

**Written evidence submitted by the
Council of Somali Organisations and the Anti-Tribalism Movement**

Is racism the new ‘normal’?

Somali experience of hate crime in the UK

1. Dr. Shobha Das, MBE, is an international human rights expert with extensive experience of anti-hate-crime advocacy, policy and training. The Council of Somali Organisations (CSO) has 80 member organisations and provides a joint platform to address issues affecting the British Somali community. Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM) has 40,000 UK members and works to increase cohesion within the Somali community, challenging prejudice and fostering peace.
2. Asha Affi of CSO says, ‘Somalis are a forgotten community as victims.’ This submission aims to articulate their experiences of hate crime. We hope it will help the Inquiry to better understand what they suffer, understand similarities with other communities’ experiences of hate crime, and find ways to improve reporting rates and agency responses.

I. Executive Summary

3. Somalis in the UK are frequent targets of hate crime, suffering incidents from verbal abuse to arson and assault. Most hate crime goes unreported. Most Somalis are resigned to racism as a normal part of being a minority in the UK.
4. The precise extent of hate crime is hard to determine as there are few official statistics of anti-Somali hate crime.
5. Somali women are targeted more than men. Perpetrators are mostly white British, but Caribbean-on-Somali hate crime is rife in some areas.
6. Interviewees do not feel the criminal justice system works for them.
7. The police should work pro-actively to raise community understanding of hate crime, encourage reporting, and end impunity for perpetrators.
8. There are examples of good practice in police-community engagement, but much more is required, and the police need to widen their community contacts.
9. The media contribute hugely to increasing Islamophobia in society. This makes Muslims vulnerable to ‘revenge’ hate crime.

II. Methodology

10. This submission was guided by a Steering Group consisting of Adam Matan (Director, ATM), Asha Affi (Business Membership and Development Officer, CSO), and Dr. Shobha Das (researcher and author).
11. It is based on evidence from London and Bristol, which have amongst the highest Somali populations in the UK.
12. Evidence was taken from 30 sources including Somali men and women (professionals, students, housewives, religious leaders) of various age groups (teens to sixties), community leaders, Somali organisations, refugee organisations, victim support agencies, and police. While not claiming to represent the views of all British Somalis, we are confident this submission in some way tells the story of thousands of them.

III. Britain's Somali community

13. It is hard to find definitive data on the Somali community in Britain. Official estimates vary between 99,484ⁱ and 115,000ⁱⁱ but the community suggests there are 300,000 to 500,000 people of Somali ethnicity in Britain.
14. London has an official estimated 65,000 Somali-born peopleⁱⁱⁱ and Bristol 10,000^{iv}.

IV. Prevalence of hate crime against Somalis

15. Not a single interviewee was untouched by hate crime. Most interviewees have suffered multiple incidents and see hate crime as a 'normal' part of being a minority in the UK.
16. There are no reliable national statistics on hate crime against Somalis, as the police record them under the larger category 'Black African'.
17. Our interviews show that hate crime is suffered by most UK Somalis on a regular, even daily, basis. Incidents include verbal abuse, assaults, being spat at, being attacked with objects, death threats, hostile looks, damage to property, arson, and racist 'jokes'. Younger interviewees have also experienced or witnessed online hate crime.
18. Hate crime occurs around homes, workplaces, on public transport, in parks and shops, at bus stops and on streets and on social media. In Bristol, over a third of incidents occur in/around victims' homes^v.
19. Some examples of hate crime suffered by Somalis:
 - a. Shamsa Ahmed was confronted by a white man as she walked home with her young son. The man removed his shoes and hit her with them, shouting racist abuse and threatening to kill her. In a separate incident, someone threw a brick at Shamsa's elderly mother.
 - b. Abdirachid Fidow was approached by an aggressive white man on a train, who asked 'Are you going to blow yourself up?' Fellow passengers confronted the perpetrator and supported the victim.
 - c. Khadra Warsame was spat at outside her home by a group of boys who set their dogs on her and her 8-month old daughter while shouting, 'Go back to your country, you fucking Somali.'

- d. After the Brussels bombings, Asha Affi had liquid thrown at her (she was terrified it was acid, but it was not) out of a moving car by two white men who shouted, 'Fucking terrorist!' The police investigated thoroughly but no action was ultimately possible.
 - e. Nura Nour and her young daughter were spat at by young men in a passing car.
 - f. Somali taxi drivers and bus drivers are frequently racially abused by passengers.
20. Somalis are targeted for multiple reasons: ethnicity, religion, visible cultural differences, and their perceived status as immigrants/ refugees.
 21. There is a hierarchy of vulnerability: women in niqabs are most targeted, followed by women wearing headscarves, then other women, then men. Women with young children are also frequently targeted. Victims think perpetrators target those considered least likely to challenge or report incidents.
 22. Interviewees feel that they are more likely to suffer hate crime in predominantly white areas. However, black on black hate crime is increasing in some areas. In a recent incident in London, a Somali woman wearing a niqab was called an 'ISIS bride' by a Caribbean man and told to go to Syria to 'kill others and eat human flesh'.
 23. Many interviewees have been told by British Caribbeans to 'Go back to Africa.'

V. Impact of hate crime

24. Interviewees said hate crime makes them feel anxiety, hyper-vigilance, fear, insecurity, anger, resentment, disbelief, powerlessness, unsupported and hopeless. It makes them feel they don't belong here.
25. Frequent hate crime, combined with poor support by authorities, could make some victims vulnerable to radical ideologies.
26. Victims sometimes pay a double price for their victimization, for instance by seeking rehousing to escape racism because authorities don't act against perpetrators.
27. Over time, interviewees change their behavior to reduce risk of hate crime, even if at a cost to them. Bishara Mohamed confessed to 'always being on guard.' Layla Ismail no longer allows her young children to play in their local park. Her older daughter doesn't travel alone after dark – something that was not an issue before. 'Our freedom feels very limited now,' she says. This pervasive anxiety is shared by most Somali families she knows in Bristol.
28. After the Paris attacks, some Muslim pupils were terrified of suffering hate crime on the way to school and ended up missing school for a few days.
29. Some Somali women feel unable to practice their faith safely – they even consider giving up the headscarf, thus compromising their beliefs, to reduce the risk of being targeted.

30. Interventions by witnesses help counter the negative impact of hate crime. Four victims said support from the public had made them feel less alone, less like it was all of Britain that didn't want them here.

VI. Understanding what hate crime means

31. Awareness of the definition of hate crime is low. In Bristol, Layla Ismail, Development Manager of Bristol Refugee Women (of Somali origin herself), says 'The community desperately needs awareness raising about what hate crime is.' In London too, Somalis aren't confident they can correctly identify hate crime. Khadra Mohammed said that until her secondary school recently did some work on this topic, she wasn't sure what a hate crime was. Fadumo Farah, Trustee of the Somali Welfare Trust, said the Somalis she serves would really benefit from hate crime training.
32. None of our interviewees had seen efforts by the authorities to offer such awareness raising. Voluntary agencies try to fill the gap but with limited resources, their reach is limited.

VII. Triggers for incident spikes

33. The community faces increased hate crime every time a Muslim perpetrates a violent incident anywhere in the Western world. Hate crime against Somalis increased after 9/11, after the attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Nice, and the killing of Lee Rigby (the Bravanese Somali community centre in London was burnt down in 'retaliation').
34. Many said that when they hear of a violent or terrorist incident, they 'pray the perpetrator isn't Somali.' They carry a heavy 'burden of representation'. Somalis have suffered 'revenge' attacks after incidents in Leytonstone tube station (December 2015) and Russell Square (August 2016), after the perpetrators' Somali origin was made public.
35. Many feel the media sensationalize the motives of Muslim offenders, and report perpetrators' ethnicities when it is not relevant. For example after the Leytonstone incident, though charges did not include terrorism, the mentally ill offender was headlined as 'Isis-inspired'^{vi} driven by a 'religious and extremist cause'^{vii}, and carrying out an 'Islamist attack'^{viii}.
36. The victim of this attack, Lyle Zimmerman, wanted to stay anonymous precisely to avoid media sensationalism. He says, 'I really didn't want to end up having a story focusing on 'American attacked by Muslim' when it was clearly 'random mentally ill man attacks random stranger'.'
37. Interviewees feel that when violent acts are committed by white non-Muslims, their ethnicity/ religion is not reported. But when offenders are Muslim or Somali, it always is. These groups are then unreasonably asked to apologise for the actions of persons they don't know and are not responsible for.
38. Interviewees worry that if mental health issues in the Somali community remain poorly addressed, as appears to be the case for the Leytonstone and

- Russell Square perpetrators, there may be more such random attacks, leading to 'revenge' hate crime against the community.
39. Somalis were not surprised by the increase in hate crime after Brexit. They feel the campaign focus on immigration 'legitimized' racist behavior, allowing previously closet racists to openly flaunt their prejudice. They also faced racism in the lead up to the referendum, and a Somali man who volunteered at the vote count in London saw swastikas drawn on ballot papers.
 40. Met Police figures show that racist and religious hate crimes against all communities in the 12 months to July 2016 is up from the previous year (15,481 as against 13,041)^{ix}. The police do not know how many of these were Somali victims.
 41. Stand Against Racism and Inequality (SARI) in Bristol is one of few agencies to collect disaggregated data on Somali victims. According to Alex Raikes, Strategic Director, Somalis are the fifth most targeted group for hate crime in Avon and Somerset. She says that since Brexit, they have seen a 10% increase in hate crimes^x overall.
 42. After Brexit, Somalis have been subjected to physical abuse, and verbal abuse such as 'why are you still here? We voted to leave, now get out of our country,' and 'we got our country back, you don't belong.'
 43. Mr. Abdul Ahmed, chair of Bristol Somali Forum, expects hate crime to increase as Brexit negotiations progress, especially if the economic situation worsens. 'We immigrants are easy scapegoats,' he said.

VIII. Reporting hate crime

44. Sagal Bafo says there is so much hate crime that challenging or reporting every incident would be 'a full-time job.' So one just has to 'let it go, move on.'
45. Somalis talk with other Somalis about hate crime they suffer. However, of the 50 or so incidents disclosed to us, only 3 had been reported to police. None resulted in charges or convictions.
46. Many hate crimes are disclosed to voluntary agencies but are not always recorded. For instance, Bristol Refugee Rights signposts victims to support agencies, but don't keep records.
47. Stated reasons for not reporting hate crime include not being able to always identify hate crimes, lack of faith in the police, having no knowledge of successful prosecutions, reluctance to 'waste time' waiting in a police station for hours, a feeling that the police do not represent Somalis, a perception that there is no point reporting incidents without hard evidence, fear that the victims are labeled 'trouble makers', fear of revenge malicious accusations, and historical mistrust of the police in Somalia. Ubah Mahamud from Somali Welfare Trust further identifies language as a barrier which disproportionately disadvantages Somali women. Sham Quayyum, Director of CSO, adds that irregular Somali migrants would not report any crimes for fear of being deported.

48. Bristol Somali Forum says physical abuse is slightly more likely to be reported. A Somali woman reported a recent racist assault, and swift strong police response helped improve trust in the police.
49. Many members of the community see the police as distant, unapproachable, and more likely to act against Somali perpetrators than to support Somali victims. They also fear neighbours may think ill of them if uniformed officers visit their home to take reports of hate crime.
50. They feel police don't do enough pro-active work to build relationships. Some exceptions were mentioned with affection: Sgt Jon Ames in Bristol who worked positively with a Somali mosque to resolve tensions between Somalis and Caribbeans, Minister James Brokenshire's visit to the Bravanese centre after it was burnt down, the Met Police welfare ring-around to community organisations after critical incidents (particularly Commander Mak Chishty's outreach after the Russell Square incident), and the exemplary community consultations by PC Mike Aartsen to ensure the *khat* ban was sensitively and effectively policed. These have made a genuine contribution to trust-building and should be showcased.
51. Somalis in Bristol tend to trust third party reporting centres more than the police. SARI is valued by the community for being neutral, culturally sensitive, victim-oriented, and specialized in supporting hate crime victims.
52. In London, young Somalis said they would be happy to report to the police, if it were easier. Older Somalis prefer reporting to community organisations where people speak Somali and understand their culture. Somali organisations would like to support victims of hate crime, but are inadequately resourced.
53. Only 2 interviewees had heard of TellMAMA, none had heard of True Vision. No reports had been made to either.

IX. Recommendations

For government

54. Help establish more specialist victim support agencies to advocate for victims of hate crime and provide culturally sensitive, specialised casework and advocacy. Existing helplines don't seem to function effectively – many numbers go to voicemail, and many did not call us back.
55. Increase engagement with the Somali community. It is unclear if Somalis were consulted towards the Government hate crime action plans of 2012 or 2016. Interviewees were unaware of the plans, and do not know if Somalis are represented on the Independent Advisory Group for hate crime. They also had no prior awareness of this Inquiry.
56. Establish transparent procedures for consulting with the Somali community. Recognise that 'Muslim' is not a homogeneous category, so don't assume that all 'Muslim' organisations in the UK speak for all Muslim communities in the UK – some may represent particular Muslim groups, eg Indian or Pakistani, and understand little or nothing of the Somali experience.

57. Improve diversity in staffing across Government departments, including police. Many young Somali men and women have good degrees and would be organizational assets.
58. Emphasize and demonstrate zero tolerance of hate crime.

For police

59. Increase community awareness of the criminal justice system, particularly of hate crime, how to report, and what to expect after reporting.
60. End impunity for perpetrators – treat anti-Somali hate crime seriously, investigate thoroughly, and work towards stronger prosecutions.
61. Take pro-active steps to understand Somali culture and address barriers to reporting.
62. Improve engagement with the community after critical incidents. Build on and replicate instances of good community engagement (see paragraph 50).
63. Maintain disaggregated hate crime data for Somalis.

For media

64. Don't sensationalize and 'Islamophobise' stories about Somalis and Muslims. Report them fairly and accurately; the contrary is actively harmful, as minority communities suffer increased hate crime as a consequence.
65. Treat majority and minority communities even-handedly. Desist from highlighting ethnicity of perpetrators where it is irrelevant to the story.

For mental health services

66. Review mental health services for vulnerable people. Some Somalis carry deep psychological wounds of war and displacement, particularly (but not only) the older generation or those who recently left Somalia. Better care for them could prevent random attacks, thus preventing avoidable hate crime against Somalis.
67. Invest in public mental health infrastructure. As Lyle Zimmerman, the victim of the Leytonstone station attack, says: 'No community is immune to violence; no group has a monopoly on it. Better investment in public mental health services won't cure all random violence, but it will reduce the reach of violent ideologies in our society and prevent at least some attacks.'
68. Train mental health staff to work with cultural sensitivity, and an understanding of how the community perceives mental illness.
69. Support the Somali community as they start an informed dialogue about mental health issues to address the stigma attached to mental illness.

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ⁱ Open Society Foundation (2014), *Somalis in London*, p24

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somalis_in_the_United_Kingdom (accessed 14/8/2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of National Statistics (2012), 2011 Census data
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp29904_291554.pdf

^{iv} Bristol City Council (2014), *Community Profile, Somalis living in Bristol*
<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/33107/Equality%20Profile%20Somalis%202014.pdf/99f13ec0-da03-4928-9971-77246a812b17> (accessed 14/8/2016)

^v Data provided by Stand Against Racism and Inequality, Bristol – by email on 17 August 2016

^{vi} Dearden, Lizzie (2016) *Leytonstone knife attack: 'Isis-inspired' Muhiddin Mire convicted of attempted murder after trying to behead stranger* The Independent, 8 June 2016
(<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/leytonstone-attack-knife-muhiddin-mire-found-guilty-of-attempted-murder-trying-to-behead-stranger-at-a7070461.html>)

^{vii} Devlin, Amanda and Fruen, Lauren (2016) *Leytonstone Tube attack victim tells of horrifying ordeal – as it is revealed ISIS inspired attacker had Muslim exorcisms*, The Sun 1 August 2016

^{viii} Whitehead, Tom (2016), *Minicab driver Muhiddin Mire guilty of Islamist murder on Leytonstone tube passenger*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/08/minicab-driver-muhiddin-mire-guilty-of-islamist-attack-on-leyton/>

^{ix} <http://www.met.police.uk/crimefigures/datatable.php?borough=lx&period=year> (accessed 25 August 2016)

^x Churchill, L (2016) *Bristol hate crime and racism rises after EU referendum Brexit fall out*, Bristol Post, 28 June 2016 (<http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/young-mum-spat-on-outside-bristol-pub-in-brexit-fall-out/story-29452483-detail/story.html>)