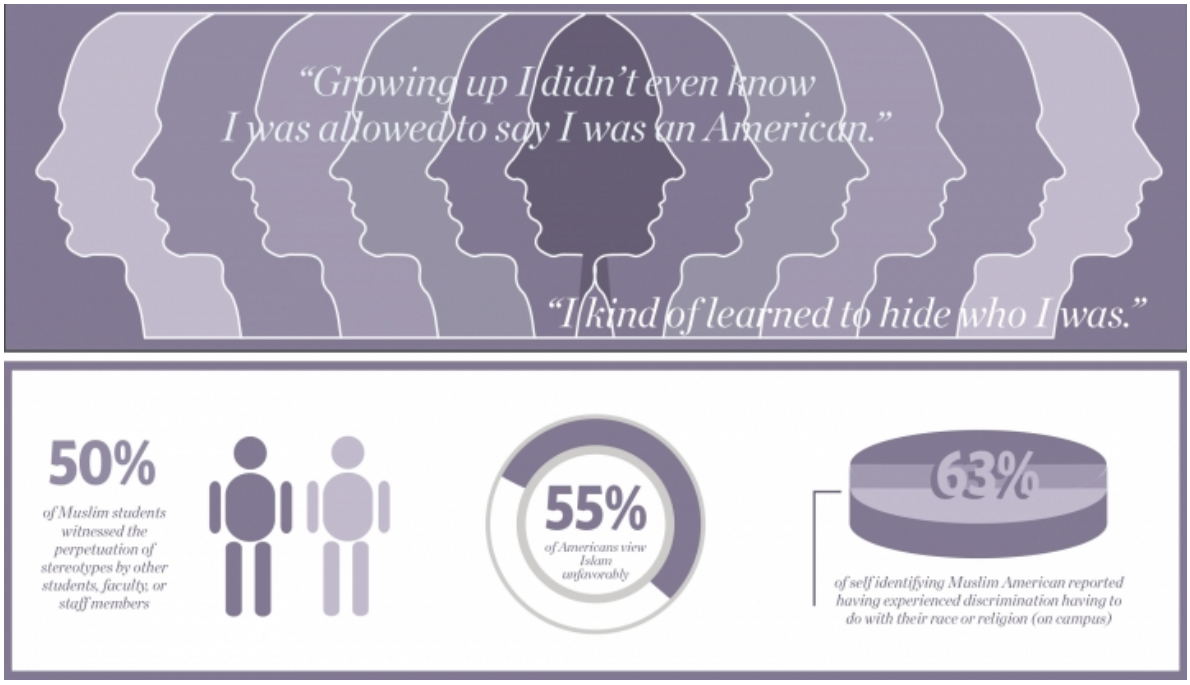
Muslim students say Islamophobia is frequent, underreported on campus

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Infographic by Michelle Phillips and Francesca Kielb

LYDIA MURRAY
Daily Staff Reporter

On the day before the 15th anniversary of 9/11, a Muslim couple was harassed at a downtown restaurant on State Street.

According to LSA senior Jennifer Alpert, a witness to the incident, a man — who she described as a white male in his late 30s — shouted at the couple while they were leaving Noodles & Company, cursing and relating the couple and Islam to the devil.

Alpert said everyone was in shock — no one reacted at first.

The woman then began to cry. Moments later, Alpert said someone approached the couple and offered words of comfort.

The restaurant manager said the couple quickly left the property. No employees witnessed the incident, the police were not called — and life, the bustle of students on the Diag during a warm fall Saturday in Ann Arbor, carried on.

"It just surprised me," Alpert said. "Ann Arbor is very liberal town and this shows that it can happen anywhere, not just at like, a Trump rally."

The incident at Noodles & Company was one, isolated moment. But for many Muslim students on campus, these stories are not surprising — and they say they are more frequent than others in the campus community likely realize.

A long-term trend

Nationwide, rhetoric around Islamophobia has heightened in the past year after terror attacks in Paris and San Bernardino and statements from politicians like Republican president nominee Donald Trump, who is calling for a ban on immigration for all Muslims.

According to the FBI, hate crimes have decreased for every group except for Muslim-Americans since 2013, and according to a recent YouGov poll, 55 percent of Americans view Islam unfavorably.

On campus, several incidents over the past year have brought discussions around Islamophobia to the forefront. In March, students found anti-Islam chalkings covering the Diag.In April 2015, controversy arose over the screening of the film

“American Sniper,” on campus, with several Muslim students on campus reporting receiving hateful messages and in some cases death threats.

American Culture Prof. Evelyn Alsultany, director of Arab and Muslim American Studies, said there is a trend of prominent acts of hate against Muslim students nearly every semester.

“In my experience on this campus, something explicit happens at least once a semester,” she said. “Every semester there seems to be an issue that comes up that highlights Islamophobia in our society and the impact it actually has on students. Also I think it’s more common than we would expect to be on the subtle level.”

This trend has also held true into this semester. Last Monday, following a week of similar incidents and subsequent protests, fliers containing anti-Muslim sentiments were posted across campus.

“In regards to the posters, I don’t know if there is really all that much to say other than I’m not terribly surprised,”

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LSA senior Adam Mageed, president of the campus Muslim Coalition, agreed with Alsultany about the frequency of the events — something always happens, he said.

“In regards to the posters, I don’t know if there is really all that much to say other than I’m not terribly surprised,” he said.

According to the University’s Islamophobia Working Group’s report — submitted in February 2016 to the administration to be considered in the campus-wide Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiative — 63 percent of self-identifying Muslim-American students reported having experienced discrimination due to their religion.

Growing up different

LSA junior Haleemah Aqel said she isn’t sure when she first became aware that she was treated differently because of her ethnicity.

“I don’t remember much about elementary school or middle school, but there was always that difference,” she said, adding that high school was when she really began noticing outward aggression.

“Growing up I didn’t even know I was allowed say I was American.”

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In one instance, Aqel said, she had a coach who placed her on the bench for an entire game after blaming her for a negative remark on social media concerning them, which she said was posted by another student.

“I was the only brown, Arab-Muslim girl on the team,” she said. “He didn’t tell anyone on the team why I wasn’t playing … I went to our locker area and I was crying. I didn’t understand why.”

Aqel said this was not the only instance of hate in her high school experience. Students would slip notes into her locker with phrases like “terrorist”, and she would encounter hateful messages posted on social media by peers or teachers.

Throughout all of this, she said, she did not feel that the other students in her predominantly white school community ever truly supported or understood her.

“It was so painful because I tried talking to people about it, but I didn’t really have that support,” she said.

University alum Areeba Jibril said while growing up she noticed many of her community members felt a lack of safety following 9/11.

“I didn’t really understand what had happened,” she said. “I didn’t understand why everybody was so scared, but I knew there was this atmosphere of fear that had to do with my identity.”

She added that for a long time, she never felt she was allowed to refer to herself as an American due to this sense of being an outsider.

“I always knew that I was different,” she said. “Growing up I didn’t even know I was allowed say I was American, even though I grew up here, because I knew I was different. That’s a label that I’ve always had to fight to be able to call myself.”

Outward choices

Despite the discrimination Aqel described, she said she does not feel as targeted as some of her friends who choose to wear a hijab.

“I’m not visibly Muslim, but I see my friends and I think every day ‘I hope nothing happens to you.’ ”

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In particular, she noted a 2015 shooting at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where three Muslim students were killed in talking about her friend’s experiences.

“The one thing after every phone call (my mom) tells me ‘be careful, be careful’ and it’s scary that she says that,” she said. “I’m not visibly Muslim, but I see my friends and I think every day ‘I hope nothing happens to you’ … It’s something that’s always in the back of my mind, like, I don’t know what’s going to happen today.”

Mageed echoed this sentiment, saying he feels that he can often talk with people without them realizing he is Muslim.

“To the layman, I wouldn’t appear very Muslim-y, and because of that I kind of get to walk around as almost a bystander,” he said. “Sometimes that is beneficial.”

“I kind of learned to hide who I was,”

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Similar to Aqel and Mageed, LSA senior Tina Al-khersan said she feels she can often pass as white and avoid the discrimination given to her peers. However, for Al-khersan, this has meant losing part of her identity.

“I kind of learned to hide who I was,” she said. ‘I didn’t say ‘Oh, I’m Iraqi or I’m Muslim.’ It was just kind of ‘I am Tina’ … It was just trying to blend in. I’d been conditioned to hide these identities.”

Aqel, Al-khersan and Mageed all said they feel their lack of an obvious Muslim appearance has shielded them from discrimination that many of their friends face.

On the other hand, Jibril, who wears a headscarf, said her experiences on campus have differed from students who can more easily pass as white.

Her first day on campus as a transfer student in 2014, Jibril says she was spit on. Since then, she has faced discrimination in the form of what she described as small stereotypical comments nearly every day, and more aggressive confrontations at least every few weeks.

“We have to be worried when we are walking down the street — not only because we are women,” she said. “I feel a little extra paranoid because I’m wearing a headscarf, so sometimes that means I’ll be sexually harassed and sometimes that means I have to deal with Islamophobic comments.”

Jibril said she does not normally call the police for incidents such as being spit on or harassed, as the perpetrator often disappears quickly, and she does not believe the individual occurrences are significant enough to report.

However, despite experiences with hate, Jibril said she does not allow uncertainty to affect her daily life.

“Even if I feel unsafe, I feel like I have to act like I don’t,” she said. “I have to convince myself that I don’t care because I’m not going to let anyone take my freedom away because they have tried way too often.”

Each student interviewed noted that they cannot represent the thoughts and experiences of all Muslims. Jibril added that she thinks it is important to understand that Islamophobia doesn't just affect Muslims, but also people of other ethnicities or religions such as the Sikhs who are often subject to Muslim and Arab stereotypes.

Finding Community on Campus

Despite memories of discrimination, Aqel, Al-khersan and Mageed all agreed that coming to Ann Arbor was an improvement from their predominantly white hometowns because they were able to find a Muslim community on campus.

Al-khersan said she found a place of refuge within the Muslim Students' Association, which she was a member of the executive board in 2015.

"For me, I think more than anything they provided a community," she said. "More than anything they provided a place where I don't feel like I have to explain myself."

LSA senior Misba Saleem, vice president of MSA, said she first got involved with MSA when she came to campus her freshman year and is now continuing outreach to first-year students, so they know there is a safe place for them.

"We do a lot of outreach to freshmen," she said. "We want them to know that we have a really welcoming community with unconditional support for each other."

Mageed said one of the most positive aspects of having this community is the ability to be around people with similar experiences and spirituality.

"According to my own experience, I think there is a lot of benefit in feeling that sense of understanding with other people," he said. "People who can identify the questions that go through your mind and those feelings of discomfort you may sometimes experience."

Balancing reputation and reality

Ann Arbor often has a liberal reputation, bolstered by a all-Democratic City Council and a track record of voting consistently for Democratic state and federal officials. Because of that, it can seem separated from the Islamophobic rhetoric seen in other parts of the state and country, but all the students interviewed agreed that this is definitely not the case.

"Because of the liberalness of Ann Arbor I guess it does have that safety aspect of it, but those little attacks, seeing those makes me question 'Is this really a better place?'"

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Because of instances like the Diag chalking last spring, Aqel said there are times where the overall campus community reminds her of her experiences back home and she no longer feels welcome. She recalled a teacher during high school who told her she would be able to find a more welcoming community at the University.

"I just remember she said it will be a better place," she said. "Because of the liberalness of Ann Arbor I guess it does have that safety aspect of it, but those little attacks, seeing those makes me question 'Is this really a better place?' I mean it is, but why am I still dealing with these things?"

Alsultany said attacks on Muslim students happen across campus in the form of both macro and micro aggressions, such as insensitive or inappropriate comments based on stereotypes.

The Islamophobia Working Group report showed that 50 percent of Muslim students witnessed the perpetuation of stereotypes by other students, faculty or staff members.

Al-khersan said upon arriving on campus, she felt a great sense of community across the University. However, during her sophomore year following the "American Sniper" incident, that feeling disappeared.

"When I came to the University of Michigan I was so excited because I had this new Muslim community," she said. "I found a lot of comfort in that, but after my freshman year I feel like that romanticism kind of faded away."

After a time, she added, she also began to notice clear reflections of national Islamophobia in Ann Arbor.

"That's when I kind of started to realize that national climate is really connected to the Ann Arbor climate," she said. "We are at a pretty liberal school and it's kind of hard to connect the two, and we get a little comfortable where we are and don't connect the atmosphere of Ann Arbor to the national atmosphere."

Several students interviewed pointed to heightened national and local Islamophobia in recent months as a result of rhetoric in the presidential election from Trump, who has repeatedly called for a ban on Muslim immigration.

Jibril said she had initially hoped that what she deemed as Trump's obvious Islamophobia would bring the issue national attention and incite change, but that feeling was fleeting.

"Before he started talking, I felt that it was really hard for people to believe how prevalent Islamophobia was," she said. "When he started talking I almost felt like 'Oh, now there's no way you can deny it. It's right there.' … Now I think that has faded a little. People will still be making up excuses."

Mageed said he doesn't believe Trump or other recent events have increased Islamophobia, but rather validated those with existing anti-Islam feelings.

"These occurrences almost legitimize the stereotypical view that they have of a certain people," he said. "I'm not so sure that these events necessarily ignite anti-Muslim sentiment or create it, but more legitimize it in people who already possess those thoughts."

Finding ways to respond

Alsultany, Al-khersan and Saleem all agreed that the best way for students to help their Muslim peers is to learn more about their various cultures and the discrimination they face so that they can better prevent stereotyping.

Al-khersan said one of the most impactful ways students can intervene is by expressing support.

"If you see something say something," she said. "I feel like people are afraid if they see that if something happens — say someone said something Islamophobic — to approach that person and say 'Hey, I'm here and I support you' and I feel like that is one of the most powerful things you can do."

Saleem said it is vital that students understand not all Muslims are Arab-Muslims. She noted that there are Muslims in the Latinx community, and that large nations like Malaysia and Indonesia also have large Muslim populations.

Several campus groups are also attempting to coordinate responses to fight discrimination, such as the IWG. Asultany said the group is currently strategizing the best ways to do this with initiatives, such as training faculty to be more aware of microaggressions.

As well, the University released its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion plan last Thursday, which will provide additional funding for diversity related departments and research and expand Inclusive Teaching Professional Development programs. The plan takes into consideration the IWG's report, but largely remains vague on the issue of religious discrimination, focusing mostly on race.

Mageed said for stereotypes and culture to change, people must first look to themselves.

"I think that change begins happening on an individual level," he said. "It takes an internal redirection of one's heart, a reflection on one's actions, and, in turn, this introspection results in an outward difference that can than be passed on."