Students share experiences of Islamophobia on campus

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Business senior G.S. Suri talks about his experiences with Islamaphobia during the Voices Against Islamaphobia discussion in the Michigan Union on Monday Buy this photo

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The words “Move to your homeland” appeared on the screen at the front of the Pendleton Room on Monday night.

The phrase, serving as one example of a negative comment aimed at the Muslim community on campus, was part of the School of Literature, Science and the Arts sponsored event Sharing Stories, Building Allyhood: Student Voices Against Islamophobia, which drew hundreds of students and faculty to the Michigan Union.

The event’s emcee, American Culture Prof. Evelyn Alsultany, who is also the director of Arab and Muslim American Studies, said she wanted to demonstrate how Islamophobia affects the University community and prompt thinking about how to create a campus environment that is inclusive of all people.

“Islamophobia has been a problem in our country for a very long time,” Alsutany said. “Recently there has been an increase in Islamophobia, (meaning) hate crimes against Muslims and people who are perceived to be Muslims, discourses by presidential candidates and other people that perceive Muslims as un-American or anti-American and not part of this country and, in general, a way of thinking about Muslims — a logic that justifies their exclusion.”

During the event, students spoke in front of dozens of attendees, sharing personal anecdotes exemplifying their experiences with Islamophobia on campus. Many audience members became emotional, and were moved to tears by many of the stories.

“By sharing one’s story, I think we can understand the different ways that it actually impacts students on this campus,” Alsultany said. “I hope that people (leave with) a new sense of understanding of how Islamophobia impacts our community and also leave with some ideas about how to be an ally, not only to Muslim students, but for any student on campus.”

LSA junior Tina Alkhersan, who served on the LSA committee that organized the event, said the event aimed to target non-Muslims and people who did not identify similarly to Muslims, so that students could express their beliefs in a positive and constructive manner.

“Ever since I was a freshman here, I felt really attached to the University of Michigan, and certain Islamophobic incidences would happen — American Sniper, Chapel Hill — and there was never a sense of a safe community,” Alkhersan said. “There was always a sense of fear and alarm,” referencing an incident in 2015 involving the University’s showing of the controversial film American Sniper and a shooting in which three Muslim students were killed.

Alkhersan said she wanted the event to be a forum for opening up and asking questions, as well as making acquaintances and forming friendships.

“I would feel accomplished if just one person walked out with their perception changed,” Alkhersan said.

Alkhersan, along with others on the organizing committee, shared a story from an anonymous student who did not want to present to attendees during the event. She said there was a fear among some students of being ridiculed for their vulnerability, so some committee members agreed to help them share their stories without releasing their identities.

Another student, who wished to remain unnamed, shared her story as well, discussing her experience as a minority Muslim student in high school. She recounted how her classmates shared Islamophobic opinions during class.

" 'They’re all terrorists anyway,' " she said one of her classmates said to her. " 'They’re all evil.' "

Rackham graduate student Banen Al-Sheemary, who discussed how Islamophobia impacts safety on campus, said she decided to share her story at the event because she believes it is important for the student body to realize how big of an issue Islamophobia is.

“(The administration) needs to understand these narratives, they need to listen to these narratives,” Al-Sheemary said. “It’s so imperative and it really does affect our success here and our safety and our well-being.”

Al-Sheemary added there have been specific incidences where she has felt unsafe and discriminated against on campus.

“We are students who pay tuition, we are students who contribute to the community just like any other student,” she said during her story. “So what sets us apart from the rest of the student body that we have to walk in fear even in the afternoon?”

Al-Sheemary noted that there are many options that the University can put into place in order to ensure the concerns from the Muslim student body are acknowledged.

“The administration just has to take the time to actually listen and connect how social hierarchy, class, gender, sexual identity and racism shape the student experience and how difficult it is to navigate our world,” Al-Sheemary said.

At the end of the event, organizers asked attendees how institutions, groups and individuals on campus can show solidarity with students who experience Islamophobia.

LSA Dean Andrew Martin, who attended the event, said forums like this were important for the campus climate because one of the University’s challenges is creating a community that includes multiple identities. He said these types of conversations are crucial in creating the accepting community that people want to have on campus.

“It was an incredibly powerful event,” Martin said. “We have a lot of brave students who are willing to share their stories to help build community and help understand things that are happening on our campus that many members of our community don’t know much about.”

Another student, who also wished to remain anonymous, spoke during the open-mic portion of the event that followed the shared stories, retelling her story of growing up as a Palestinian Muslim-American.

“I honestly only felt safe when I was with my high school English teacher, who told me that everything would be OK once I entered the University of Michigan,” the student said. “However, nothing changed. I escaped to Michigan with the idea that I would be in a much safer environment.”

Adrienne Dessel, co-associate director of the Program on Intergroup Relations, also held a presentation toward the end of the event on being a constructive ally and encouraging positive communication among different ethnic and racial groups.

“The Program on Intergroup Relations is very interested in promoting ally work among students and promoting any event that will reduce discrimination and bias on campus,” Dessel said.

Dessel said she believes Islamophobia is an issue that is affecting some of the students on campus as a result of national racism and Islamophobia, negative media portrayals and lack of contact caused by segregation among different cultural groups that lead to harmful stereotypes.

“(We hope) for students’ stories to be shared and told and to provide students with some guidance and some skills,” Dessel said.

Martin said he believes the University needs to articulate inclusion as a core value by taking initiative and following up on the issues identified during the event to ensure that the University is fostering an inclusive environment for all students.

“It’s really important, particularly given the discourse that’s happening in our broader politics today, to focus on Islamophobia and how it affects our Muslim students,” Martin said. “I’m really proud of the work that the students put into organizing this event. I found that the stories that the students brought to the front required a great deal of courage, and I think were painful to hear, but I think will be constructive in community building going forward.”

Angela Dillard, associate dean for undergraduate education, was also in attendance and said she hopes those who attended the event will be more sensitive to Islamophobia on campus.

“Certainly (Islamophobia) is one of the big issues that we’ve been looking at and worried about,” Dillard said. “I definitely thought it was appropriate for this group to take on, especially right now, given what’s been going on nationally, what’s been going on internationally.”

Dillard said it was crucial to lead initiatives on inclusivity with students telling their own stories, even though they are sometimes shocking and upsetting.

“One of the things that has been a little surprising to me is finding out what might be the depth of underreporting of incidents, of bias, of microaggressions,” Dillard said. “There seems to be a little confusion about how one goes about reporting, which leads to ideas of what can we do to make it clearer, what can we do to make it safer and what can we do to make sure that people have a sense that something is being done to follow up.”