**UNVEILING ISLAMOPHOBIA:**

**THE VICTIMISATION OF VEILED MUSLIM WOMEN, Irene Zempi, (2014)**

In a post-9/11 climate, Islam and Muslims are under siege. Islam is understood as a violent and backward religion and culture, Muslim men are perceived as the embodiment of terrorism and extremism, and veiled Muslim women are viewed as the personification of gender oppression. Veiled Muslim women are also seen as dangerous and threatening to notions of public safety and national cohesion by virtue of being fully covered in the public sphere. Such stereotypes mark veiled Muslim women as ‘ideal’ targets to attack when they are seen in public.

Drawing on qualitative data elicited through individual and focus group interviews with veiled Muslim women, individual interviews with key stakeholders and policy-makers as well as an ethnographic approach, this study sheds light on the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women as actual and potential victims of Islamophobia in public places. The study investigates the nature and impact of this victimisation upon veiled Muslim women, their families and wider Muslim communities. It also examines the factors that contribute to the under-reporting of this victimisation and outlines the coping strategies which are used by veiled Muslim women in response to their experiences of Islamophobia.

The study demonstrates that Islamophobic victimisation is understood as ‘part and parcel’ of wearing the veil rather than as single ‘one-off’ incidents, and this reflects the tendency of veiled Muslim women not to report such incidents to the police. The study also reveals how repeat incidents of supposedly ‘low-level’ forms of hostility such as name-calling, persistent staring and a sense of being ignored place a potentially huge emotional burden on victims. The threat of Islamophobic abuse and violence has longlasting effects for both actual and potential victims including making them afraid to step out of their ‘comfort zone’. Ultimately, the study offers a model of vulnerability of veiled Muslim women as potential victims of Islamophobia in public places based on the visibility of their Muslim identity coupled with the visibility of other aspects of their identity alongside factors such as space as well as media reports of local, national and international events related to

Islam, Muslims and the veil.

In addition to individual and focus group interviews, the study also included an ethnographic element, which involved wearing the veil in public places in Leicester. This aspect of the research was conducted over set periods of time during the daytime only. As such, it was a complementary approach to the study which provided insights beyond the scope of a more conventional approach.

In total, I wore the veil for four weeks as part of my daily routine in public places in the city of Leicester such as streets, shopping centres and public means of transport. Although my aim was to be ‘natural’ in terms of visiting places that I would normally visit, for example, when doing my shopping in Leicester city centre, I decided not to wear the veil if it was late at night (mainly for safety reasons). The setting of public space was an open setting, which means that I assumed a covert role since I did not disclose the fact that I was a researcher to members of the public. This approach carries both advantages and risks. On the one hand, using a covert role meant that members of the public were not aware of my status as a researcher and as a result they could behave naturally in front of me. This covert role was essential to the success of the ethnographic research. It is highly likely that people’s awareness of my status as a researcher would influence how they treated me, which would potentially mask the true dimensions of public expressions of Islamophobic prejudice. On the other hand, the ethnographic part of the study was fraught with difficulties, and indeed in certain circumstances with danger. After wearing the veil for a few days I felt that I was under constant threat and as a result I had to be alert all the time whilst wearing the veil in public. The various situations that I encountered because of my perceived Muslim identity placed me in situations of, perhaps, inevitable verbal abuse and potential physical attacks, situations that were probably ‘normal’ for both victims and perpetrators. I encountered public expressions of hostility such as persistent staring, angry looks, being ignored, Islamophobic comments such as ‘Terrorist’, ‘Muslim bomber’ and ‘Go back to Afghanistan’, and as a result, I felt vulnerable to physical attacks, particularly when the streets were not crowded.

Definitions: *Niqab* is a veil that covers a woman’s hair and face, leaving only the eyes clearly visible. There are different ways of wearing the *niqab* but the great

majority of the women interviewed for this thesis wore a black *jilbab* with a black *niqab* to cover their face. The *niqab* can also be worn with a separate eye veil.