TANENBAUM
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE | 25 YEARS

Diversity
Best
Practices

ISLAMOPHOBIA:
Challenges and Opportunities
in the Workplace

Written By: Mark Fowler, Deputy Executive Director and Liz Joslin, Workplace Senior Program Associate, Tanenbaum

Throughout the history of the United States, different groups have been thrust into "the hot seat" – a social crucible where they are subjected to increased scrutiny, negative public framing, verbal abuse, emotional suffering and, often, physical danger. Groups subjected to the hot seat over the years include Native Americans, African Americans, Irish and German immigrants, German immigrants, Jews, Catholics, citizens of Japanese descent, and many others. Some are still being targeted. African Americans, certainly, are subjected to racism today, and Jews are reported to be on the receiving end of more hate crimes than any other religious group. Meanwhile, anti-Muslim crimes and harassment are growing exponentially in the U.S. (and, more broadly, across North America and Western Europe). In this paper, we acknowledge the breath of hatemongering, but will focus on the trending phenomenon of anti-Muslim sentiment, a lived experience that has a name: Islamophobia.

ISLAMOPHOBIA: WHAT IT IS AND WHEN IT STARTED

Islamophobia is a word that is now part of our lexicon, having come into use so we have a way to describe fear and blind hatred of Muslims and Islam. According to The Bridge Initiative (a research project based in Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding), the term "Islamophobia" came about for the same reason we have terms like "anti-Semitism," "racism" and "homophobia." We needed a way to talk about the bigotry and discrimination that Jews, African Americans and LGBTQ individuals (and now Muslims) were facing.

The Council on American-Islam Relations (CAIR) provides the following definition: "Islamophobia is closed-minded prejudice against or hatred of Islam and Muslims. An Islamophobe is an individual who holds a closed-minded view of Islam and promotes prejudice against or hatred of Muslims." Gallup offers a more detailed definition: "An exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life."

Notwithstanding these definitions, it is critical to note that it is not only Muslims who suffer from Islamophobia. Many individuals who are perceived to

BY THE NUMBERS

1.6 BILLION
Muslims in the world

23%
of the global population

1%
of the US population is Muslim

20%
of the world's Muslims live in the Middle East-North Africa Region

62%
live in the Asia-Pacific Region

Pew Research Center projects that India will have the largest Muslim population by 2050 and that by the same year **10% of all Europeans will be Muslims and that they will make up 2.1% of the US population,** surpassing people who identify as Jewish.

Source:
http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/

be Muslim, including Sikhs, South Asians and Arabs of various religious practices, have also been the targets of hate crimes and profiling. (Throughout this article, we will refer to bigotry, discrimination and harassment that Muslims face; when we do so, we will be referring to the bigotry, discrimination and harassment faced by those who are Muslim, and also by those who are targeted because they are perceived to be Muslim.)

Though Islamophobia seems to be in the news more than in the past, it did not begin with the recent presidential election, or even with 9/11. Unfortunately, the United States has a history when it comes to bias against Muslims. In fact, 70 years ago, fear of Muslims and Islam was already an aspect of American public life. Until 1944, American courts denied citizenship based on Muslim identity, while various court rulings before 1944 characterized Islam as "an inherent menace and threat to American life."

There is also evidence from those years that Arab and Muslim identities were conflated then, much as they are today. In a 1942 court case, a Yemeni Muslim immigrant was denied citizenship because of the fear that "Arabs" could not be counted on to intermarry and assimilate. The legalization of this bias began to shift after World War II. American interests in the Arab world (specifically, the region's oil) are actually credited with bringing an end to the naturualization ban on Muslims.

Fear of and discrimination against Muslims in the United States may be more visible today. But it is not new.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AT WORK

Through corporate Diversity & Inclusion inititaives, the discrimination faced by African Americans and LGBTQ individuals, described by the terms racism and homophobia, are being addressed in significant ways, including in recruitment efforts, the creation of employee resource groups, mentoring, sponsorship and amicus briefs. In contrast to their more proactive approaches on these issues, it is still not the norm for companies to address religious bias or issues like Islamophobia, even though discrimination against Muslims is showing up in many areas of society, including the workplace. For companies to thrive, they need to understand the Muslim population as a diverse group and recognize that they need inclusion and advancement efforts similar to those already in place for African Americans, LGBTQ+ individuals and others.

When companies fail to identify and implement needed policies and practices to include Muslim employees, they miss opportunities for increasing their market share and driving social change. Societally, they can also wield influence; they have the power to move the needle—as we saw with marriage equality and other matters related to LGBTQ+ inclusion. Thus, for example, 379 companies signed an amicus brief in favor of marriage equality when the issue was before the Supreme Court. While we cannot know the degree to which this influenced the Court's decision, we do know that its ultimate ruling aligned with that brief's conclusion.

Similarly, companies exerted influence over the controversial Religious Freedom Restoration Act in Indiana in 2015, when high profile CEOs of companies including Apple, Salesforce, Yelp, and Angie's List threatened to take business

out of Indiana if the bill passed as originally drafted. Although the bill did not explicitly condone discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, many feared that this was in fact the intention. In speaking out against the bill, CEOs cited potential business detriment from discrimination against LGBTQ individuals, and the disconnect between the bill and company values. Shortly thereafter, an amendment was added to the original bill, clarifying that it did not sanction such discrimination. It's time that companies consider what they can do to push back against the culture of Islamophobia to create safe, respectful environments for Muslim employees, clients, and community members— and for employees of all beliefs.

There are many ways in which Islamophobia shows up in the workplace and workforce. Consider the following real-life situations that our clients have shared with us and/or have been reported in the news:

- Muslim employees experiencing increased scrutiny going through airport security while traveling for business.
- Muslim employees being called "terrorists" by customers and colleagues.
- Muslim employees being moved to "back of the house" roles from public facing positions so that customers/ clients do not get upset, or because their physical appearance did not match the company's brand.
- Muslim employees feeling unsafe commuting to work/in the workplace and/or having to manage safety concerns for family members (ex: a Muslim parent worrying about their child being bullied at school).

Those examples are fairly overt. Sadly, there are many more subtle ways in which Muslim employees can feel excluded or disrespected at work, in the form of microaggressions. Consider the following examples:

- An employee doesn't drink as part of his observance of Islam and isn't comfortable going to a bar. He therefore doesn't attend team happy hours and is labeled "anti-social."
- An employee fasting for Ramadan is constantly asked why she is not eating at lunch meetings and other events during the day where food is served.
- An employee gets criticized for not being "sharp" at weekly team meetings which are held at 4pm during Ramadan (at which point, he has been fasting since sunrise).

We must also consider the very real impact of unconscious bias toward Muslim employees and customers in our places of work. Imagine a security guard who sees a new employee entering the building (with the proper identification), who appears to be Muslim. The guard's automatic reaction may be fear that this person is a terrorist, based on portrayals she has seen of terrorists in the media. Now imagine the the security guard is a veteran, who served in Afghanistan. She has firsthand experience of enemies dressing in full-length veils or burqas in order to conceal explosives.

The new employee is wearing a hijab and a long skirt. The security guard came to work with certain unconscious (and perhaps some conscious) biases, as we all do. The role of the employer is not to discredit the guard's experiences, or berate her being bigoted. Instead, employers should provide training and other proactive measures to equip this security guard, and all their staff, to have respectful interactions with colleagues and clients of all faiths and none.

Unconscious bias also comes into play in terms of who one perceives to be Muslim. The images popularized by the

media are of Arab Muslims. However. Muslims are a much more diverse group, and come from many different ethnic backgrounds. In the U.S., for example, there is a centuries old history of Muslim Americans of African descent, and movements like the Nation of Islam, which has long attracted African-American converts. Additionally, as of 2010, the five countries with the largest Muslim populations were Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. None of these countries are part of the Arab World.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND D&I INITIATIVES

40% of EEOC claims of workplace discrimination are made by Muslims even though they only account for 1% of the population.

It is easy to become disheartened by the Islamophobia (and racism, homophiba, anti-Semitism, and a host of other isms and phobias) we see and experience on a daily basis. Considering the number of stories we routinely hear about terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam and the divisive public debate that has swirled for over a decade about Islam, it is no surprise that many have come to to fear the tradition and its adherents. This fear may be misguided or misdirected, based on misinformation or distortion, but it is nonetheless real, and should not be simply dismissed. It should be addressed respectfully with facts, data and true stories (for example: according to the FBI, 6% of terror attacks in the U.S. between 1980-2005 were committed by Muslims).

As Diversity & Inclusion professionals, your plate is already full (if not overflowing) with biases to tackle, and inclusive practices to institutionalize. The idea of taking on another identifier may seem daunting. We understand. However, it is imperative that corporations take on this issue and lead the way in stopping Islamophobia. Consider the fact that Muslims are overrepresented in EEOC claims, making up about 40% of EEOC claims of workplace discrimination even though they only account for about 1% of the population.

Companies that want to succeed can and should put resources into making workplaces more inclusive of Muslim employees. At the very least, they should make sure that they are not allowing harassment or discrimination to go unchecked. The stakes are high. Addressing Islamophobia head-on is as critical as the other dimensions of identity we are already addressing, and we have seen the impact that corporations can have on social issues.

Some companies have already started this process. Below are examples of 4 inclusive measures leading corporations are taking:

- Holding a Q&A session about religion after the attacks in Paris (Horizon Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Jersey)
- Providing transportation to mosques and other places of worship for employees who do not have access to onsite prayer space (JPMorgan Chase)
- Using an interfaith calendar to avoid scheduling events on Muslim (and other) holidays (Accenture)
- Supporting a Muslim ERG (Texas Instruments)

These are examples of corporate values in action. But for most, where we are now, is at the very beginning of a long process. There is a lot of work that needs to be done. To start out, there are some simple steps that practitioners can take can take to counter Islamophobia in your company. (Note: some of these accommodations and/or practices may already be in place. In that case, the next step is to make sure these accommodations are institutionalized and communicated so that all employees can make use of them.)

1. Create ongoing opportunities to combat stereotypes and raise the profile of Muslims in your company/industry.
  a. Feature Muslim senior leaders in internal communications/spotlights.
  b. Create opportunies for employees to volunteer with local Muslim nonprofits.

2. Send internal communications condemning acts of violence/hate crimes against Muslims in the local community.

3. Remind your workforce of your commitment to a diverse and inclusive workforce of people from all backgrounds, including religious and non-relgiious beliefs, and of the expectation that all colleagues will be treated in a respectful manner.

4. Create/designate space within the office that can be utilized by those who engage in daily prayer (or meditation/reflection). This space should be open to employees of all faiths and none.
  a. Consider making additional space available during the month of Ramadan, when the need may increase.

5. Make a variety of Halal food options available in the cafeteria and at company-sponsored events
  a. Keep in mind that these food options should also be kept apart from non-Halal food to avoid cross-contamination.

6. Implement an inclusive dress code that does not prohibit hijabs and other kinds of headgear worn for religious purposes. If a certain dress code is necessary for safety or hygiene standards (i.e. a prohibition on facial hair or long sleeves in a health care workplace), clearly communicate why this is a necessary policy, thereby clarifying that it is not based on discrimination, and work with employees to find accommodations wherever possible.

7. Acknowledge and/or celebrate Muslim holidays, such as Eid.
  a. Remind appropriate stakeholders, including managers and HR, when holidays and obervances are coming up so that they can be proactive in arranging any necessary accommodations.
  b. Send company-wide notices about upcoming holidays and observances throughout the year so that employees can greet Muslim colleagues and clients appropriately.

You may not take all of these steps at your company right now. Some may need to be tailored to your company culture, and many will require buy-in from senior leadership. But we invite you to challenge yourself to implement one of these policies or practices in the next six months. If enough companies take the first step, together we will start to move the needle on Islamophobia and make our workplaces, and our world, a safer place for our Muslim colleagues.

_____

Note that in addition to Halal, there are a variety of religious (and non-religious) dietary restrictions that may be needed within your employee population, such as kosher, vegetarian, vegan, and ital..

RESOURCES TO CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Below we have provided a list of resources that will support your efforts to create space at your organization to engage in important conversations about Islamophobia and how to build an inclusive workplace for all employees.

VIDEOS

Secret Life of Muslims. A series of short videos about the challenges American Muslims face
http://www.secretlifeofmuslims.com/

"What American Women Who Wear Hijab Want You to Know"
http://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/497318/hijabi-world/

Facts vs. Fiction about Muslims
https://www.upf.tv/films/american-muslim-facts/

GENERAL INFORMATION/ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has local chapters across the U.S. Employees could potential volunteer with them. They also monitor hate crimes and legal cases involving Muslims.
https://www.cair.com/about-us/cair-at-a-glance.html

Myths and Facts about Muslim People and Islam from the ADL
http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/myths-and-facts-about-muslim.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/#.WFG3RrIrIdU

Diversity Best Practices' Research Report: Tech Industry Response to Building a National Muslim Registry
http://www.diversitybestpractices.com/research-report-tech-industry-response-to-building-national-muslim-registry

TRAINING

Tanenbaum offers training and consulting on religious diversity in the workplace
https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/

Islamic Networks Group (ING) offers trainings for corporations about Islam in the workplace
https://ing.org/corporate-overview/

Connecting Cultures offers training, consulting and resources on Islam in the workplace
http://www.connecting-cultures.net/new/

Tanenbaum *is a secular, non-sectarian nonprofit that promotes mutual respect with practical programs that bridge religious difference and combat prejudice in schools, workplaces, health care settings and areas of armed conflict. Tanenbaum designs trainings and educational resources to change the way people treat one another and to celebrate the richness of our country's diversity. In all of their work, Tanenbaum is inspired not only by The Golden Rule – to treat others as you would like to be treated – but also by the Platinum Rule – to treat others as they want to be treated.*

Diversity Best Practices is proud to call Tanenbaum a Solutions@DBP partner. For more information on their services, please contact Janet Wigfield at janet.wigfield@workingmother.com.