Dear Members of the Women and Equalities Committee,

Re: Session on Gendered Islamophobia

Please see below a written submission that we would like the Committee to consider as part of the session on 'gendered Islamophobia' on Wednesday 15th January 2025. Please note that this was written within a short time frame and we would appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee on these concerns.

In our submission, partly due to the constraints of time and partly in the knowledge that our perspective on this issue will be underrepresented, we have chosen to focus on the ways in which the framing of anti-Muslim racism as Islamophobia closes down legitimate critiques of religion which impacts on women and LGBT rights and freethought and expression. We also point to the overlapping ways in which racism affects both Muslim women and other Black and minoritised women to conclude that an exclusive focus on Muslim women does not do justice to either group.

About us

Southall Black Sisters was formed in 1979, at the height of the anti-racist struggle against fascist marches across the UK and the everyday reality of racist attacks. We continue to challenge racist violence and immigration controls and other state policies that question our right to live in the UK. We set up a not-for-profit, secular and inclusive organisation to meet the needs of Black (Asian and African-Caribbean) women to highlight and challenge all forms of gender-related violence against women, empower them to gain more control over their lives; live without fear of violence and assert their human rights to justice, equality and freedom. We have supported women to challenge all aspects of the intersection of racism, sexism and poverty.

In 2024, Southall Black Sisters expanded its support services, providing critical support to 5,472 callers through our national helpline and over 800 women through direct funded projects. Our dedicated team has worked tirelessly to offer legal advice, counselling, and emergency accommodation, ensuring that each woman receives the holistic wraparound support she needs to rebuild her life.

One Law for All was launched on 10 December 2008, International Human Rights Day, to call on the UK Government to recognise that Sharia and religious courts are arbitrary and discriminatory against women and children in particular and that citizenship and human rights are non-negotiable. The Campaign aimed to end Sharia and all religious courts on the basis that they work against, and not for, equality and human rights. One Law for All promotes secularism

and the separation of religion from the state, education, law and public policy as a minimum precondition for the respect of women's rights.

The international and local context

Developments in the UK in relation to the term 'Islamophobia' cannot be fully understood without reference to the international context. The coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran marks the moment of the rise of pan-Islamism, forces which have been privileged, funded and promoted by the US, a foreign policy which has been described as McJihad (Mitchell, 2017)[1] in its attempt to contain the perceived threat of communism as we have seen in Afghanistan and across the Middle-East. This unleashed Islamic fundamentalism which sought to establish an 'anti-imperialist' hegemony in the name of religion through acts of terrorism around the world, mainly in Muslim majority countries but also in the West (e.g. 9/11 and 7/7). This severely and adversely impacted the Muslim communities in countries where the brutal War on Terror launched by Western governments, has provided an additional justification and fillip to racist and anti-immigrant sentiments and narratives, the context of all non-white communities in post-colonial Britain.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism globally, in particular, (although all religions have been heading towards fundamentalism) and a growing hostility towards migrants, has provided domestic far-right and racist groups the pretext to sharpen their rhetoric and attacks on Muslims and specifically in terms of their religion. Patterns of violence against Sikhs wearing turbans, however, have shown that fascists on the street are rarely able to distinguish between Muslims and other minorities that wear head coverings.

The experience of heightened racism and sophisticated fundamentalist mobilisations lies behind the increased assertion of religious identities, a response that has in turn benefited the growth of religious fundamentalism. We have felt the impact of these locally as minoritised communities have turned to the Right, pushing out important histories of secularism and ushering in new waves of religious conservatism and fundamentalism that seek to police women and children and subject them to greater mechanisms of control. In this encounter between the far-right and besieged Muslim communities, valid critiques of religion (as crushing women's rights and the rights of sexual minorities) have been sidelined and dismissed as another manifestation of 'Islamophobia'.

This was the experience of Southall Black Sisters when, in 1989, we joined forces with women of all religions and none to form Women Against Fundamentalism and defend Salman Rushdie

[1] Mitchell, T. (2017) 'McJihad: Empire and Islam between the US and Saudi Arabia' posted on *Verso Books blog*, dated 7th June. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/3256-mcjihad-empire-and-islam-between-the-us-and-saudi-arabia?srsltid=AfmBOopvRGlzbPtX_KBtlB6LOXXq3fm5T6Lj_XEWWG2RAHzUgX6y5AiC [accessed 14/01/2025]

against Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa and defend the right of all women to dissent against the imposition of religion by right wing sections of our communities. We were called 'Islamophobes.' It was a way of shutting down debate and dissent within our communities.

The term 'islamophobia' was actually first used by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran to accuse Iranian women, who objected to his imposition of the hijab, of being Islamophobes (Tax, 2013)[2]. In Britain, too, it was religious authorities who pushed for the adoption of 'Islamophobia' as they were concerned that 'anti-Muslim hatred or racism' would not protect mosques and madrassas from criticism.

We urge you therefore to keep an important space open for dissent by dropping the term Islamophobia and adopting the term anti-Muslim racism.

Understanding the current context of racism

The current climate is shaped by an overlay of racial and religious supremacist ideologies that share frameworks which lay claim to a racial or religious purity dependent on marking out groups of Others, dehumanising those Others and condemning them as enemies and as a threat to the status quo or to the betterment of their society. Networks of racial and religious supremacists also share a nostalgic harking back to 'golden days', particularly periods that predate rights for women and LGBT peoples. And they share in gendered ideologies that seek a return to times when men's superior position was secure, insist on male headship of families, and legitimise men's entitlement to sex (Dhaliwal and Kelly, 2020)[3]. Moreover, they share a push for the subjugation of women back to the home environment and the promotion or legitimation of various forms of violence against women in the public sphere (Dhaliwal and Kelly, 2020)[4]. These ideologies are carried and acted upon by global networks of Far Right and religious fundamentalist organisations of all religious hues.

The problem with 'Islamophobia'

The term Islamophobia has passed into popular language and is being used as a common-sense term but, as you can see from above, it carries a problematic history. Anti-racists may use the term to refer to attacks on Muslims but the term Islamophobia has the effect of moving these experiences from an analysis of structural, systemic, and institutionalised racism to an irrational individualised fear or 'phobia' of Islam. It erases the connections with other forms of racism, which are often manifestations of exactly the same axis of power, violence, ideology and policies (such as the contemporary and historical characterisation of Jews, Roma-

[2] Tax, M. (2013) 'Unpacking the idea of Islamophobia' posted on *openDemocracy*, dated 20th May. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/unpacking-idea-of-islamophobia-0/ [last accessed 14/01/2025].
[3] Dhaliwal, S. and Kelly, L. (2020) *Literature review: The links between radicalisation and VAWG*. CWASU: London. Available at: https://cwasu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/radicalisation_and_vawg.pdf [Last accessed 14/01/25]
[4] ibid.

Travellers, Arabs and immigrants as dirty, uncivilised and barbaric). The framework of Islamophobia takes us down the road of protecting religious sensibilities, enabling blasphemy law through the back door, and focusing policy on religious accommodation, demands that are themselves shaped by fundamentalists (Patel, 2022)[5].

Muslim fundamentalists have used the term to stop any criticism of Islam, Muslim texts and practices, and to de-legitimise ex-Muslims and Muslims that choose not to believe or refuse to practice some parts of the religion (see Tax, 2013)[6]. In the UK, there is widespread misconception that the term Islamophobia was introduced by the anti-racist Runnymede Trust to refer to specific racism directed at Muslims. But as we have detailed above, the religious authoritarian history of the term Islamophobia began with Khomeini and continues today, and has been central to the political projects of Muslim fundamentalist organisations within the UK. Their objective is to impose specific and limited understandings of Islam on a diverse range of Muslim communities within the UK, to impose a fixed sense of Islam, to shut off any other interpretations or criticism, and further their own political projects through the imposition of dress codes, prayer facilities, Sharia courts and gender segregation within schools and workplaces. The term Islamophobia has assumed that Islam is homogeneous and this denies the multiple and diverse forms of Islam in the UK and across the globe.

The fact that Islamophobia is a central part of religious authoritarian lexicon and strategy has led to situations where anyone challenging them and their projects or demands is accused of being Islamophobic[7]. In our experience and that of organisations like One Law for All and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, this includes:

- The individual women and minoritised women's organisations that campaign and lobby for state intervention to protect women from violence within their communities and assert the right of women to leave marriages and extended families where their human rights and autonomy are being undermined or violated;
- Everyone that challenges the way that religion curtails women's rights, LGBT rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of belief including the right to atheism or different interpretations of religious and cultural festivals. For instance, where the head teacher at Anderton Park school in Birmingham was accused of sexualising children and Islamophobia when she simply expanded the discussion of diverse family forms to include same sex relationships.

[5] Patel, P. (2022). The APPG, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism. *Feminist Dissent*, Issue 6, pp. 205-229. Available at: https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/1268 [Last accessed 14/01/25].
[6] Tax, M. (2013) 'Unpacking the idea of Islamophobia' posted on *openDemocracy*, dated 20th May. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/unpacking-idea-of-islamophobia-0/ [last accessed 14/01/2025].
[7] Patel, P. (2022). The APPG, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism. *Feminist Dissent*, Issue 6, pp. 205-229. Available at: https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/1268 [Last accessed 14/01/25].

- Challenging gender segregation in the name of religious beliefs as in our campaign against UUK guidance legitimising gender segregation where invited speakers demanded it.[8]
- Challenging the imposition of parallel legal systems to govern family life (including child custody, inheritance, marriage and divorce) which undermine Muslim women's access to justice and equality. See: https://onelawforall.org.uk/ ;
- Ahmadiyyas and other sects within Islam who do not conform to fixed understandings and representations of Islam;
- Atheists and those who seek to leave Islam are considered apostates and lose contact with family and community. See - https://ex-muslim.org.uk/
- Anti-fundamentalist activists that challenge the unethical partnerships between human rights and civil liberties groups and Muslim fundamentalists like CAGE and MEND; Gita Sahgal, head of Gender Unit at Amnesty International lost her job for questioning these links - see: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/feb/09/amnesty-sahgal-rights-row
- Anyone that questions the projection of a transnational geographical space that is deemed to be 'Muslim lands'.[9]

We must not resort to the conceptual framework of the Muslim-Right to challenge racism. As we highlight here, the cost of doing so is the undermining of the right to dissent and doubt, the right to free speech and expression, the rights to bodily autonomy, the right to live free from violence, and the right to freedom of religion (as in the Ahmadiyyas and other sects) AND ALSO the right to freedom from religion as in the case of ex-Muslims. We must not feed the divisive rhetoric of all racial and religious supremacists who seek to split the ability of minoritised communities to respond effectively to racist attacks and state policies that affect all of them.
Moreover, we previously submitted evidence in June 2018 to a consultation on Islamophobia held by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims where we raised additional concerns.[10]

- The framework of Islamophobia leads us down the road of religious offence and therefore blasphemy law;
- It focuses institutional responses on religious accommodation thereby enlarging the spaces of influence of religious fundamentalists rather than tackling racism;
- The success of Muslim fundamentalists in getting recognition for Islamophobia is leading to parallel attempts by other fundamentalists, such as the Hindu-Right in the UK, to limit criticism of their agendas and activities by asserting the term Hinduphobia;

[8] See - - see: https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/news/campaign-against-gender-apartheid-in-uk-universities/
[9] Tax, M. (2013) 'Double bind: tied up in knots on the left' posted to *openDemocracy* on 5th February. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/double-bind-tied-up-in-knots-on-left/ [Last accessed 14/01/25].
[10] For a reflective discussion of this submission and responses to it see: Patel, P. (2022) Patel, P. (2022). The APPG, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism. *Feminist Dissent*, Issue 6, pp. 205-229. Available at: https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/1268. [Last accessed 14/01/25].

- Similarly Sikh fundamentalist factions claimed they were facing phobias when they were challenged on their aggressive demonstrations against interfaith marriages both inside and outside gurdwaras;
- This is a part of a process of the institutionalisation of multifaithist governance where minoritised communities are governed through fundamentalist religious leaderships and religious organisations, and where criticism of their interests and demands is shut down by accusations of Islamophobia;
- that artists and dissenters are as likely to be caught by a definition of Islamophobia (even a basic definition as the Runnymede Trust one that refers to a fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims) as anti-Muslim racists/Far-Right;
- That the use of allegations of Islamophobia has a serious impact on ECHR Article 10 on the right to freedom of expression, and Article 9 on freedom of thought, belief and religion. Judgements have noted that people with religious beliefs should expect their beliefs to be critiqued;
- Islam is not a race/ethnicity, it is a set of ideas and beliefs and like any set of ideas and beliefs must be open to criticism;
- Islamophobia has privileged racism against particular groups when they actually share experiences of racism with other Black and minoritised ethnicities - indeed some groups such as African-Caribbean people are disproportionately overrepresented in prisons, care homes, school exclusions etc.;
- To see Islamophobia as a specific discrimination strand, set apart from racism, is to reinforce a hierarchy of oppression, and attempt to separate out aspects of racism that cannot be separated out vis-à-vis an overlay of anti-immigration and colour racism - and acts as a barrier to solidarity.

The experiences of 'Muslim' women

'Muslim' women are ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse. The term encompasses puritans, conservatives, secularists, agnostics and non-believers. Being Muslim can be as much a cultural identity as it is a religious belief. However, right wing factions within Muslim communities have attempted to shut down the more liberal interpretations, expressions and traditions within the broad church of Islam and have been actively trying to fix what counts as 'Muslim' and particularly 'Muslim' women's place, dress and expected conduct. These processes have also been pushed through as policy and implemented by state institutions - for instance, see the guidance for schools by the Muslim Council of Britain, which advises on kinds of hijab that Muslim women ought to be wearing at school.

It certainly is the case that Muslim women have been targeted in racist attacks where they are wearing hijab and other forms of religious dress. Equally, they have been attacked by members of their own communities for not wearing it or the 'correct' version of it. They have been

subjected to increasing pressures to cover up (and 'modesty culture' and 'honour culture' in general).

And, in SBS's experience as a women's centre that has supported Muslim women for over four decades, most of their experiences of violence and abuse are the same as that of other Asian, African and Caribbean women accessing support at the centre: they are subject to the same cultural pressures of shame, honour and modesty as apply to a range of minoritised women, they are subjected to the same acts of violence (honour based violence, forced marriage and FGM), and they are subjected to the same structural and institutional racisms (such as multiculturalist denial, institutionalised racism, and immigration controls) as all the other women that we support now and historically.

Any government inquiry into the position of Muslim women must make the connections with the gendered racism faced by other minoritised women. These overlaps became clear from the Muslim Women's Network's own assertion that non-Muslim Asian women and also Muslim African women responded to their call out for case examples of sexually exploited Muslim women (Gohir, 2013).[11] The term 'Muslim women' is a problematic category that is enmeshed with national, transnational, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic specificities. All the Asian, African and Caribbean women we support are also subjected to colour racism, institutionalised racism, socio-economic deprivation, cultural legitimations of violence against, and racist immigration controls. All their experiences need to be addressed as part of an inquiry into the gendered dimensions of community cohesion and racism.

Moreover, isolating some women's experiences as being about 'Muslimness' can also lead agencies to seek religious, theological, or faith-based solutions rather than feminist ones (as was the case with the government's inquiry into Sharia Councils). At the same time, secular Muslim women are deemed inauthentic and denied a seat at the table of these discussions (Rehman, 2019)[12]. Often the views of patriarchal religious leaders and theologians are privileged on issues where secular organisations have the greatest experience of providing support and safety.

These developments are taking place in a context where there has been a seismic de-secularisation of services and policy interventions since the introduction of New Labour's 'faith

[11] Gohir, S. (2013) *Unheard Voices*. MWNUK: Birmingham. Available at: https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf [last accessed 14/01/25].
[12] Rehman, Y. (2019) Walking the Line: Prevent and the Women's Voluntary Sector in a Time of Austerity, *Feminist Dissent*, 4, pp. 69-87. Available at: https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/329 [Last accessed 14/01/25].

agenda' (see Dhaliwal, 2011[13]; and Dhaliwal, 2020[14]). Even Southall Black Sisters had to fight back against the threat of losing our funding in 2008 when the implementation of a new Cohesion and Integration framework led to the decommissioning of 'by and for' organisations and simultaneous state funding of Muslim specific services that completely reconstructed VAWG provision within local areas (see Patel and Sen, 2011[15]; Dhaliwal, 2011[16]; and Dhaliwal, 2020[17]). There are examples of how this has strengthened the hand of parallel legal systems and religious mediation, pushing survivors back into violent relationships and households. In the meantime, we assert the right to secular provision as an essential framework for enabling freedom of religion AND freedom from religion, and the best way to ensure VAWG services can create and sustain alternative spaces and futures for women that are fleeing violence and abuse.

Our recommendations

1. We urge the Women's Equality Commission to drop the use of the term 'Islamophobia' - religious fundamentalists are keen to secure a definition of Islamophobia that enables its agenda. These forces have long since tried to prevent organisations like ours from critiquing religion and they push Muslim women into ever decreasing spaces, making it impossible for them to reject modesty and purity cultures, to question the hijab and other forms of religious dress, and stop people from questioning part or all of the religion. As can be seen from some of the examples and histories detailed above, these right-wing forces have engaged in violence and threatened violence against Muslims and ex-Muslims who question their version of Islam or critique the power of religious organisations.
2. Minoritised women's experiences of racism are shaped by the intersection of sexism and racism. The way that particular religions are characterised and targeted by racists is part and parcel of the axis of race is anti-Muslim racism and needs to be understood as a form of racism but not to the exclusion of other racisms.
3. The terms of the proposed Cohesion Inquiry must look at the experiences of minoritised women as a whole and not seek to set apart the experiences of Muslim women. To look only at Muslim women, and through a religious lens, is exactly the division that racial and religious supremacist factions seek to instil within the policy arena and within our

[13] Dhaliwal, S. (2011) Religion, Moral Hegemony and Local Cartographies of Power: Feminist Reflections on Religion in Local Politics. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London [Thesis]. Available at: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/7802/ [last accessed 14/01/25].

[14] Dhaliwal, S. (2020) *Extremism and VAWG: A Roundtable*. CWASU: London. Available at: https://cwasu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Extremism-and-VAWG-Roundtable.pdf

[15] Patel, P. and Sen, U. (2011) Cohesion, Faith and Gender. Oxfam and Southall Black Sisters.

[16] Dhaliwal, S. (2011) Religion, Moral Hegemony and Local Cartographies of Power: Feminist Reflections on Religion in Local Politics. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London [Thesis]. Available at: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/7802/ [last accessed 14/01/25].

[17] Dhaliwal, S. (2020) *Extremism and VAWG: A Roundtable*. CWASU: London. Available at: https://cwasu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Extremism-and-VAWG-Roundtable.pdf

everyday lives. Our experience in 45 years of supporting minoritised women in the UK demonstrates that their experiences of racism and sexism are incredibly similar in terms of the way that a number of community and state practices and policies coalesce to restrict their space for action, their rights and their autonomy. In particular, the pressure of cultural codes such as honour and shame, the imposition of religious doctrine and belief, the limited spaces for non-belief and agnosticism, the experience of racism from statutory services, the struggle to survive in a 'hostile environment' for migrants and decades of governments that are intent on strengthening immigration controls.

We should instead have one (unifying and unified) approach based on principles of anti-discrimination, equality and human rights, including freedom of expression. This framework already exists but needs improving and robust implementation at all levels of the criminal justice system. We would also encourage better guidance for police, prosecutors and judges for investigating, charging, trying and sentencing hate crime cases, and call for clear accountability mechanisms for victims when the criminal justice system fails them.

Yours Sincerely,

Selma Taha, Executive Director, Southall Black Sisters
Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson, One Law for All and Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain