



MUSLIM PUBLIC AFFAIRS CENTRE

UNVEILING DISCRIMINATION

A Report on Discrimination
(Societal and Institutional) Against Hijab in Nigeria

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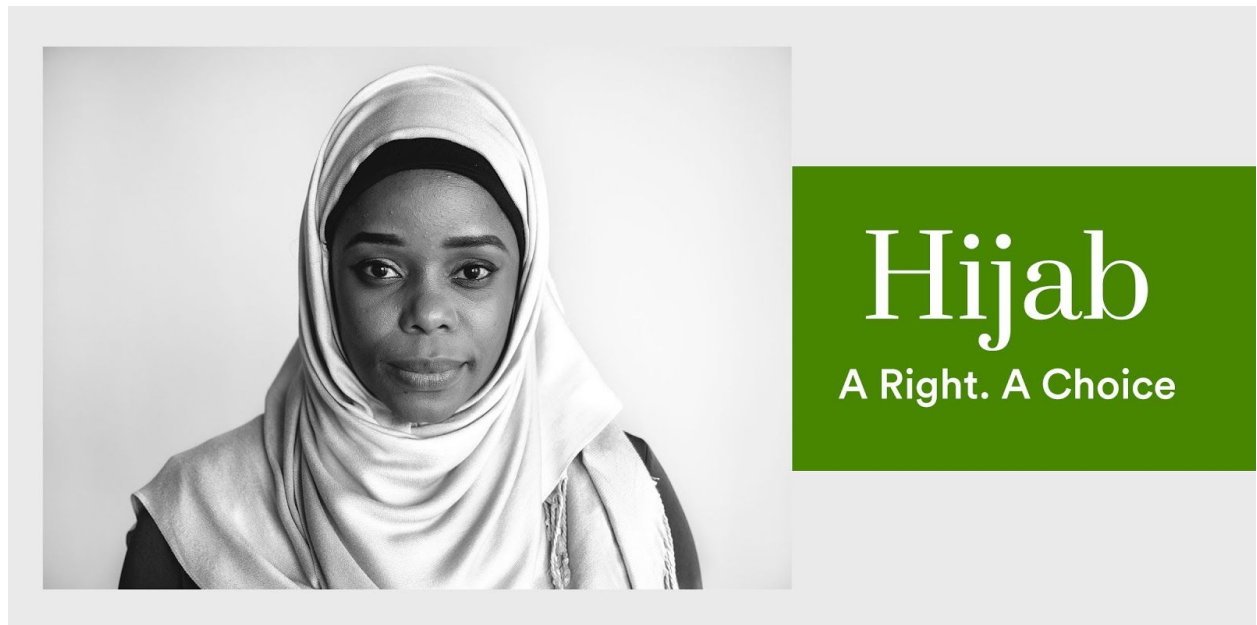
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MPAC, Nigeria

UNVEILING DISCRIMINATION

A Report on Discrimination (Societal and Institutional) Against Hijab



Introduction

The Hijab Bullying, Intimidation, Harassment and Discrimination Survey (Poll) was taken to evaluate the experiences of Muslim women wearing the hijab in Nigeria. This poll was necessary as a research tool to evaluate discrimination against women who wear the hijab and the difficulties they face in public life. The poll was launched on 21 October 2019 and ran till 25 November 2019. It was open to only female Muslim Nigerians in hijab and a total of 675 representative entries were received across the nation.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was created majorly from carefully selected questions in relation to previous reports to MPAC from victimised Muslim women in hijab. The following questions were asked:

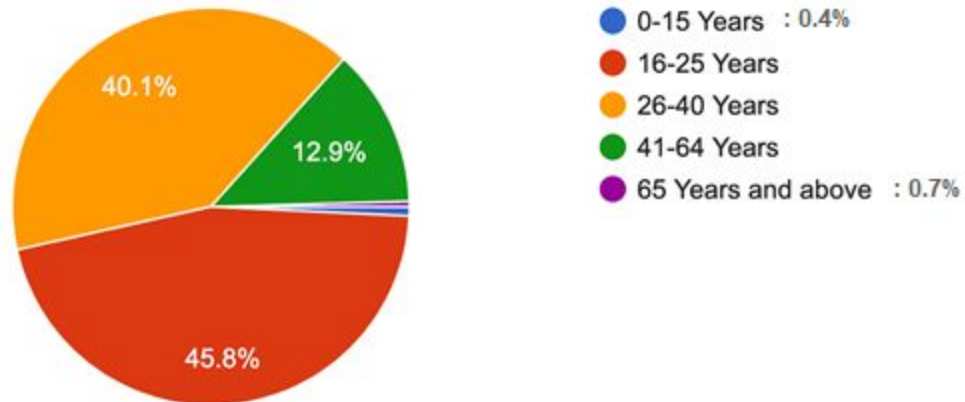
- How old are you?
- How many years have you been wearing the hijab?
- What form of hijab covering do you wear?
- Have you encountered bullying/intimidation/ harassment/discrimination as a result of your using hijab?
- Where did you have this encounter?
- In which location(s)/state(s) did you have this encounter?
- Did you make a report to any organisation or government agency about this encounter?
- Did you get any help/support from people around you, any organisation or government agency?
- How satisfied were you with the help/support you received?

Key Findings

The responses were then collated, analysed and interpreted as follow:

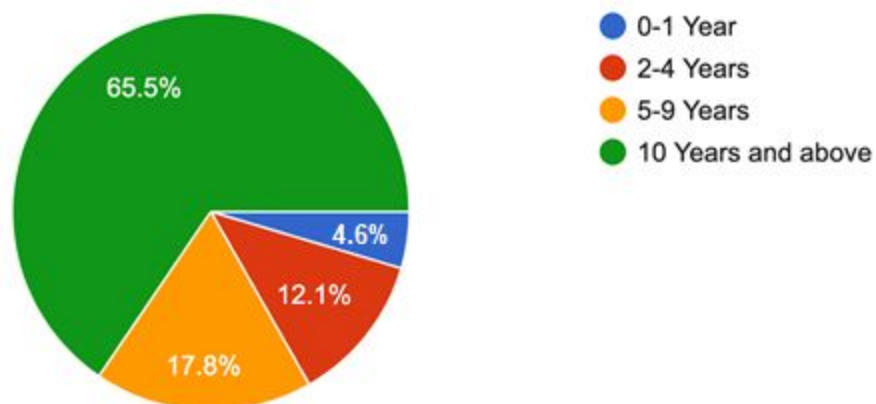
How old are you?

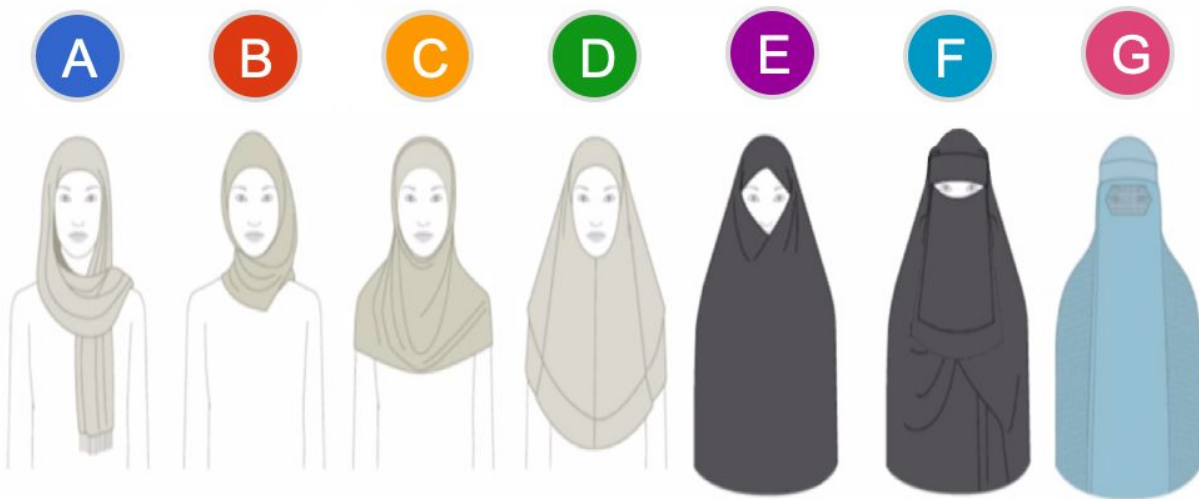
675 responses



How many years have you been wearing the hijab?

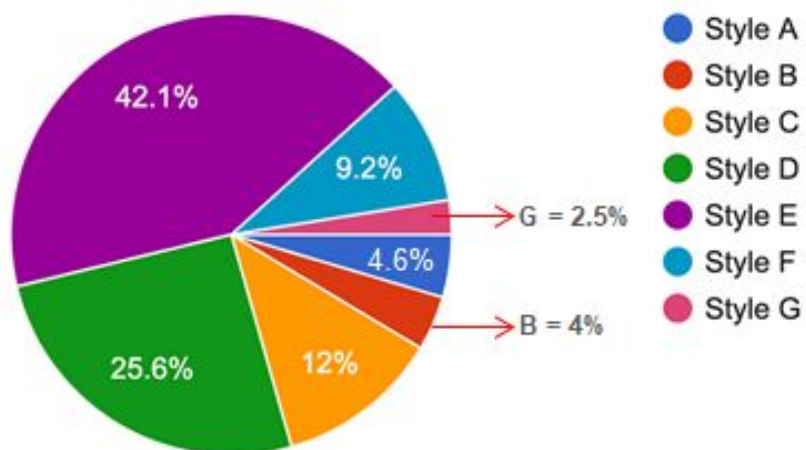
675 responses





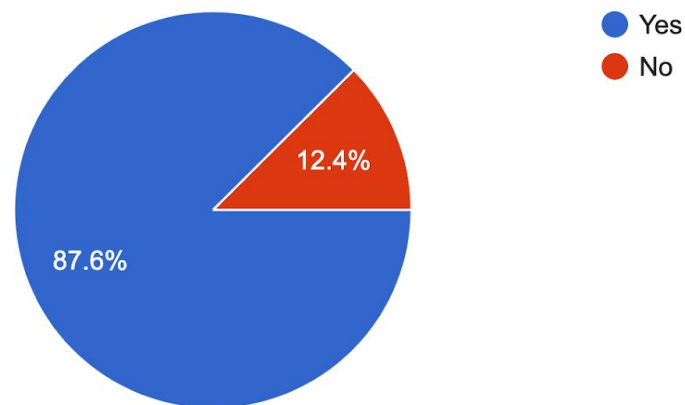
What form of hijab covering do you wear?

675 responses



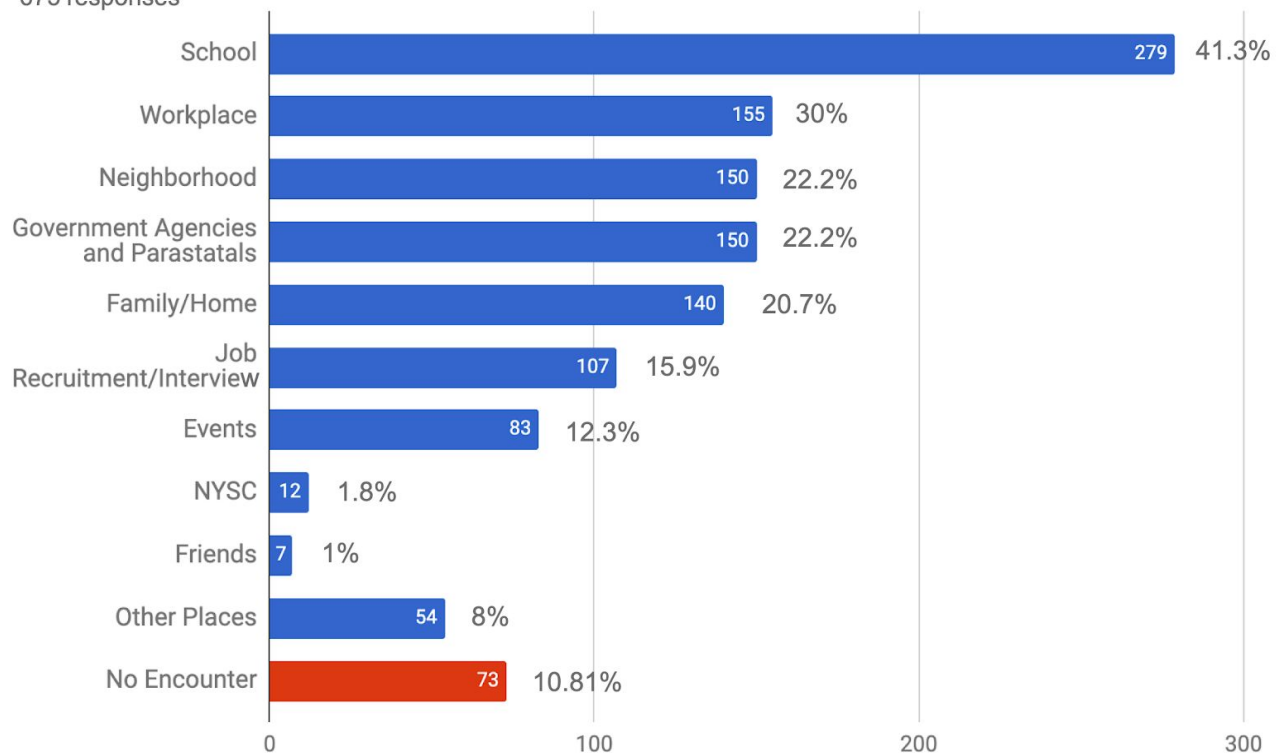
Have you encountered bullying/intimidation/ harassment/discrimination as a result of your using hijab?

675 responses



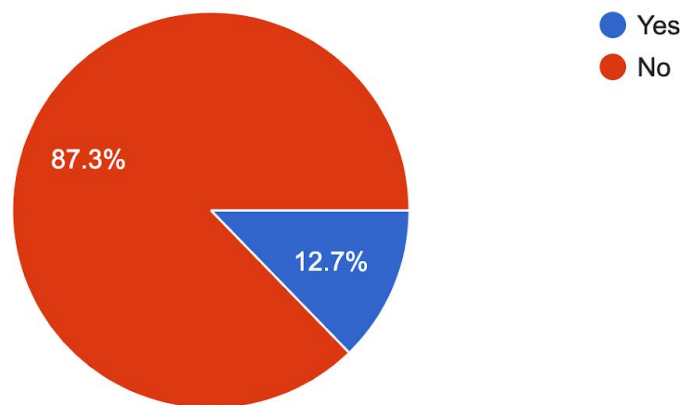
Where did you have this encounter?

675 responses



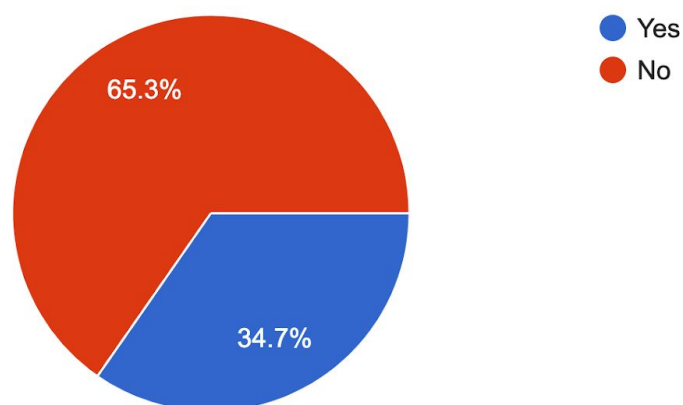
Did you make a report to any organisation or government agency about this encounter?

675 responses



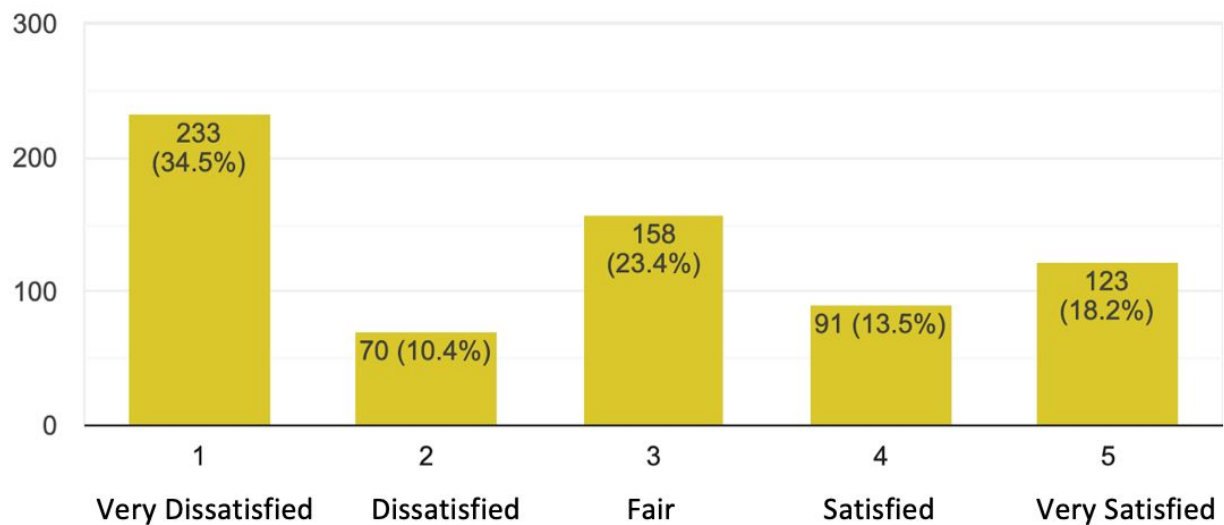
Did you get any help/support from people around you, any organisation or government agency?

675 responses



How satisfied were you with the help/support you received?

675 responses



Survey Summary

From the results above, the following can be deduced:

1. 85.9% of the respondents are a mix of youth and adults up to the age of 40. This implies that 4 in 5 of the polled women experienced discrimination, exclusion or bullying and that those Muslim women are either schooling or working class. It is important to note that a similar pattern may exist in female Muslims below the minimum age limit captured in this survey due to widespread discrimination against hijab in the public schools in the South-Western, Eastern and South-Southern parts of Nigeria. In a number of cases in these areas, Muslim students have been harassed and assaulted for wearing a simple hijab, and there are a few cases in court to prevent Muslim students from using hijab in school or to secure their right to do so.
2. Nearly 20% of respondents say they face opposition or harassment at home, from members of their family or persons personally known to them.

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3. 65.5% of respondents have been wearing the hijab for over a decade.
 4. Bullying is more consistent with women who cover more parts of their body and less with women who use a scarf around the head or neck.
 5. 87.6% of the respondents reported that they have encountered bullying/intimidation/ harassment/discrimination specifically as a result of using hijab.
 6. The highest opposition to hijab occurred in schools, within the family and workplaces.
 7. 87.3% of the respondents chose not to report their encounters. This implies that many victimised women do not make an attempt to report the incident when it occurred. Failure to take action on a direct or indirect form of discrimination may contribute to continuous victimisation or under-reporting of the problem.
 8. 34.7% of the respondents reported that they received support from people around them when they reported the incident.
 9. 44.9% of respondents were not satisfied with the help they received after the encounter or were not satisfied with how the matter was handled.

Recommendations

There is a severe impact on the ability of Muslim women in hijab to engage in civic life or properly function in the society due to deep-seated discrimination against their religious beliefs or expression of such beliefs. Muslim women, like all people in the country, should be free to express their religious beliefs free from discrimination and prejudice. It is a collective responsibility to ensure a safe space for people to practice their faith or express it.

Based on our understanding of the poll results and long-standing experience dealing with the problem faced by Muslim women in hijab, the following recommendations are put forward:

There is an urgent need for detailed research to determine the prevalence of anti-Muslim bias and Islamophobia in the Nigerian society, and their link to the perception and treatment of people who are 'visibly Muslims'.

Muslim organisations need to invest in and prioritize innovative outreach methods to effectively communicate with affected populations, to address genuine concerns and to understand and counter the poisonous narratives that produce antagonism, intolerance and biased actions.

The phenomenon of discrimination sometimes hinders the ability of the victims to express themselves and seek help. It is essential, particularly for Muslim advocacy groups and Muslim parents, to take a critical look at creative methods to further empower and encourage female Muslims to come out and to speak out against discrimination, report and take intelligent actions against any form of discrimination they face due to their religious beliefs or expression of such beliefs. It is also important for Muslim women take leadership role and champion causes to eradicate discrimination in the society at large.

Muslim organisations need to build their internal institutions to (be able to) detect and dismantle the ideology of extremism anywhere in the society and competently deal with the problem of hate and discrimination. Further, they need to build and nurture strong alliances against the imminent danger of unrelenting attacks on hijab as well as the agenda-driven accusation of *Islamisation*. These alliances should also include non-Muslim allies, individual or institutional, who believe in equality, inclusiveness and fairness.

There should be strong legislation to prohibit and criminalise discrimination on the basis of religion, including hate speech, hate preaching and hate crimes.

Muslim women who face several stereotypes should be/become empowered to convert their difficult experiences into working actively in eradicating misconceptions about Muslim women and ending discrimination and injustice in the Nigerian society.

Parents, family members and the Muslim community should endeavour to provide a strong support base and safety net for Muslim women who have made the free choice to wear hijab. It is especially challenging when the home suddenly transforms into a hostile environment on the basis of the choice to wear the hijab. There should also be a wider acceptance that there is more than one form of hijab suitable in a given situation.

As the hijab has been represented extensively as a symbol of oppression, fundamentalist beliefs, and a threat to Western democratic values, such reductionist perspectives of hijab

have enabled prejudice towards Muslims and contributed to the climate of intolerance and discrimination. It is important for media outlets to give voice to Muslim women and a space to explain their choices and positive feelings on wearing the hijab.

Muslim leaders (religious and political) and interfaith leaders must do more to speak forcefully against discrimination (societal and institutional) faced by Muslim women in hijab as silence may be deemed to be passive acceptance, endorsement or act as a powerful disincentive for victims to step forward.

Conclusion

This analysis makes an important call for a research on the scale and trend of Islamophobia in the Nigerian society by highlighting the unique experiences of Muslim women in hijab. It is a fundamental right to wear the hijab or not. Much progress is being made by individuals and Muslim activists to secure the rights of freedom of religious expression in Nigeria, sometimes at a huge personal cost. It is time to intensify advocacy, education and collaborative works to extend the landmark achievements made in the Call to Bar ceremonies and NYSC to other areas where discrimination, prejudice and exclusion still enjoy safety and protection.

Sadly, hostility against Muslims in hijab is not the only or full story of the presence and manifestations of Islamophobia in our society. However, it is time for all people who cherish democratic values and those who believe in a society that values everyone equally to take a common stand that as long as Muslim students are forced to make a choice between public-funded education and observing their religion, as long as Muslim women's participation in civic life, in professions, in employment or career progression are maliciously restricted or their access and involvement in public life generally are prejudiced simply because of their free choice to wear hijab, our society remains an ambivalent combination of contradicting values.