engage in civic activism and volunteer community work (Bhasin 1997; Wilson 2012). This also applies to Muslim communities as several empirical studies indicate (Dunn et al. 2015; Monash University 2009).

The following section of this article discusses selected findings from my recent study on this very topic of Muslim intra-community volunteering in Australia. While this research was not specifically designed to examine the interplay between Islamophobia and Muslims' community work, its findings make an original contribution to the emerging scholarship on how complexly Islamophobia and Muslims' civic-political engagement interact.

Methodology: Muslim community volunteering in Australia

The study,¹ conducted in 2017 and 2018, comprises two methodological components, (1) a series of in-depth interviews and (2) an explorative national survey, both targeting specifically adult Muslims who were volunteering for a Muslim community organisation in Australia at the time. The aim of the research was to examine their experiences as community volunteers, their pathways, goals, and motives, as well as how their intra community engagement has affected them personally.

The sampling for the interviews and the survey sought to include Muslim volunteers from a broad range of community groups, reflecting the enormous diversity of the Muslim community landscape in Australia. These encompass applying Torry's (2005, 117–122) differentiation, both 'religious organisations' whose primary purpose revolves around Islamic services (e.g. mosques) as well as 'faith-based organisations' which are influenced by the Islamic faith and cater mainly for Muslims but provide primarily non-religious services. Moreover, the sampling logic tried to avoid ending up with a sample skewed towards those Muslim volunteers active in mainstream and religiously or politically more moderate Muslim organisations with an 'integrationist' agenda of interreligious or intercultural engagement. Instead, the sample sought to also include those involved in organisations that sit more at the politically radical or religiously (ultra-)orthodox fringes of the Muslim community.

This sampling rationale was successfully implemented: The realised interview and survey samples encompass volunteers from a range of religious and faith-based organisations,

¹ The study received ethical approval from Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee; the approval ID is HRE16-172. The research adhered to all ethics principles and was conducted in line with Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans.

including university student associations and Muslim youth groups, mosques, Muslim umbrella organisations and advocacy groups, and Islamic educational or welfare organisations. These organisations reflect the enormous diversity of the Muslim communities in Australia also in terms of their religious and political outlook. It included, for example, self-declared 'progressive' Muslim groups that advocate a rather liberal understanding of Islam, and Hizmet-affiliated organisations (Gülen movement) that are particularly dedicated to interfaith dialogue and education, but also more religiously conservative and (ultra)orthodox Muslim organisations such as several Salafi groups, and the radical (non-violent) Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The recruitment of the Muslim community volunteers for the interviews and the survey relied on both pre-existing personal networks as well as newly established contacts with various Muslim community organisations and individuals active within these organisations. In some instances, this required several informal meetings and participation in community events to develop a relationship of trust. In addition, some participants assisted in the recruitment by inviting and encouraging others from the community to complete the survey (snowballing).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 Muslim community volunteers (half of them women) from Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane. Similar to the survey sample, some of them held leadership positions, while others volunteered to help with the daily operation of the organisation on the ground. The national survey was completed by 138 self-identified Muslims currently volunteering for a Muslim community group. Most participants completed the questionnaire online; approximately 20 people did so with pen and paper offline, often in the context of Muslim community events (e.g. at a local mosque) where I was present and was offered the opportunity to explain the study and the survey. Although, given the size of the sample and the sampling strategies, the findings are explorative and non-representative, they do offer valuable insights into the underexplored issue of Muslim intra-community engagement in Australia.

Issues related to Islamophobia were frequently mentioned in the interviews; and the survey questionnaire was designed with some minor references to Islamophobia, drawing from the insights gained through qualitative interviews and my previous work on Muslims' active citizenship (Peucker 2016; Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014). The open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire, which gave participants an opportunity to elaborate on certain facets of their volunteering experiences, were also frequently used to comment on issues pertinent to the relationship between Islamophobia and participants' community volunteering.

In the following, I will first present a brief outline of some general findings from the quantitative survey before I discuss the results of a special analysis of both survey and interview data focusing on the interplay between Islamophobia and their volunteer community activism.

Overview of some key findings

The survey sample achieved a gender balance (71 men, 67 women) and included Muslims aged between 18 and over 65 years. Around 70% of respondents were born overseas (which is only slightly above the 2016 census data), a majority of them arriving in Australia after their sixteenth birthday. The sample is ethnically very diverse, reflecting the official census data on

main countries of origin: The main groups are of subcontinental (mainly Pakistani, but also Indian and Sri Lankan) or Arab background (mainly Lebanon, but also Egypt and others). Muslims of Turkish and Afghan origin are also well represented, whereas only a rather small number of respondents are of Indonesian and (Eastern) African background. Overall, education levels are very high (and above census data), with a majority holding a tertiary degree (over 70% had a Bachelor's, Master's, or doctoral degree).

The respondents contributed to the respective Muslim (either faith-based or religious) community organisation in a range of different ways and in different positions. While some described their volunteer activities as providing general support and 'helping out', others were active in more specialised ways, for example, as youth leaders or running education classes, and again others held leadership positions (e.g. secretary, vice president, treasurer) as part of their volunteering.

For most respondents, volunteering is not a new experience. Almost one half of them started volunteering more than ten years ago (i.e. prior to 2007); only around 15% had less than three years' experience as volunteers. Asked about the organisation of their initial volunteering, just over half stated their volunteering began in a Muslim group, and a significant minority of around 30% gained their first volunteering experiences in a non-Muslim organisation in Australia (most of the others started volunteering overseas). It is important to note that, despite the sampling focus on those who were currently volunteering for a Muslim group, a majority of respondents also volunteered for a non-Muslim organisation at the time of the survey. One quarter stated their volunteering was taking place equally in both Muslim and non-Muslim organisations, and one third were active mainly but not exclusively within a Muslim community group; 41% were currently volunteering only for a Muslim organisation.

This suggests that most surveyed Muslims, in principle, do not shy away from non-Muslim organisations; their volunteering rather shifts between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. The boundaries between religious and secular civic engagement seem to be blurry and often are not even particularly relevant, as a majority of survey respondents considered the religious nature of an organisation to be secondary for their decision to volunteer there. Around 80% agreed (50% strongly agreed) with the statement that they 'just wanted to do something positive for others, whether I can do that within a Muslim community group or elsewhere is not so important'.

Asked about the reasons for their volunteering, almost all respondents – regardless of the community context in which they volunteered – expressed a mix of communitarian as well as greater good oriented goals, both usually driven by altruism and the belief that doing good deeds constitutes an Islamic duty. The vast majority seek to 'contribute to society at large', 'help people who are disadvantaged or need help', and at the same time 'support the Muslim community and/or fellow Muslims'. Instrumentalist reasons (e.g. useful for future employment; desire to learn new skills) and enjoyment-focused reasons (e.g. a 'fun and enjoyable way to spend my spare time') were much less prominent.

Intra-community volunteering, like volunteering in general (Wilson 2012), has a series of positive effects for the individual. According to most respondents' self-assessment, they have learned new skills, gained confidence and self-worth, and have become more articulate as well

as tolerant towards other people's views; many stated their trust in others has also increased. Moreover, they have made new friends and expanded their social networks especially within but also beyond the Muslim community, and their sense of being part of Australian society has strengthened, while their faith has also grown stronger as a result of their intra-community volunteering. A majority reported becoming more interested in political issues and more engaged in civil and political life. Most of these positive personal implications applied independently of the specific community contexts within which the respondents volunteered; only the responses of those who were active within the radical Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir differed in that their sense of being part of Australian society has weakened and they have become more upset and angry about the treatment of Muslims in Australia as a result of their engagement. These results, however, are based on very small numbers and can not necessarily be generalised.

Multifaceted interplay between Islamophobia and intra-community volunteering

A special analysis of the survey data (including the responses to the open-ended questions) and the in-depth interviews sheds fresh light on the multifaceted relationship and interplay between Islamophobia and Muslims' intra-community civic engagement.

Challenging Islamophobia through intra-community engagement

As previous research suggests, collective or personal experiences of Islamophobia have motivated and encouraged Muslims to become civically and politically active in order to challenge anti-Muslim prejudice and interpersonal, structural-institutional racism. Muslim community groups are not the only organisational platform for Muslims to pursue such an agenda, but they are certainly an important one.

According to a recent study of Muslim community organisations in the Australian state of Victoria, it is a key organisational aspiration of mosque and other Muslim organisations across Victoria to work towards 'improving the public image of Islam and Muslims in Australia' (Peucker 2017, 40). The centrality of this goal is also reflected in the activity profile of Victorian mosques and other Islamic community groups: Around 85% of them stated they are involved in some form of cross-community and outreach activities (e.g. open door events cooperating with non-Muslim community groups), which makes this the second most prominent area of activities among these organisations, topped only by the provision of religious services (Peucker 2017, 33).

This organisational agenda resonates with the findings of my study on Australian Muslims' intracommunity volunteering, which demonstrates that Muslim organisations are commonly regarded as a suitable platform to challenge anti-Muslim misconceptions and Islamophobia. When asked about their motives for volunteering, the vast majority of survey respondents (who at the time were all volunteering for a Muslim community organisation) maintained that it gives them a 'chance to do something about the negative perception of Muslims in Australia'; 68% agreed strongly with this; a further 23% agreed somewhat. Within the small sub-sample of those who volunteered for Hizb ut-Tahrir this motive was comparatively less central (although differences are not statistically significant), which is noteworthy given that in their

political advocacy work, Hizb ut-Tahrir often highlights the maltreatment of Muslims in Australia and globally.

The goal of addressing misconceptions was also commonly mentioned in the interviews and written responses to the open-ended survey questions. One woman from Melbourne, for example, said in the interview: 'There is so much that needs to be done, so many myths that need to be debunked [. . .] that's where I see my value'. Another interview partner referred to the conflict around a mosque planning application in the regional town of Bendigo, Victoria, which urged him to respond to the Islamophobic backlash against building a mosque; in this context, he stated that he was 'essentially forced into being an activist'.

Similarly, a survey respondent wrote that s/he wants 'to use those [Muslim community] networks to advocate tolerance and understanding to the wider community'. Another participant sought to challenge in particular prevalent stereotypes of Muslim women, often being misrepresented as 'oppressed and uneducated'. Yet another respondent explained:

I also would like for non-Muslims to see Muslim organisations doing good and helping the wider community as I believe that helps in creating a more realistic, healthy and positive image of Islam and Muslims in Australia.

These responses not only show that redressing Islamophobia is a major driver and goal; they also echo the two different approaches taken by civically active Muslim individuals seeking to redress anti-Muslim stereotypes (Peucker 2016), either by engaging in cross-community dialogue or acting as a 'good citizen' or as "'ambassadors" of Islam' (Van Es 2019, 375).

Empowering and supporting Muslims in the face of Islamophobia

As mentioned above, all study participants volunteer with the goal in mind to (also) support the Muslim community and fellow Muslims. One way of pursuing this aim is to empower others in the community to cope with, and respond to, Islamophobia in their daily lives. This goal of empowering Muslims has been frequently mentioned by study participants, often in connection with accounts of their own personal experiences of anti-Muslim racism. Asked about the reasons and motives for their volunteering, one survey respondent, for example, elaborated:

I have faced racism and Islamophobia, and I believe that a strong Muslim community is one that is empowered, educated and aware of its rights and can defend itself against ignorance and misinformation that is spread in the mainstream media.

In a similar vein, another survey respondent answered: 'I want my community to be at the fore of being able to proactively counter issues as they arise, especially in the current climate of fear in Australia'. For some, this was the reason behind the decision to volunteer specifically with a Muslim community organisation. One participant, for example, explained that he/she chose a Muslim community group for his/her volunteering in order to 'help the Muslim community become more active [. . .] and empowered in [the] current climate that is rife with racism, misinformation and Islamophobia'.

One young Muslim woman interviewed for this study referred to persistent discrimination against Muslims in the labour market, which motivated her – in addition to her personal experiences as a hijab-wearing woman of colour in a male-dominated industry – to set up her own community initiative to support Muslims in overcoming these barriers and finding adequate employment.

A survey respondent mentioned an additional dimension of this endeavour to support Muslims who experience Islamophobia. She asserted that young people's anger resulting from Islamophobic abuse can be 'monopolised by [some] who claim to be Muslim and they prey on the feelings of anxiety, isolation and anger in these youth'. Her volunteering with a certain Muslim community group is an opportunity to 'counter [. . .] these vile efforts' and to provide an alternative space where young Muslims can turn to with their anger and frustration and where people 'listen to their concerns and [. . .] guide them into a healthy, proactive and positive way [to] express themselves'.

The study also found evidence that suggests such an agenda of intra-community volunteering aimed at supporting and empowering Muslims who experience Islamophobia can be successful. Several study participants explained how their engagement with Muslim community groups has helped them personally to cope with anti-Muslim rejection. One participant, for example, stated:

[My active involvement with this Muslim community group] has provided a lot of support for me. I experience a lot of Islamophobia and rejection from my Australian community as a revert to Islam and having this support [within Muslim community groups] has actually lessened my negative feelings in response to Islamophobia, and it has helped me to feel supported and patient through these difficult times instead of feeling rejected and alone.

Intra-community engagement in a safe, Islamophobia-free space

Those survey respondents who, at the time of interview, mainly or exclusively volunteered for Muslim community groups were asked an additional question about their reasons for their current focus on intra-community volunteering. While the most common response was that they considered a Muslim community group a better suited site for pursuing their goal of helping fellow Muslims, other responses pointed to barriers in the access to non-Muslim civil society groups. They expressed personal concerns about the (potentially lower) level of respect or acceptance they would experience in a non-Muslim environment. This is reflected rather subtly in the high proportion (68%) of respondents who stated that they currently volunteer mainly or only for a Muslim group 'because [they] feel very comfortable [. . .] around other Muslims' (35% strongly agreed). This obviously does not mean they necessarily feel uncomfortable around non-Muslims and that this would be due to anti-Muslim sentiments. However, six out of ten respondents also explained that at least one of the reasons for their decision to volunteer for a Muslim and not a non-Muslim organisation is that they 'do not have to explain their religious duties and practices' (31% strongly agreed), and 32% expressed concerns about possibly not experiencing the same level of respect in a non-Muslim organisation (10% strongly agreed).

The analysis of survey participants' written responses unveiled similar concerns, but here they were articulated more openly, ranging from highlighting 'cultural barriers' to claims of blatant racism as reasons for their preference for Muslim community groups as a site for their volunteering. 'Racism [. . .] occurs towards Muslim volunteers by non-Muslims as time goes on', one person maintained, and another respondent explicitly stated safety concerns:

[Volunteering for a Muslim organisation] reduces the fear of being discriminated against and/ or abused; limited exposure to the [wider] community reduces such experiences; therefore, it is safer on the whole to volunteer within Muslim organisations, which in effect helps the wider community.

Acknowledging the manifold manifestations and experiences of Islamophobia, from the persistent gaze of suspicion in public, refusal to accommodate religious needs, and culturally inappropriate behaviour to bullying, harassment, and aggression, these findings demonstrate that Islamophobia influences some Muslims' decisions to choose a Muslim community group over a non-Muslim organisation for their volunteering.

Muslim community volunteering increases awareness of injustices

For some, volunteering for a Muslim community group seems to be a response to experiences of Islamophobia; but intra-community engagement may simultaneously contribute to an increased personal interest in political issues and awareness of 'the injustices that Muslims face in Australia and overseas'. Four out of ten survey respondents strongly agreed (and further 39% agreed somewhat) that through their community volunteering they have become more aware of such injustices vis-à-vis the Muslim community in Australia or globally. Linked to this increased awareness, a significant minority of survey respondents 'have become more upset and/or angry about the way Muslims are treated in Australia' as a result of their volunteering (13% strongly agreed; 32% agreed somewhat). It is worth noting that the survey findings suggest that this increased awareness of injustices, and in some cases anger, usually does not fuel a sense of mistrust of others nor weaken their sense of being part of Australian society. The survey and interview data analysis rather portrays Muslims, generally speaking, as politically interested, engaged, critical, and active citizens, who refuse to be silenced in their expression of legitimate anger and dissent.

Muslim community volunteering hampering Muslims' employment prospects

Several study participants pointed to a particular sinister link between their volunteering for a Muslim community group and anti-Muslim exclusion, arguing that their intra community engagement may negatively affect their personal employment prospects. This stands in contrast to findings from general volunteering research according to which volunteering is often seen as a way to improve one's employability and access to the labour market (Stukas et al. 2016; Walsh and Black 2015, 20–21). Not only did a majority of surveyed Muslims (63%) in the present study disagree with the statement that their volunteering had improved their chances on the labour market (only 10% strongly agreed), but qualitative analysis of survey responses also revealed that some had experienced the opposite effect: As one respondent

stated, '[volunteering] negatively affect my employment prospects especially when connected to Muslim groups'. Several others expressed similar views:

I have not been able to share my volunteering experience with the wider community and tend to conceal my volunteering with Muslim organisations as I feel this will limit my career choices if seen on my CV or public social media profile. I also do not share any of the advocacy work I do widely for this reason. Often when I share my experiences with people at work, they view my involvement with Muslim organisations as negative, so I steer away from the conversation.

Another participant expressed suspicion that his job search may have been unsuccessful also because he mentions his volunteering for a Muslim group in his job applications:

On my resume I state that I volunteer for a Muslim organisation and that I am a newly practicing Muslim. While I like to think there are other reasons for my unemployment, not being able to get a job at KFC makes me wonder if I should change my resume.

Several large, methodologically robust discrimination studies lend empirical support to these vastly under-examined personal experiences and suspicion that volunteering for a Muslim organisation may negatively affect Muslims' chances of securing employment (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Di Stasio et al. 2019).

Adida, Laitin, and Valfort (2010) conducted a correspondence test generating three different 'fake' job applicant identities and sending job applications with a CV to employers who were looking to fill publicly advertised positions. The three test applicants, all women, were all equally qualified for the job, but they differed in two (non-merit relevant) ways, their names – French (Aurélie Ménard), Christian Senegalese (Marie Diouf), and Muslim Senegalese (Khadija Diouf) – and their volunteering experiences: the 'ethnic' French applicant volunteered for a secular organisation, the Christian Senegalese for a Christian one, and the Muslim Senegalese for a Muslim organisation. The researchers found that the Muslim Senegalese applicant with volunteer experience with the Scouts Musulmans de France (Muslim Scouts of France) received two and a half times fewer positive responses from employers than her Christian Senegalese counterpart. The statistically highly significant disadvantage remained where a photo was attached to the application that showed the Muslim applicant without a headscarf (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010, 22, 388).

Di Stasio and colleagues undertook a similar but cross-national discrimination testing study, seeking to identify potential differences in the call back rate between three fake applicant identities in several European countries: (1) a non-Muslim member of the majority population; (2) an ethnic minority member from a predominantly Muslim country who did not mention anything about Islam in his application ('Muslim by default'); and (3) an ethnic minority member from the same Muslim country of origin who explicitly mentioned his volunteering with a Muslim organisations ('disclosed Muslim'). As expected, the study identified generally higher call back rates for majority applicants, but it also 'found evidence of an additional

disadvantage for minority applicants volunteering in an organization with a Muslim connotation' (Di Stasio et al. 2019, 15).

While these results innovatively provide evidence for religious (and not only ethnic or racial) labour market discrimination against Muslims, the findings also suggest that mentioning volunteering for a Muslim organisation may signal a form of community commitment that is regarded negatively by some employers. This confirms the subjective experiences and assessments of Muslim volunteers in my own study.

Concluding remarks

The findings from this study on Muslims' intra-community volunteering confirm previous research whilst shedding new light on the multifaceted relationship between Islamophobia and Muslims' civic engagement. Many Muslims get involved in voluntary community work in order to tackle misconceptions and anti-Muslim prejudice and/or to support their community and empower fellow Muslims to respond to experiences of exclusion and stigmatisation. 'The logic is', as one participant from Brisbane put it, 'that a stronger Muslim community and strong Muslim organisations would have better tools to counter Islamophobia'.

Moreover, the analysis found that issues of cultural discomfort and concerns around a lack of respect towards Muslims within non-Muslim civil society groups leave some Muslims with little option but to pursue their desire to do good deeds in a Muslim community context. Hence, an anti-Muslim climate or experiences are not only connected to the goals behind their civic engagement but also affect the decision of where to volunteer. To explore these cultural barriers and anti-Muslim exclusion within Australia's diverse civil society landscape would require further research.

This research highlights the complex interplay between Islamophobia and civic engagement. On the one hand, the study showed that civic engagement within a Muslim community context often results in a further increase in people's awareness of the injustices Muslims face in Australia and overseas. This may further encourage their community engagement and activism. On the other hand, volunteering for a Muslim community organisation may increase the risk of facing anti-Muslim exclusion from the labour market and disadvantages in one's career – in contrast to the often-noted positive effects of volunteering on one's employability, identified in (non-Muslim specific) volunteering research (Walsh and Black 2015, 20–21).

These complex dynamics potentially put Muslims with a desire to volunteer and do good deeds, which is usually regarded an Islamic duty, in an almost paradoxical situation. Those who engage in intra-community volunteering either because of concerns they may not experience the same level of respect in non-Muslim civil society groups or because they wish to combat Islamophobia in society, may in effect face higher levels of anti-Muslim barriers in access to the labour market (if they mention their Muslim community volunteering in their job application).

Voluntary civic engagement is a highly beneficial experience for everyone, as volunteerism research has consistently found (Wilson 2012) and as the study findings presented here strongly confirm. It has positive effects on, among other things, people's wellbeing, health and

self-worth, their social connectedness and skills. Moreover, beyond the individual level, high volunteering rates are considered a marker of, and a pathway towards, enhanced social cohesion in pluralistic societies and healthy democracies (Putnam 1993). Islamophobia is the antithesis of this – and it cannot be tackled effectively without empowered Muslim communities and civically committed active citizens.

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