

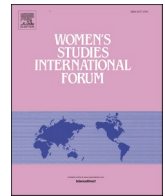
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## Rethinking gendered anti-Muslim racism in a relational matrix of race and gender

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## Rethinking gendered anti-Muslim racism in a relational matrix of race and gender

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### ABSTRACT

Gendered ideas of Muslims and Islam are one of the central organising principles of anti-Muslim racism. However, discussions around gendered anti-Muslim racism often ignore 'Muslim men' as a gendered category despite ideas about 'Muslim women' being constructed in direct relation to (often implicitly assumed presence of) their male counterparts. As problematised by Alimahomed-Wilson (2020), historical anti-Muslim racist representations of Muslim men as violent and oppressive have not been often considered in these gendered perspectives, but instead treated as a 'gender-neutral' facet of anti-Muslim racism. Developing on previous works, our research findings highlight that anti-Muslim racism is inherently gendered, not only because women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic attacks but because of its gendered essence. Informed by feminist scholars, our understanding of gender is a relational matrix between men and women upon which we elaborate this gendered foundation of anti-Muslim racism. Anti-Muslim racist ideologies are premised on myths and stereotypical ideas which claim that: 1) Islam is an inherently misogynistic religion; 2) 'Muslim men' are therefore inherently violent and oppressive, primarily towards Muslim women, but also backwards and unable to govern themselves or their communities and, as such, are in need of correction or control (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Farris, 2017; Kumar, 2012; *inter alia*). In this article, building on the previous analyses of the gendered aspect of anti-Muslim racism and our research findings based on fieldwork with Muslim communities in Ireland ( $n = 193$ ), we argue that anti-Muslim racism is gendered not only because it affects women more, but also because: 1) its underlying gendered racial ideology constructs Muslim women as the passive Other of assumed 'violent Muslim masculinity'; 2) 'Western liberal' anti-Muslim discourses, claiming to be vying for the liberation of all women, assume it as their 'duty' to save 'Muslim women'; 3) with 'white feminism' often providing the moral ground for this saviour image, ignoring Muslim women's emancipatory agency and politics.

### Introduction

Scholars have pointed out that Muslim women experience anti-Muslim racism and are for example targeted by hate crimes significantly more than Muslim men (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Carr, 2016; Hammer, 2013; Hopkins, 2016; Keddie, 2018; Mirza, 2012; Perry, 2014; Zine, 2006). The term "gendered Islamophobia" emerged with these findings to understand how and why Muslim women are more subject to violent Islamophobic attacks than Muslim men (Zine, 2004). Following Zine, the term has been widely used to explain the asymmetry between Islamophobic violence towards men and women. Gendered ideas of Muslims and Islam are one of the central organising principles of anti-

Muslim racism (Hammer, 2013). However, discussions around gendered anti-Muslim racism often ignore 'Muslim men' as a gendered category despite ideas about 'Muslim women' being constructed in direct relation to (often implicitly assumed presence of) their male counterparts. Historical anti-Muslim racist representations of Muslim men as violent and oppressive have not been often considered in these gendered perspectives but instead treated as a 'gender-neutral' facet of anti-Muslim racism. Alimahomed-Wilson problematised the gender-neutral conceptualisation of Islamophobia, stating that it "underestimates the centrality of gender as an ongoing, co-constitutive axis of power that structures Islamophobia" (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020, p. 649).

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Developing on previous studies, our research findings highlight that anti-Muslim racism is gendered not because women are disproportionately targeted but because of its gendered essence that is manifested by the attacks on Muslim women and many other forms of violence. Here, the gendered essence refers to the fact that anti-Muslim racism is based on the gendered ideas of Islam and Muslims. Informed by feminist scholars, our understanding of gender is a relational concept upon which we elaborate this gendered foundation of anti-Muslim racism. Anti-Muslim racist ideologies are premised on myths and stereotypical ideas which claim that: 1) Islam is an inherently misogynistic religion; 2) and that 'Muslim men' are therefore violent and oppressive, primarily towards Muslim women, but also backwards and unable to govern themselves or their communities and, as such, require correction or control. In this context, Muslim women need to be saved from such men and consequently their entire culture and religion (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Farris, 2017; Kumar, 2021; Shehabuddin, 2021; Vergès, 2021). In this article, building on the previous scholars' analysis of the gendered aspect of anti-Muslim racism and following our research findings based on fieldwork with Muslim communities in Ireland, we argue that anti-Muslim racism is gendered because 1) its underlying gendered racial ideology constructs Muslim women as the passive Other of assumed 'violent Muslim masculinity', 2) the 'Western liberal' anti-Muslim discourses, claiming to be vying for the liberation of all women, assume it as their 'duty' to save 'Muslim women' from 'Muslim men' and 3) with 'white feminism' often providing the moral ground for this saviour image, ignoring Muslim women's emancipatory agency and politics. We, therefore, situate Muslim women in the relational matrices of the above-mentioned aspects within the findings of our research.

There are many scholarly debates regarding the definitions and limitations of 'Islamophobia' and 'anti-Muslim racism' (Carr, 2016; Garner, 2009; Vakil, 2010). In this article, we use the term anti-Muslim racism instead of Islamophobia to focus on the aspect of racialisation to explain the systemic nature of the racist perceptions about Muslims in Ireland (Carr, 2016) as well as to use the critical race theories' (CRT) framework on the relational aspect of race and gender (Collins, 2000; Glenn, 2002). Drawing on original data derived from focus groups and interviews with Muslims in Ireland ( $n = 193$ ) we contextualise the Otherness of 'Muslim women' set to relational matrices with 'Muslim men' and 'white/Western women' and 'white/Western men' as underlying constructs necessary for the survival of anti-Muslim discourse. Here, analysing through a gendered lens, we argue that gender is one of the central organising principles of this anti-Muslim discourse made manifest in the lives of Muslims in the Irish context. To elaborate our argument, we will first present the methodological approach employed in this study. The second section elaborates on the conceptual foundation of gender to analyse anti-Muslim racism. The third section elaborates on the historical construction of anti-Muslim racism and its gendered foundation. Following that, drawing on our research findings, we examine the everyday manifestations of Anti-Muslim racism experienced by Muslims in Ireland by placing 'Muslim women' at the centre of three relational matrices of gender: 1) 'Muslim men'; 2) 'white/Western women'; and 3) 'white/Western men', that underpin and reify narratives about the need of 'saving of Muslim women' and associated experiences.

## Methodology

The findings discussed below, based on a qualitative methodology, derive from fieldwork undertaken with Muslim communities in four cities in Ireland between the months of September and December 2022. In all, a total of one-hundred and ninety-three Muslim men and women participated in the research discussed here. Specifically, one-hundred and eighty-eight people participated in twenty-four focus groups and five individuals took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Participants were all over eighteen, with the oldest age category included that of the sixty-six to seventy-five cohort. In terms of gender,

seventy-eight identified as male, seventy-seven as female with the remainder choosing not to complete the given anonymous demographic questionnaire. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in a range of locations, including participants' homes, places of employment, mosques/cultural centres and university campuses. The vast majority of focus groups/interviews were in-person, but a small number were held purely online, and in some cases, a blended approach was employed. The methods noted above were utilised to gain deep insights into the experiences of Muslim men and women in Ireland vis-à-vis anti-Muslim racism and also how this phenomenon may be challenged.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2007). A purposive approach was first utilised in an effort to recruit participants from across a broad range of ethno-national identities, genders, ages (all over 18 years), socio-economic positions, traditions of Islam, etc. For this first wave of sampling, key Muslim individuals within cultural centres, mosques, women's groups, student societies, etc. were contacted to aid in the recruitment of participants in four Irish cities. This initial approach was then supplemented with a snowball sampling strategy to further develop participation. Here, specific individuals were asked to assist in recruiting of participants where access was otherwise difficult, for example, minorities within Muslim communities derived from various identity grounds.

Participants were asked to complete an anonymous demographic questionnaire. One hundred and fifty-seven participants completed this in all or in part. In the interests of maintaining participant anonymity, we have not tabulated these data here. The following sentences provide an overview of the sample characteristics. Of those who responded to the question on gender, seventy-eight identified as male, seventy-seven as female. In terms of ethno-national identities, participants identified as Irish, broader European, West and South Asian, and North and Sub-Saharan African. The largest age cohorts were those of 25–35 (34), 36–45 (38) and 46–55 (50); these were followed by the 18–24 (18), 56–65 (13) and 66–75 (2). Overall, the sample was quite diverse and reflective of the demographics of Ireland's Muslim communities. However, there are two observations to be made in terms of sampling limitations. The first of these relates to the diversity within Muslim communities. While rich in terms of ethno-national diversity, the duration afforded to the fieldwork under discussion was time-limited and this reduced the ability of the research team to develop connections and seek greater participation from minority groups within Muslim communities. Second, and relatedly, compared with recently released census data, the sample here is marginally older than the communities in real terms. As above, time did not allow for the development of alternative methods to encourage more Muslim youth participation.

## The foundation of gendered anti-Muslim narratives

The gendered roots of Anti-Muslim racism emerged from Orientalist constructions of the Muslim Other. One of the main themes running through contemporary anti-Muslim racism is that of Islam as a monolithic, inherently violent and uniquely misogynistic religion, one from which "Muslim women need to be liberated by the West" (Kumar, 2021, p. 216). The construction of a monolithic Islam is reductive in and of itself. Furthermore, we contend that it is better to understand this as a categorisation process. This categorisation approach complicates the manner in which Muslims are constructed, for example, as evident in the work of Mamdani and his ideas of the "good Muslim, bad Muslim" and further discussed by Aziz (2021). Nonetheless, racialised representations of Muslimness and Islam can be traced to at least from the fourteenth

<sup>1</sup> Ethical clearance has been provided by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the University of Limerick for the research from which the article derives. The ethics approval no is - (2022-04-03-AHSS)

century, with white European historians, travellers and colonisers (Kumar, 2012), often describing Muslims as 'abominable' (Shehabuddin, 2021, p. 14). In the early nineteenth century at the birth of English feminism, the image of the 'oppressed Muslim women' was developed and utilised by Western colonisers. This image of veiled Muslim women became a playing card for the European colonial civilising mission, in which Western/white feminism fulfilled a fundamental role (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Kumar, 2012, 2021; Lazreg, 1994; Shehabuddin, 2021). Historically informed, the idea of 'saving Muslim women' has served as one of the foundations of anti-Muslim discourse premised on the notion that 'Muslim women' are victims of 'violent Muslim men', thereby making it the duty of 'civilised white Western men' to rescue them.

Beydoun and Sedique (2023) argue that this 'saving Muslim women' narrative is based on three Islamophobic dialectics. The first of these stems from the image of masculine Muslim violence, patriarchy, and tyranny. Beydoun and Sedique contend that "these tropes not only characterise the posture of Muslim men toward their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters but far more deeply, they define the very culture of the lands that they come from" (Beydoun and Sedique, 2023, p. 490). The second dialectic involves the erasure of Muslim women's agency, individuality, or subjectivity, homogenising them as powerless, passive, and dependent. These two dialectics, violent Muslim men and passive Muslim women create the third one, which holds it the duty of Western liberal men to save Muslim women from their male counterparts (Beydoun and Sedique, 2023, p. 490).

The construction of the innately "hyper-patriarchal" Muslim man (Razack, 2008), has been deployed as a legitimising logic in colonial discourses abroad and exclusionary practices in the metropole. At its core, the figure of the Muslim man is held as being the embodiment of innate violence motivated by a patriarchal, misogynistic culture and backward, barbaric religion (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020). There are both similarities and differences in the manner in which Muslim men are constructed vis-à-vis their female co-religionists. For example, while Muslim men and women are both constructed to represent a putative terrorist and cultural threat, the figure of the Muslim woman is held as particularly symbolic of the alleged looming demographic change of the so-called 'Great Replacement' as discussed further below. Conversely, while both the figure of the Muslim woman and man may be presented as threatening, the female Muslim has also been identified as presenting an opportunity, as a means through which to influence barbaric Muslim men; the civilising mission at home (Carr, 2016, 2017); an opportunity for salvation not afforded to Muslim men always deemed threatening and collectively beyond redemption.

The image of the 'Muslim woman' plays a central part in stereotypically imagined representations of Muslimness with repercussions that go beyond the discursive and inform the lived experiences of anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination. What follows are excerpts from our research findings, indicating the interconnected dynamics behind constructing the 'saving Muslim women' narratives.

### Gendering anti-Muslim racism

The conceptualisation of gender employed here is informed by the feminist scholars who contributed to changing the focus from 'women' to gender as a useful category for analysing social organisation. This introduced a *relational* notion into analyses of the discrimination experienced by women, with gender as an analytical category used here understood "as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). However, despite this explanation of gender as a relational reference to inequality and power relations, and the transformation from 'woman' to 'gender' as an analytical category established more than three decades ago, today, gender still often refers only to 'women's issues;' while everything else is presented as gender-neutral, mainstream, and often associated with men

as 'people' (Bailey et al., 2020). In short, men are often not considered a gendered category; instead, they are referred to as the mainstream, the 'norm,' gender-neutral or gender-absent human beings.

The term 'gendered Islamophobia' was coined by Jasmine Zine, who suggested that anti-Muslim racism "targets Muslim women specifically through the construction of negative stereotypes, harassment, and discrimination based on religious identity" (Zine, 2004, p. 86). Zine argues that gendered Islamophobia "operates socially, politically, and discursively to deny material advantages to Muslim women" (Zine, 2004, p. 230). As such, 'gendered Islamophobia' is a specific form of discrimination directed at Muslim women, informed by historically contextualised negative stereotypes that manifest in individual and systemic oppression (Zine, 2004, p. 229). Zine's work also includes examples of 'gendered Islamophobia,' such as discrimination against visibly Muslim women in the employment sector *inter alia* where studies show, for example, that the percentage of visibly Muslim women receiving job offers is significantly lower when compared to non-Muslim candidates with similar qualifications. Following Zine's lead, many scholars have identified the prevalence of gendered Islamophobia, manifesting as increased levels of attacks on Muslim women vis-à-vis men in different parts of the world (Carr, 2016; Easat-Daas, 2019; Najib, 2021; Perry, 2014; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). Perry (2014) demonstrates that in the post-9/11 context, hate crimes against Muslim women are unusually higher compared to other similar forms of criminality in the US, UK, Canada, and other Western countries. Perry (2014) analyses the ideologies and historical reasons behind these attacks, which are linked with gendered and racialised ideas of Muslim women. Easat-Daas (2019) argues that in Belgium, anti-Muslim racism acts on the basis of two principles: viewing Islam as a threat and Muslims as in need of being saved. Easat-Daas presents the gendered aspect of these principles not as a separate category of gendered Islamophobia, but rather as "fluid, moving between possible categories; in short, gendered anti-Muslim racism in Belgium is a fluid rather than static phenomenon" (Easat-Daas, 2019, p. 126). By "gendering Islamophobia" (Hopkins, 2016) the foundations of anti-Muslim hatred as a gendered phenomenon are revealed, demonstrating how anti-Muslim tropes underpin notions of 'White men's' superiority to 'Muslim men', in a struggle for dominance and power with Muslim women, and their rights used as tools.

Gendered anti-Muslim racism assumes women as non-subjects, following the sexist logic of objectification and dehumanisation of women. It also explains the orientalist sexualisation of Muslim women's bodies as the erotic form of the Other. Building on the previous scholarship on gendered Islamophobia, we use the term gendered anti-Muslim racism first to examine Islamophobia as a specific form of racism; therefore, we used critical race theories (CRT) to see it through the process of racialisation. Second, we use CRT to examine the gendered essence of anti-Muslim racism within the relational matrix of race and gender. In this article, we, therefore, situated Muslim women at the centre in conceptualising gendered anti-Muslim racism, but within the relational matrix of gender and race as the axes of power and co-constitutive categories of connection (Collins, 2000; Glenn, 2002). Using Patricia Hill Collins' theory of the matrix of domination (2000) and Jasmine Zine's concept of gendered Islamophobia, Alimahomed-Wilson conceptualised 'the matrix of gendered Islamophobia', to situate this phenomenon within the multiple interlocking axes of power that are constitutive and embedded to each other, in a way which gender is fundamental to the racialisation of Muslims (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). Building on the work of these scholars, analysing anti-Muslim racism as gendered allows us to use the aforementioned matrix to see 'Muslim women' in relation to racial and gendered categories of Muslim men, white/Western men and white/Western women. In what follows, we argue the gendered foundation of anti-Muslim racism and demonstrate how this manifests in real terms in the lives of Muslim men and women in Ireland.

## Gendered anti-Muslim racism in the everyday lives of Muslims of Ireland

The research findings provide evidence of the gendered nature of anti-Muslim racism that manifested in the day-to-day lives of Muslim men and women in Ireland. Applying the conceptualisation of gendered anti-Muslim racism as outlined above here, drawing on our findings, we situate Muslim women in three gendered narratives of anti-Muslim racism in relation to Muslim men, white/Western women and white/Western men to show how gender plays as one of the central organising principles of anti-Muslim racism.

*Muslim women as the passive victim/companion of 'violent and oppressive Muslim men'*

Crucially, first and foremost, as noted above, the foundations of gendered anti-Muslim racist assumptions of Muslim women are constructed through and in relation to the racist image of violent Muslim men. Muslim women are either perceived as the victims or blind supporter of Muslim men. The gendered, racist idea of Muslim masculinity noted above, plays a central role behind that assumption. Hazem, shared his experience of anti-Muslim racism while coming back to Ireland from the UK:

*One thing that I confronted when I came into Ireland was... Anti-Islamic racist comments, on the ferry on the way over. Because they [perpetrators] obviously didn't think I was Irish, because I suppose my dress sense, my beard, hat I was wearing, and all I got was, 'Oh, here we go, here we go, here's a Muslim terrorist, here Mohammadi terrorist, here is Bin Laden.' I mean that is the first beginning of what I have experienced.*

This expression highlights the contrast between the image of homogeneous Irish men and the othered Muslim masculinity. As Carr (2016, 2017) illustrated, any identities other than the ideal notion of white and Catholic fall outside the bounds of what is accepted as really Irish. 'White masculinity' is perceived as incompatible with 'Muslim masculinity', as it is viewed as the Other and the latter is often seen as treacherous if such co-occurrence is established (Carr, 2016). This Muslim masculinity is also represented as homogenous, fixed and equated with the label 'terrorist,' as expressed in the above quote. Being called a terrorist is a common, if not daily, experience of Muslim men in Ireland. Mohamed, another participant, shared his experience of anti-Muslim hate speech, again being the subject of racist slurs associating his Muslimness with tropes of terrorist threat:

*You know you get the usual ones, the terrorist ones, it's like, 'You're not going to blow this up?' Or sometimes you leave your bag there... and they're like, 'Oh there isn't a bomb in it?' Like that sort of stuff. Where like young, when you're younger whatever you think nothing of it. But once you get older and stuff like now, you wouldn't kind of accept that sort of thing. But when you're growing up and you're trying to fit in and you're trying to just kind of not be different I suppose. You just brush it off sort of thing, from my personal experience.*

Mohamed's use of the term 'the usual ones' underscores the normalisation of this form of racism in his life and those of Muslim communities. Resonating with Mohamed, Hasan, shared his experiences of anti-Muslim racism from peers in university:

*I did physics and chemistry and... engineering. But like people would connect those subjects to somehow being a terrorist or you know this is just one example. But like just random things that they would somehow connect, to try to, like, make a joke.*

Hasan continues:

*Like, eh...in terms of the physics...they would say like all these subjects could be linked in a way to making a bomb or make like, I could use*

*physics to calculate how much, like random ways that they would like somehow sum up what the reason I choose subjects to being a terrorist.*

Participant responses illustrated the 'otherness' directed towards and felt by young Muslim people, including children, as demonstrated below, while growing up and trying to fit into a society that is infused with global, racialised constructions of Muslimness as Other (Aziz, 2021). The racialised image of the Muslim man, evident in the preceding quotes, can be contrasted with those of the Muslim woman understood as the passive victim and/or brainwashed companion of the violent Muslim male. Yasin's wife's experience is telling in this regard:

*An example happened to my wife, you know, she was in Lidl, and you know Irish people love the queue, so she is in the queue waiting and then an old man is coming behind her, you know in the queue. And she just watching the kids behind [her] and she smile and you know what the man said, he is an old man, 'are the Muslims allowed to smile?' You know without saying hi, 'Are Muslim women allowed to smile?'*

Whether the man thinks that Muslim women are not even allowed to smile, or this is his sarcastic way of making racist comments to humiliate Muslim women, we argue that it is indicative of and underpinned by racialised ideas of Muslim women as docile victims of Muslim men and Islam. Contrasting with the above, the racialised idea of the Muslim woman, as lacking in agency, the victims of their Muslim men and faith, results at times with them being the object of pity and a subject to be liberated, as Zara demonstrates below. This sense of pity assumes that Muslim women cannot live freely and enjoy their lives, expressed here as a form of concern or goodwill for them. The past tense of 'used to go' shared by Zara indicates the impact of such discourses and associated experiences, restricting the spaces Muslim women can feel safe and comfortable in socially.

*I used to go to these Christmas parties or places with my husband, there were doctors there, my husband is also a doctor. And there were people, when he was not around, they used to come to me and say 'oh you poor thing you are wearing hijab; does he push you to wear that?' 'Or [it is] okay in this society if you don't want to wear it, we will support you on that.' These kinds of things; this is a direct indication of Muslim hatred, and they think anybody who is wearing a hijab means they have been suppressed by their husbands or their fathers or whoever, by any male in their family and it is not the case. This has been happening for a long time and it's not only in one place.*

Another Muslim female participant, Fatima, who works with women who are the victims of domestic violence, shared her encounter of being assumed a passive victim of "hyper patriarchal Muslim men" (Razack, 2008). The focus group exchange that follows Fatima's contribution underscores the frequency, and normalcy of this experience, resonating with Zara above:

*Like recently, somebody said to me, 'Oh you're from Iran, there's issues of hijab going on, is your husband forcing you?' and I was like, no, I was wearing my hijab way before I met my husband. So it was that kind of an issue of they think like, you take off your hijab and my husband is going to start beating. (Fatima).*

Somaya: *Did you change your religion, oh where is your husband from, I said what? I'm not married. I'm still single. [Then they ask] But why are you wearing hijab maybe your husband is asking you to wear this.*

Khadija: *Yea, yea I've been asked that as well... I was just going to say, like they think they [husbands] can force you.*

Importantly, these experiences are not restricted to casual interactions at social events or comments while out in public but also manifest in professional settings, with, in this case again, the assumption that all Muslim men are inherently violent and abusive.

*Even when I was pregnant and I go to maternity, one of the nurses, she took me to the side and just asked me about domestic violence. Why are*

*you asking me that for? 'It's part of the...,' I already had been there, this is my third time, I had already been there for two times, but nobody asked me that question before. 'Why are you... wearing hijab and some...?' No, it's totally my choice, my husband didn't told me to do that or forcing me to wear hijab, yeah it has happened to me.*

(Hajar)

The preceding contributions demonstrate the manner in which Muslim women are assumed as vulnerable, confused and naïve, victims to Muslim men (Martini, 2018). They are assumed as passive and oppressed by Muslim men, and even if they have limited agency, that agency is also conditional to 'violent Muslim men'; Muslim men who fit the identikit of 'suspect' upon which surveillance, in this case through Muslim women is justified (Hillyard, 1993).

#### *Muslim women and her 'veil' as a threat to Western liberated women*

The image of the Muslim woman as an oppressed victim in need of liberation cultivated in colonial discourses has not remained static. Veiled Muslim women's bodies in Western spaces are understood as disruptive to the liberal, 'secular' establishment and a sign of gender, sexual and other unfreedoms (Siddiqi, 2019). In the post-9/11 context, this image has been further built upon to present Muslim women as a threat to the West and Western culture reductively understood (Sheth, 2006). In this context, these deeply colonising and orientalisating gendered Islamophobic ideas have expanded to 'allow' Muslim women some limited agency, primarily in those cases when they are associated with behaviour or acts deemed threatening to the West. In this context, the figure of the Muslim woman has become synonymous with terror and demographic replacement (Aziz, 2021; Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2022). In relation to the latter, Muslim women are constructed in one sense as the companions and supporters or their male terrorist relatives, as "mere extensions of familial relationships with actual or presumed male terrorists... the Muslim "veil" has become a symbol of terror" (Aziz, 2012, p. 193). In another sense, Muslim women are potential terrorists themselves. This was particularly clear in and after the instances of three British Muslim female teenagers joining the so-called Islamic State as 'Jihadi brides' (Martini, 2018). Now, in addition to being endangered by Muslim men,

Muslim women now too appear as 'dangerous' (Mirza, 2015) but again only when under the influence their male co-religionists. In all of this, the hijab and other forms of Islamic dress play a crucial symbolic role (Allen, 2010). Fatima shares her frustration about people's response regarding her hijab:

*They just see the scarf on your head, it doesn't matter where you come from, it doesn't matter what you are doing, what status you have in the society or whatever. You could be living in a way better condition than they do. But as soon as they see the scarf on your head, they just assume that you know, you're also a terrorist... So that's how they view you.*

The image of the burqa or niqab is also deemed as symbolic of terrorism and Muslim women who wear them are often targeted with racist epithets that centre on these items. One Muslim woman, Mona, was sharing her friend's experience of such an attack; interestingly, Mona has a strong Irish accent, which seems to confuse the men who were attacking the other woman, underscoring how Muslim women are often assumed to be 'not Irish' but Other (Carr, 2016).

*Yea, so like for example I was... coming out of Lidl in X Suburb. And my friend, I saw her, and she was wearing the niqab. And I was going in to get something. She came out and there were these two men, they were around thirty, forty age demographic right. And they were trying; they were asking her did she have a bomb under her jilbab and starting to pull it up.*

*And she was wearing the niqab. So of course I was like, are you?? So, I get out of the car, and I was like are you alright lads? Are you alright? And they were like, 'oh what??' I was like will we call the Guards,<sup>2</sup> will we call the Guards maybe and they were like; 'oh we're not doing anything.' 'We're not doing anything...' and I was just like, okay yea, yea so if you're not doing anything you're grand to kind of move off... or we can call the Guards? But like it was like as soon... Like it was this weird negotiation in their head because I wasn't wearing the hijab.*

In addition to discourses of terror-threat, veiled Muslim women's bodies are also constructed as the visual symbol of 'weaponizing the womb' (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2022) for a 'White extinction' (Obaidi et al., 2022) and as the personification of 'the replacement theory' (Iftikhar, 2021). The form of the veiled Muslim woman's body, racialised as emblematic of the so-called demographic threat becomes a direct target for anti-Muslim hostility resulting not only in subtle forms of racism but also hate crime. These violent attacks are not just motivated by the presence of Muslim women, instead, it is the meaning of alleged threat that is assigned to her presence. In addition to the day-to-day and subtle forms of anti-Muslim racism experienced by most participants, our research found evidence of these kinds of attacks, where in one such case, Nadine, while heavily pregnant, was attacked in public while waiting for public transport:

*Yea, like it happened when I was in [Irish City] once, like the boy, just pick only me to throw the hot coffee on me... it was a load of people there but this boy came onto me and just threw the hot coffee you know. And then started talking about hijab, go home, bla, bla, bla. And I was standing there. I didn't say anything in that time I had a huge pregnant [bump]*

Although the subtle forms of racism such as looks, verbal anti-Muslim assumptions or jokes are often conceptualised as racial micro-aggression (Sue et al., 2007), from which the above-mentioned violent racial attack is less common and clearly different in extent, we argue that both are the manifestations of systemic racism. Moreover, while 'replacement theory' or the idea of 'white extinction' fuelled the far-right 'illiberal' forces in Western countries, the boundary between the liberal and 'illiberal' regarding anti-Muslim racism is rather blurred (Mondon & Winter, 2019). Mondon and Winter (2019) argue that, while these forms of illiberal anti-Muslim racism and violent attacks, such as the assault above, are denounced by liberal narratives, there remains a connection between such forms of egregious hostility and more nuanced, subtle and embedded forms of anti-Muslim racism in liberal 'secular' ideologies in Western societies. Through her concept of femo-nationalism, Sara Farris argues that anti-Muslim racism creates a common ground between right wing nationalists, certain white and liberal feminists and neoliberal agents for their own objectives (Farris, 2017). Sheth (2006) argues that the image of a 'Muslim woman wearing a veil' symbolises the challenge to Western liberal 'secular' values and is therefore often considered unruly. She argues, that the 'crimes' of women visibly wearing a veil in a Western country symbolises "their conspicuously heterogeneous comportment—openly subscribing to 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' culture. This breach is seen in explicit practices that are thought to contravene the fundamental ethos of Western liberal culture, namely that of political secularism" (Sheth, 2006, p. 456). Since Islam is assumed to be a threat through this liberal anti-Muslim racist 'logic', Muslim women face exclusionary experiences, including belittling looks in public for wearing veil as was the case perceived by Hazem below:

*And you know I can give you an example of recently when I got onto a bus... and there was two Muslim girls came on the bus, wearing full hijab... and I saw the faces of those who were around them; of absolute*

<sup>2</sup> The term 'guards' is an anglicised term referring to the police service whose title in Irish is *An Garda Síochána*.

eh...anger in some of the people's eyes, and also dislike to these young ladies. So even if they are not expressing it...I mean verbally... you can see it on their faces.

Erasing the multifarious meanings of the veil, the one that predominates in the Western liberal gaze is that wherein veiling is deemed symbolic of gender inequality and women's oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Alexander, 2016). Muslim women's veiling (and, as such, unveiling) in the Western public sphere reduces them to a signifier of the demarcation of the conceptual separation between religion and liberal Western values (Siddiqi, 2019). The obsession with the veil places Muslim women in a position where they have to engage with it, whether they wear it or not. The veil becomes the all-encompassing symbol of Muslim women's identity, relegating other aspects of her life and her agency to background noise. Constructed as a symbol of oppression, Muslim women are left with no choice but to spend time and energy on it, often to the detriment of other things in her life. In what follows, Israa speaks about how her daughter is constantly questioned about her veil:

...people ask her, so you can't do anything, you can't come to the beach, you can't do anything. And luckily, I practice everything, but I think Islam in the west is a little bit different. I go to the beach, I have a full cover burkini that I don't mind, I took [my daughter] swimming when she was 4 months old. And back, this is 2008 and I think I might have been the only one with burkini in that swimming pool for at least 2 years before I saw another one with burkini. I didn't mind it. It's just me personally, I didn't mind it, I got the looks, I got questions, I answered them and you just get on with it. [My daughter] is the same, she goes to the beach and she will answer everyone, like whenever, if you tell her you can't have fun because of your hijab, she has a list of answers for you and she is good at that.

(Israa)

The reason for wearing or not wearing a veil is a central point of attention for Muslim women, so much so that they are often required, forced, to explain why they wear it in random situations; yet, when explanations are provided, these are mostly ignored. Asking questions but not accepting the answer in favour of their presumptions is a form of racial microaggression (Sue et al., 2007), and that is a manifestation of systemic racism in action. In the following contribution Najwa shares her experiences of how she is expected to have an answer for wearing or not wearing the veil.

Because they will relate it with what's happening in Iran and they will relate, oh were you also forced, did your parents force you to wear this. Or do you have to answer to somebody if you are not wearing this. I mean that all is very personal to me, if I am answering to somebody for wearing it or not wearing it or for choosing to wear or not to wear it... So yeah, they want an answer, they want an explanation why or why not, but I feel like for me they have certain expectations of the answer, and if it's not that answer it's not an answer.

The obsession with the veil in the minds of those engaging in anti-Muslim racist behaviour is overwhelming. Even if the woman does not wear the veil she still seems to be always stereotyped in relation to it. For example, Afifa told us,

And if you don't tick the boxes of being a Muslim, then you're not a good Muslim. So, because I don't wear the hijab, then I'm not a Muslim by default. Because that's not their idea of what a Muslim woman is.

Similarly, Yumna and Aadilah share their perspectives on the power and omnipresence of racialised expectations ascribed to the figure of the Muslim woman:

I think, I think that when you are like a person of colour a lot of people can only see you as either, like a homogenous part of the group you are from. Or as an exception to the rule. And that's what happens with like Muslim identity as well. So, either you get to be the same as all Muslims, in which case you are conservative, or you get to be the exception. So, you are progressive, more than all the other Muslims that they know or that exists

in the world. And so either way, I think you are defined by a stereotype of what they believe like person of colour or Muslim is.

(Yumna)

Like if I'm writing on freedom of religion or if I'm writing about human rights abuses anywhere in the world, I must also simultaneously look at how veiled Muslim women experience in Europe. And it's an important topic of enquiry but I do not have to be the one to look into it all the time, you know. And so yes, there is an expectation by virtue of the fact that, you know, I declare quite openly without any like hesitation that I am Muslim, you know, and I have written about it. So therefore, and I'm a woman, who chooses not to veil, therefore all of those things mean I must have an opinion on this and continue to keep writing on it.

(Aadilah)

Another layer that is important to elaborate upon here is the phenomenon of 'homonationalism', an example of superiority that Jasbir Puar (2015, 2018) argues is used against migrants and people of colour to fuel Anti-Muslim racism in the global North (Croce, 2015; Drucker, 2011; Montegary, 2015). Puar argues that homonationalism "relies on the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual subjects in relation to the performative reiteration of the pathologised perverse (homo- and hetero-) sexuality of racial Others, specifically Muslim Others, upon whom Orientalist and neo-Orientalist projections are cast" (Puar, 2015, p. 321). Homonationalism assumes and reinforces the orientalist idea of 'Islam as uncivilised and barbaric'. It also creates a new kind of exclusion for migrant and Muslim people who identify as queer, who often find the Western queer space as being white and exclusionary of other power relations (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2018; Dhoot, 2022; Held, 2022; Khan, 2022). This Islamophobic exclusion and homonationalist superiority was in evidence in an interview with Yumna, a participant who identified as queer:

...because I am visibly Muslim, I think a lot of the time people's guards are already up, where they would expect me to be unaccepting of queerness. Because I think that's what a lot of people expect from Muslim people in general. I think when I say that I'm queer, or people learn that I'm queer, it's actually like shocking to them. Because it's unexpected, that somebody who is Muslim could be queer. And it's for me it's uncomfortable because I don't think it should be shocking. And it doesn't turn into them being like welcoming. Instead, what it often turns into is that I'm being like 'oh you are really cool for a Muslim person,' 'you are really like, like so progressive for a Muslim person.' So, it's kind of like you can be accepted, but [only] as long as you are putting down the rest of the Muslim community.

The fear of losing the liberation that "Western women" have achieved is a driving force behind this obsession with the veil. The veil is constructed as a challenge to Western liberal secular values, and Muslim women who choose to wear it are often viewed with suspicion. This fear is rooted in the Islamophobic notion that Islam is a threat to Western culture, and Muslim women are positioned as symbols of this perceived threat. The fixation on the veil and its implications for Muslim women is a critical aspect of anti-Muslim racism. It not only erases their agency but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the marginalisation of Muslim communities. The fear of losing Western values and the intersection of homonationalism add further layers to this issue, highlighting the complex and intertwined nature of anti-Muslim racism in Western societies. Addressing this deeply ingrained prejudice requires challenging these racialised ideas and recognising the diverse identities and experiences within Muslim communities, contra those reductive racialised imaginings of Muslimness as Other.

#### Muslim women need saving by Western men

Muslim women, in relation to 'white Western men' have historically been situated within two dynamics. One is in between the power dynamics of Muslim men and white Western men, where Muslim women

are the tools to fight with and over. Gayatri Spivak famously described this as a battle between white and brown men (Spivak, 1994) in the colonial era, which has taken new turn for Muslim women in contemporary times, elaborated by Farris as femonationalism (Farris, 2017). Femonationalism infantilises Muslim women and aims to 'save' them within the neoliberal agenda, often resulting in the exploitation of their labour.

The second dynamic is the colonial and Western portrayal of the sexualised and objectified Other who is either hypersexual or oppressed and to be saved by white Western men, reproducing and recycles colonising narratives from the past into the contemporary (Akabli & Chahdi, 2022; Easat-Daas, 2021; Lazreg, 1994; Zeiny, 2017). However, even though white Western men superficially assume the duty to save Muslim women from their barbaric men, violent anti-Muslim racist attacks experienced by Muslim women are in fact, usually perpetuated by white men (Hopkins, 2016). Calling this violence as gendered, Hopkins argues, "These forms of gendered violence are especially targeted at Muslims; the perpetrators are overwhelmingly white men, and the victims are women but also men who are perceived to follow the Islamic faith" (Hopkins, 2016, p. 186). While the saviour image of white men might seem incongruent with the violence meted out by this demographic towards Muslim women, 'saving Muslim women' discourse can and is rooted in anti-Muslim racism, often expressed through the gendered ideas of Islam and Muslim men and women, which can be offensive and indeed violent as is reflected in the following contributions from Zara and Sanaya.

*I was working there, but whoever was coming there, like old people or the other people I was working with, they used to say like these things, 'oh your English is very good, from where are you [in] the third world you were coming from?' But obviously, that is not Muslim hatred, but I think they used to see my hijab and they say, 'Oh you are wearing this don't you feel hot in this, don't you feel uncomfortable in this,' these kinds of remarks... I used to tell them very politely at that point but then I used to get you know offended by that. Once I told the gentleman that I am getting offended by your remarks. And he pulled himself, he said 'no, no, I'm just talking about for your own thing, I was checking on you, and these kinds of things;' and I said I don't need checking I'm an adult and I can do whatever I want to do.*

(Zara)

*Its more about expression than actually asking the question because I remember we had an incident with a former [colleague/friend] and when he started narrating the story where he goes to a Muslim household and the women run and hide or something, that's how he described it, actually run and hide. And he was like 'I don't know why people think that I want to see their wife, and why are they hiding their wives??' And we were like, I don't know how to answer that, are you like asking or are you attacking or, so we just say yeah, that happens or whatever.*

(Sanaya)

The above quotes exemplify the saviour image of white men, always alert and trying to rescue Muslim women from their assumed discomfort of being under the 'veil' or the controlling husband who tries to hide her from the gaze of white men. The saviour image of white men conceals their violence towards Muslim women, often expressed through overt and 'subtle' forms of hostility. The shared experiences of Muslim women in response to these saviour narratives illustrate the problematic assumptions made by some white men. The veil becomes a focal point in this regard for Muslim women perceived as disempowered and in need of liberation. The objectification of veiled Muslim women's bodies is an example of how these narratives can lead to the reduction of women to objects of attraction and subjects to be controlled.

## Conclusion

In this article, we build upon the relational matrices of gendered anti-

Muslim racism on the foundation of the concept of "gendered Islamophobia," as coined by Zine (2004). Zine shed light on how Muslim women are targeted with Islamophobic stereotypes and subjected to hostility. Here, we focused on the process of racialisation with the help of critical race theories and the co-constitutive relational aspect between race and gender. This gendered racism is not limited to individual acts of discrimination but is deeply embedded in societal structures and narratives. Moreover, drawing on the work of Alimahomed-Wilson (2020), in this article, we situate Muslim women within a relational matrix of gender, with racialised Muslim masculinity and with the assumed superior positionalities of white women and men. We argue that the gendered aspect of anti-Muslim racism is much broader and significant than higher levels of anti-Muslim racism as experienced by Muslim women vis-à-vis their male counterparts. We contend that gender functions as a central organising principle, from the historical to the contemporary, in anti-Muslim racism made visible through the experiences of both Muslim men and women (Kumar, 2012; Razack, 2008). We problematise the tendencies of analysing the gendered aspect as a fringe aspect of anti-Muslim racism that situates negatively racialised ideas of and about Muslim men and Muslim masculinity as a beyond-gender or as a gender-neutral concept.

Understanding gender as a central organising principle of anti-Muslim racism enables a broadening of the analytical ability to situate Muslim women in a relational matrix of gender and 'race' with white men and women and Muslim men. Through the findings presented above, derived from the experiences of Muslims living in Ireland, this article reveals how anti-Muslim racism is used to legitimise the dominance of 'White men' over 'Muslim men' while using Muslim women as tools in this power struggle. This article discusses the narrative of "saving Muslim women" from a gendered lens, which has deep historical roots in Orientalism, with Islam being portrayed as inherently violent and misogynistic and Muslim women being seen as needing liberation by the West. This ideology has been used to justify colonialism and imperialism, with Western feminism often playing a role in promoting these ideas and their civilising 'rationales'. While the manifestations of anti-Muslim racism may vary, they all are the result of histories of colonisation and orientalism, from the past and the present, that construct Muslims as the Other of the idealised occidental.

We contend that anti-Muslim racism is gendered because it relies on the race-gender matrix of the images of violent Muslim men, passive Muslim women, and the duty of White men and Western liberal women to save Muslim women. As is clear above, the gendered assumption of anti-Muslim racism was made evident in the range of anti-Muslim violence, hatred and humiliation experienced by the individuals of Muslim communities in Ireland. From our research findings, we argue that anti-Muslim racism not only disproportionately affects Muslim women but is fundamentally rooted in gendered stereotypes and assumptions about Islam and Muslims.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Nasrin Khandoker:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Dermana Kurić:** Writing – review & editing. **James Carr:** Writing – review & editing.

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