The politics of (in)visibility:
The everyday movements of Muslim women in sectarian Belfast

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Overview

My research examines belonging, place-making, and movement of Muslim women in Belfast, Northern Ireland. This presentation will focus upon one concept that arose during my research: visibility.

1. I provide a general overview of my broader PhD field work
2. I discuss the local context and Muslim populations in Northern Ireland
3. I examine Northern Ireland’s struggle with hate crime and Islamophobia
4. I document the intentional invisibility of Belfast’s Muslim population
5. I specifically address the visibility and invisibility of Muslim Women
My PhD Research

• Through ethnographic examination, I look at the relationships Muslim women develop (belonging), the ways their movements are structured (movement), and the spaces they inhabit, as a form of place-making (women’s spaces) in Belfast.

• I examine the ways in which Muslim women have established a place for themselves in Belfast, navigating complex social structures and overcoming restrictions associated with gender, racial and religious discrimination, and immigration.
Northern Ireland Context

- Northern Ireland is a place with a recent history of sectarianism, conflict and division.
- The ‘Troubles’ refers to a period of violent sectarian conflict which divided the region from 1969-1998.
- Despite the peace process, sectarianism still structures daily experiences - where and when people feel safe, how they move around the city, and where they spend time.
- Paramilitaries still exist, holding power over spaces and people.
- Migrants and minority groups must navigate the resulting complex social and spatial divisions.

The Muslim Population in Northern Ireland

• The first Muslims arrived in Northern Ireland in the 1800s.
• The population has more than doubled since the 2011 census. Today the population is estimated at over 10,000 (Northern Ireland population is 1.8 million).
• The majority of asylum seekers and refugees identify as Muslim and account for a substantial portion of the recent population growth.
• Muslim migrants come from > 42 countries with 24 different languages.
• Migration occurs for work, study, marriage, and to seek asylum/refugee status.
• Muslim populations are not just migrants, but also include native-born minorities and those who have chosen to convert to Islam.

Source: Photo of Sign by Amanda Lubit, Feb 2020
Islamophobia / Hate Crime

“Although we are a caring, kind and welcoming society usually, we do have a serious problem... While one problem is receding [sectarianism], one is growing exponentially [hate incidents].”

– Judge Desmond Marrinan (lead of hate crime review)

• Racism and Islamophobia are significant daily issues for Muslims.
• Experiences of verbal attack, egg throwing, intimidation, and physical assault are common.
• These experiences lead to feelings of alienation and fear that prevents minority and migrant integration and participation in society.
• Brexit compounded the problem, proliferating xenophobic rhetoric.

Source: Photo of a “No Place for Hate” Bus Shelter Ad by Amanda Lubit, Feb 2020
Invisibility of the Muslim Population

“We are a well established community but we have been largely invisible.” - Staff at the Islamic Centre

**Invisibility**

- The two Islamic places of worship in Belfast (pictured) are nearly invisible, blending into rows of townhouses.
- Small metal plaques are only readable close-up, making them largely invisible to those who do not already know they exist.

**Visibility**

- There are places and times when the Muslim community intentionally makes itself visible.
- E.g. places of worship open to the public allowing people to come in, look around, and ask questions, in an attempt to demystify Islam and counteract negative stereotypes.

Source: Photos of "mosques" by Amanda Lubit, Feb 2020
Muslim Women – A Visible Minority

• Wearing clothing that marks them as Muslim (e.g. head coverings) heightens a woman’s visibility, making her more vulnerable to unwanted attention and Islamophobic attacks.

• This heightened vulnerability interferes with movement and place-making.

• One woman explained:
  In Islam, women cover themselves out of modesty and to protect from excessive attention. But in Belfast, wearing Islamic clothing calls attention to women and makes them more vulnerable to discrimination, verbal and physical attacks.

Source: Photo of Muslim women on Belfast streets by Amanda Lubit, Sept. 2019
How Visibility Impacts Women’s Movement

• Muslim women negotiate the vulnerability that comes with their visibility in different ways.

• Some choose to remove Islamic clothing to become less visible at certain times and places, increasing their opportunities and safety.

• Many women absent themselves from certain public spaces – e.g. avoiding public transportation where bus drivers and other passengers frequently harass them and their children.

• Access to public spaces is also restricted by other factors. Without childcare, transportation, or accessible spaces women cannot participate in a variety of activities including: prayers, trainings, exercise, socializing, and leisure.

Source: Photo of a public bus in Belfast with a “No Place for Hate” poster, by Amanda Lubit, Feb. 2019
Women’s Experiences of Hate

Quotes from Muslim women at a Hate Crime meeting, on their experiences of racial and religious prejudice:

• “She say ‘Get out of here. Why you come to our country. You come to destroy our lives,’ in front of my children. Housing Authority said nothing they can do and if I complain, the paramilitary will come.”

• “They take salt for ice and throw it through their windows if they are open. Teenagers come and pee on the windows in front of her and her kids.”

• “I reported my neighbor three times and they record them as hate crimes. For me I feel horrible. Why they no do anything to her, why she keep doing it? ... We not bad people. We here to live with dignity not to lose it in front of our kids... I know people here out of conflict, but it not fair.”
Forced Movement as a Form of Invisibility

• Forced movement is a common occurrence for Muslims in Belfast, due to Islamophobia, sectarianism, and housing policy.

• Many report chronic harassment and intimidation by neighbours.

• Yet due to a lack of hate crime legislation, there is little the police, prosecutors or housing officials can due to protect Muslim residents in their own home.

• The Housing Authority commonly forces the victims to move.
  
  • “The police went to neighbor and said ‘this a hate crime’, but she didn't stop. The solution is to move me.”

  • “Here 13 years and have a British passport... She feel always that she is not accepted in any house. In 6th house now.”

Source: Photo of Graffiti denouncing racism in an area of Belfast (Holyland) with a large number of minorities
By Amanda Lubit, Dec 2019
Experiences of Women Who Convert

- Prior to converting, women from Northern Ireland identified as Protestant or Catholic. As the city is segregated by identity, they lived in Catholic or Protestant areas (see map).
- As the dominant majority in Belfast, Protestants experience greater freedom of movement while Catholics are restricted.
- Upon converting, women’s visibility and movement shifts dramatically.
- Protestant women converts find the city **shrinks** – racism is worst in Protestant areas with strong paramilitary presence, making women unwelcome and in danger. They avoid these areas.
- Catholic women converts find the city **expands** - “For me, Belfast is bigger now. You can go to places you never did before from a Catholic background.”
Summary

• The sectarian context of Northern Ireland combines with pervasive acts of Islamophobia to limit opportunities and movements of Muslim women.

• As a visible minority, Muslim women disproportionately experience discrimination and violence.

• Women respond to these circumstances by making themselves invisible – removing visible markers of identity, avoiding public spaces, moving out of hostile neighbourhoods, etc.
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