

[Sign](#)

We continue to produce events and special projects while we explore where the on-site journalism goes next. If you'd like to reach us with feedback or ideas for collaboration you can do so at partners@newsdeeply.com.

[BROWSE THE WOMEN AND GIRLS DEEPLY ARCHIVES](#)

[Share](#)[Tweet](#)[Share via](#)[Email](#)[EDUCATION](#)[GENERAL](#)

Veiled and Undercover: Exposing Harassment of Muslim Women in the U.K.

Hate-crime expert Irene Zempi wore Islamic clothing in public to research harassment against visibly Muslim women in the U.K. The disdain and abuse she experienced was so bad, she says, she didn't want to leave the house.

WRITTEN BY
[Elspeth Dehnert](#)

PUBLISHED ON
[Dec. 20, 2016](#)



Last year, there was a 326 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims in the U.K., with reports showing that Muslim women were more likely to be attacked than Muslim men. [AFP/Adek Berry](#)

ORIGINALLY FROM GREECE. Irene Zempi is a foreigner in the U.K., but it's not obvious until she speaks. She didn't give much thought to her ability to blend in until 2009, when she began working at the charity [Victim Support](#) in Leicester. That was where she met Muslim women who were being abused in public because of the way they dressed. Propelled by the injustice and shocked at the lack of information on the topic, she went on to earn a PhD in criminology with a focus on the purposeful victimization of visibly Muslim women.

While Zempi was conducting her doctoral research, she interviewed Muslim women who urged her to wear the Islamic hijab (headscarf), niqab (face veil) and jilbab (long dress) so she could better understand their collective experience. A practicing Orthodox Christian, she agreed that dressing the part would be the best way for her to examine the issue of

female-focused Islamophobia. So, in 2012, she went undercover for a month in Leicester. The level of harassment she faced was astonishing, she says.

Nearly four years have passed, but the data from Zempi's research is now more timely than ever. In 2015 alone, there was a **326 percent increase** in hate crimes against Muslims in the U.K., with Muslim women more likely to be attacked than Muslim men. And **police figures** show that hate crimes soared in the country following the Brexit vote earlier this year.

Women & Girls spoke with Zempi, who teaches criminology at Nottingham Trent University, about her month as a Muslim, the results of which will be published fully for the first time in an upcoming report with co-author Imran Awan of Birmingham City University.

Women & Girls: Why are Muslim women more likely to experience Islamophobia than Muslim men?

Zempi: We see that Muslim women who are visibly Muslim in terms of their dress are easy targets. It's obvious that they're practicing Muslims and, to some extent, wearing a veil is a symbol of Islam in the West. A hate crime is a message crime. Therefore, for hate crime perpetrators, attacking the symbol of Islam – the veil – sends the message to the wider community that all Muslims are vulnerable. The perpetrators think they can get away with it if they attack Muslim women because they don't think the women will fight back or report it to the police because they view Muslim women as oppressed and forced to wear the veil.

So, there isn't just one reason why Muslim women in veils are more likely to experience abuse. It's a combination of reasons. Muslim men also suffer from Islamophobia. Women experience it more in the public space – like when they walk on the street or take public transport – while men are more likely to experience it in the labor market.

“People would say things to me like ‘Muslim terrorist,’ ‘Muslim bomber’ and ‘Why do you have that on your face?’”

Women & Girls: As part of your research you dressed in Muslim clothing for a month. What did you experience?

Zempi: When I would leave my house and go to the city center I felt unsafe. People would say things to me like “Muslim terrorist,” “Muslim bomber” and “Why do you have that on your face?” But it wasn't just verbal abuse, it was also persistent staring and being ignored in shops where I've been dressed as I am normally. So, I could see the difference in people.

On one occasion, I was walking down the street and [someone in] a passing car threw eggs at me. Everyone was staring, but no one was coming to my assistance, so I felt doubly victimized.

It was really, really difficult. I lost my appetite, had indications of depression and I didn't want to speak to anyone or leave the house. When I told my Muslim friends about my experiences, they said: “This is what we suffer on a daily basis.”

Women & Girls: You said you lost your appetite and were depressed. In your research, how did you find Muslim women cope with harassment on a long-term basis?

Zempi: Not everyone reacts in the same way. Some women might choose to take the veil off, either permanently or for a short time. I've met women who have refused to go to shops or they don't leave the house at all. So, there's a sense of imprisonment. And, in some cases, it could even lead to radicalization, because if you're really vulnerable, you can easily be brainwashed. Some women who wear the veil are not wanted, even in the Muslim community. So, they might experience bias, prejudice or hate perpetrated by fellow Muslims who are more secular or so-called modern.

Women & Girls: Would you say Brexit has contributed to increased harassment of visibly Muslim women in the U.K.?

Zempi: Absolutely. Imran Awan and myself have spoken to people in the Muslim community, and I think the feeling is that the political campaigns related to the E.U. referendum and Brexit – but also the political campaign of Trump in the U.S. – legitimize Islamophobia because they make it mainstream. Therefore, people on the street feel that if politicians make these comments, then it's fine for them to attack Muslim women because they're wearing the veil or they think the women are supporting terrorists. We can see the ripple effects across the world.



Irene Zempi says many of the women she spoke to point to politicians as part of the problem – when leaders legitimize Islamophobia, they say, the prejudice goes mainstream. (Courtesy of Irene Zempi)

Women & Girls: What should be done to reduce Islamophobia and make visibly Muslim women feel safe?

Zempi: I think it's important for us – government, academia, criminal justice agencies – to work together now in the current climate to try to understand and address the problem. But I also think the politicians who have made these comments have the responsibility to protect the communities they are meant to protect. They need to rise to the challenge of making sure they don't promote hate bias and prejudice toward minority communities, in general, and Muslims, specifically.

We tend to see Muslim women in stereotypes – as forced to wear the veil, victims of FGM [female genital mutilation] and forced marriage, or related to extremists. I think we need to address these stereotypes. We also need to offer training to the media because the media often promote these stereotypes.

And, finally, I think we need to work more with hate-crime perpetrators. We place more emphasis on victims, but I think we also need to educate the perpetrators. I would like to see some work done with perpetrators that will allow them to understand the impact and implications of their actions.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Related Articles

After Her Parents' Murder, One Activist Takes the Path of Peace

[Feb. 21, 2017](#)

Catarina Martins, the Woman Shaking up Portugal's Political Scene

[April 13, 2017](#)

U.N. Offers Advice on Ending School-Related Gender-Based Violence

[Jan. 27, 2017](#)

10 Women Leading the Way in Counter-Extremism

[March 1, 2017](#)

Botswana Activists March in Miniskirts to Fight Gender-Based Violence

[Sep. 6, 2017](#)

Assault on Aleppo: When an Eye for an Eye Turns the Whole World Blind

[Dec. 16, 2016](#)

Video: One Woman's Tale of Being Radicalized by 'Utopian' Promises

[Feb. 20, 2017](#)

'Hate Crime' Call for Corrective Rape Receives Boost in South Africa

[Oct. 25, 2016](#)

Mass Sexual Violence Leaves Rohingya Women Traumatized and Stateless

[June 8, 2017](#)

Migrant Women Sentenced for Having Unmarried Sex in Qatar

[June 12, 2017](#)

Most Popular

Video: Turkey's Trans Sex Workers Are the Most Vulnerable in Europe

The trans sex workers of Turkey take an enormous risk when they step out to find clients each night. But as one sex worker tells News Deeply, most lack any alternative. [April 25, 2017](#)

Expert Views: Soaring Teen Pregnancy Rates in the Philippines

[Aug. 29, 2017](#)

How Microfinance Helped Nepali Women Recover From the 2015 Earthquake

[April 25, 2017](#)

India's Devadasis Trapped in Cycle of Poverty and Sex Work

[April 5, 2017](#)

Migrant Women Sentenced for Having Unmarried Sex in Qatar

[June 12, 2017](#)

Related

After Her Parents' Murder, One Activist Takes the Path of Peace

[Feb. 21, 2017](#)

Related

Catarina Martins, the Woman Shaking up Portugal's Political Scene

April 13, 2017

Related

U.N. Offers Advice on Ending School-Related Gender-Based Violence

Jan. 27, 2017

Most Popular Stories

1. Video: Turkey's Trans Sex Workers Are the Most Vulnerable in Europe

April 25, 2017

2. Expert Views: Soaring Teen Pregnancy Rates in the Philippines

Aug. 29, 2017

3. How Microfinance Helped Nepali Women Recover From the 2015 Earthquake

April 25, 2017

About the Author

4. India's Devadasis Trapped in Cycle of Poverty and Sex Work

Elspeth Dehnert

April 5, 2017

Elspeth Dehnert is an American journalist based in Amman, Jordan. She has a passion for telling stories about women, society and international development. Her collaborations have included Marie Claire, Scientific American, Brownbook, ClimateWire, Channel

News and many more. Her work has been featured on www.elpethdehnert.com.

June 12, 2017

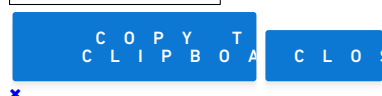
'My Mind Was Racing': A Midwife's First Day in Hurricane-Hit Haiti

Republish this article

Our mission is to empower stakeholders and the wider public with high quality information, insights, and analysis on critical global issues. To help achieve this, we encourage you to republish the text of any article that contains a Republish button on your own news outlet.

By copying the HTML below, you agree to adhere to our republishing guidelines.

► By copying the HTML below, you agree to adhere to our [republishing guidelines](#). [Click to expand](#)



Suggest your story or issue.

Your email:

SEND

Share Your Story.

[Have a story idea?](#) Interested in adding your voice to our [growing community](#)?

