

SAWCC Statement on Anti-Muslim Racism*

The South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC) is a service, support and advocacy organization for South Asian Women and their families in the Greater Montreal/ Tiohtià:ke tsi ionhwéntsare area, founded in 1981. We are greatly alarmed by the entrenched and growing anti-Muslim racism in our midst, which resulted in the massacre in the mosque in Quebec City in January 2017 and has continued overtly with the far right attempting to take the streets, and covertly with stealth attacks, graffiti and arson.

There is systemic racism and there is commonplace, everyday racism too, and they feed off each other. Muslims are blamed for whatever racism they are subjected to, paradoxically, but not unsurprisingly, because the lot of victims is to be blamed for their victimisation. And Islam, the religion gets called out too. It would be unthinkable for any other religion to be subjected to such overt vilification. Yet for Muslims and Islam this has become normative.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, at the time of the Crusades, or later, with colonialism and imperialism, while about power and resources, has been framed in the West as civilizational difference with Muslims being the ones always falling short. In the second half of the 20th century, the Cold War created a definable Other in communism, but by the end of the century, with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the need to have an Evil Other, the civilizational enemy once again became Islam. 9/11 ushered in a sea change leading to what we are living today. In a contagion spread around the world, Islam and Muslims have become convenient scapegoats for all manner of ills. The 20th and 21st centuries have also seen a sharp upswing in wars of imperialist aggression and regime change centred in the Middle East. This has unleashed forces of resistance as well as of reaction. Many scholars and politicians agree that these wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the bombing of Libya have only served to create chaos and breeding grounds for extremist groups, and the vast majority of victims of terrorist attacks have been, and continue to be Muslims in these countries.

As a result of anti-Muslim racism, people in our communities feel great fear for themselves and their families. And this is not imagined. There is overt and covert discrimination. This is an intolerable and unacceptable situation. When children feel afraid because of their names, how they look, how they and their families dress, this is unacceptable. When women who wear hijabs are spat on, this is shocking. When in anticipation of violence a woman stays as far from the metro rails as she can because she is afraid of being pushed onto the lines, this is intolerable. At the core is the view – conscious or unconscious – of a Muslim as Outsider, an Other. And from that flows the concomitant view that she should diminish her Muslimness in order to fit in. We contend that it is highly problematic to think or say, "I am not a racist, but, I do think it would be good if they did not...cover their hair, pray so observantly, etc. etc." That's the slippery slope. That's the Us and Them. Essentially it's saying, "If they were more like Us things would be okay."

Racially essentializing youth angst and insecurity always as 'radicalization', violence against women as 'honour' crimes, or child or youth abuse as 'forced marriage', when we know this isn't so and there is ample evidence to the contrary is reckless and ill-conceived. It often misses what the actual issues may be and results in heightened Othering. Majority communities are not subjected to this kind of scrutiny and policing; outright, uninvestigated assumptions are not made in their case.

We see patriarchy at the core of all oppressions. We have struggled and continue to struggle to ensure that we enjoy choice without coercion in all aspects of our lives. We assert our right to live in dignity as human beings. And we assert the same for our families and communities. And we will not change just to make people feel more comfortable around us. Everyone has a right to be the way they are. Governments, state agencies, the media, educators, intellectuals and policy shapers must acknowledge the role they play in generating and sustaining anti-Muslim racism. They have a moral responsibility and ethical duty to de-escalate the racism and challenge it wherever it is. We reject tokenism and platitudes. Making Muslims scapegoats and political punching bags, and using Islam as a wedge issue to score cheap political points is a dangerous game. History has shown us that sowing or ignoring hatred eventually tears an entire society apart and those originally targeted are not the only victims.

[SAWCC is a member of the Quebec Women's Federation, Femmes de diverses origines, l'R des centres des femmes du Quebec, La Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI)]

*Even as we focus on anti-Muslim racism, we acknowledge the daily racism experienced in particular by Indigenous and other racialized peoples in Quebec, even as specificities may be different.