intersections

Article

Fighting the Misrepresentation of Muslim Women

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A training program to combat Islamophobic reporting

According to *Islamophobia in the Eyes of Muslims*, a report by the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, “Muslim women tend to be the primary targets of Islamophobic incidents (74.3% of the time). ” The report adds, “The lack of reporting by victims (87.5% did not report) should give the needed impetus to develop the necessary responses at a policy, educational, and civil society level. ” In 2021, the United Nations published a similar report that describes “a vicious circle whereby State policy validates private Islamophobic attitudes and actions.”

> ***The media is the most powerful vehicle for representing or misrepresenting Islam, Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular.***
>
> —*Muslim Women and Media Training Institute (2018)*

Source: Mostafa Meraji via Unsplash.

This prejudicial view of Islam in the U.S. has in large part been fueled by the reporting of mainstream media outlets throughout the war on terror declared by George W. Bush in 2001. The "war on terror" was a political term used by the Bush administration and promoted by the mainstream media to justify multiple invasions of Muslim countries. Anti-Muslim flames were stoked again by the rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, including his infamous Executive Order 13769. Although the main official thrust of the war on terror ended with the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, future historians will likely note that the pursuit of America's foreign policy interests in the Middle East today are, in effect, a continuation of that campaign.

The Media Training Institute

In light of the profound consequences of Islamophobia in the media and politics, in 2018 University of California, Davis professor of anthropology and gender/sexuality studies Suad Joseph founded the Muslim Women and the Media Training Institute. The purpose of the training institute is to allow emerging journalists to receive training from media professionals, global historians, and scholars who specialize in Islamic studies and gender studies. The goal is to improve the quality of reporting, representation, and public discourse about Muslim women.

Muslim Women in the Media Seminar Feb 2018. Source: Dr. Suad Joseph.

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The first cohort of the Training Institute met for its first seminar in February 2018 with twenty fellows participating in the program. The seminar included a three-day session of lectures, discussions and presentations led by Dr. Suad Joseph and fellow scholars Zeina Zaatari, Sarah Gualtieri, Lawrence Pintak, Elora Shehabuddin, Annelies Moors, as well as journalist Soterios Johnson. The fellows were given reading and writing assignments for the rest of the year until they met again for the culminating seminar in November 2018.

Muslim Women in the Media Seminar Nov 2018. Source: Dr. Suad Joseph.

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The Muslim Women and the Media Training Institute welcomed new cohorts for 2019, 2020, and 2021. In 2022, the project was awarded a grant by the American Council of Learned Societies to continue its work, in addition to its original funding by the Henry Luce Foundation.