# How we can counteract Islamophobia in our schools – and our communities

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News

As a Muslim woman who wears a *niqab* (face veil) in America, I'm thankful that I haven't had to experience a traumatic incident of Islamophobia, unlike most of my friends. I know people who've had their headscarves pulled, had racial slurs yelled at them, or been interrogated for hours at the airport.

Rather, I've experienced a series of "it-could-have-been-worse" moments just small enough to sweep under the rug each time. Like when a classmate insisted that I wore the veil, not of my own choice, but because I was simply brainwashed into believing I had to. Or when a man at a polling station yelled that people like me were the reason this country was going to hell – as I handed him his ballot as an election judge. Or the look in my parents' eyes as I, just recently turned 18, was pulled away from my family for "additional screening" on a family vacation to the Middle East.

The aggressors varied in age, race, and gender, but all espoused the same ignorance. Though I consider these incidents, and others like them, small, they have permeated my psyche enough to create an unshakable sense of that I must always be cautious, alert, "on." A sense that, whether I am in a classroom, a polling place, or getting on a plane, I do not belong here.

And I never want any of my students to feel that way.

As an educator, I offer some ways that teachers, youth workers, and community members can counter the ignorance that fuels anti-Muslim sentiment.

## Educate yourself and others.

As an educator, I could not allow my students, Muslim or not, to walk into the real world espousing the same ignorance and hatred that I saw (and still see) growing up. I consider it my duty as an educator to address the severe gap in our students' understanding of Islam and Muslims.

That is what the Countering Anti-Muslim Racism in Schools curriculum, which I helped create with AFSC and the University of Illinois - Chicago, sets out to do. The curriculum, designed for grades six to 12, is a deep dive into the way we see the world and the people around us. We are constantly inundated with stereotypes and narratives that do not represent the most marginalized of our communities. Where do these stereotypes come from? How does America's history of colonialism influence our understanding of other communities and cultures? How do our centuries-old narratives of Orientalism and anti-Blackness affect real people – our neighbors, classmates, colleagues – today?

The curriculum follows a four-part model in which students learn about institutional racism, the long history of anti-Muslim racism in America, its effects on the lives of Muslims today, and how they can take action against both individual and institutional forms of anti-Muslim racism. The curriculum uses primary and secondary sources, maps, art, novels, and

poetry to provide students the opportunity to challenge and analyze various modes of information. It creates spaces for tough conversations, critical analysis, and thoughtful reflection.

## Learn to shift the narrative.

I've realized that often our students – and many adults – are simply repeating the rhetoric and ideas of mainstream, often biased news and television shows. It's not effective for us to respond with "not all Muslims are terrorists" – and in fact, <u>it can do more harm than good to mythbust</u>.

Instead, we must actively create spaces for critical conversations that allow people to challenge the media they consume, to make connections across our complicated history, and to question the lens through which they see the world.

Our work aims to moves students (and educators) away from the use of the word "Islamophobia" and toward "anti-Muslim racism" because it attempts to encompass the institutional and systemic reasons that Muslims today are vilified.

**The term anti-Muslim racism does two things:**

1. It shifts the conversation to include how institutionally racist policies like the Muslim ban or <u>unfounded community surveillance programs</u> allow for these individual acts of racism to occur.

2. It references the way the Muslim identity has become racialized. While Muslims are not a race, the way Muslims are seen portrayed in the media (brown skin, a beard or hijab, ethnic-sounding names, etc.) creates a racial understanding of what a Muslim looks like. Which is also why non-Muslims (like Sikhs and Arab Christians) also experience the effects of anti-Muslim racism.

So as we head back into another school year, I ask you all to do all you can to stop anti-Muslim racism – and create spaces where all students and every one of our community members feels safe and welcome.

Question everything. Challenge the media you consume. Know that you have the power to make a change – as individuals and institutionally.

And for my fellow educators, hold your students to the same standards. They are capable of far more than we can imagine. They will not disappoint.