

TORONTO STAR

Anti-Islamophobia ad campaign draws heated debate online

A bus-shelter ad campaign asking viewers to rethink prejudice has Torontonians talking.

By Christopher Reynolds
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Toronto resident Siti Azlee, 21, says she has had to endure similar comments recently. "This happens everywhere, but it's not being talked about openly, especially by the victims," she says. (Christopher Reynolds)

An ad campaign drawing attention to Islamophobia has Torontonians talking — and that's just the point, backers of the campaign say.

The poster, recently rolled out at about 150 TTC stations and bus shelters across the GTA, depicts a young white man squaring off against a young woman in a head scarf. "Go back to where you came from," he says. "Where, North York?" she replies.

The ads, launched this week by the City of Toronto and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), have sparked a flurry of comments online and on the street

— precisely the point, said Amira Elghawaby: “to have constant dialogue ... and force people to rethink their assumptions.”

Elghawaby, spokesperson for the National Council of Canadian Muslims, said recent events have rekindled latent prejudices.

The idea for the campaign was brought forward last fall, to cushion the arrival of Syrian refugees, she said, but has become all the more urgent in the wake of the Conservatives’ [proposed partial ban on the niqab](#) in 2015, presumptive Republican presidential candidate [Donald Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric](#), the fallout from the [Paris attacks](#) and mass shootings in [San Bernardino](#), Calif., and [Orlando, Fla.](#)

“Islamophobia has become a serious concern in many communities in Canada,” said Elghawaby, whose organization was consulted on the ad’s creation but isn’t an official part of the campaign.

It’s not uncommon for women wearing a hijab to field unsolicited questions about their origins or criticism of their appearance, Elghawaby said. “That almost goes with the territory of being a visibly Muslim woman in Canada.”

Hijabs and hockey don’t clash; head scarves and beavertails aren’t incompatible, she says: “In other words, I’m as Canadian as the next guy or gal. And newly arrived immigrants and refugees will eventually be as well.”

Some people saw the ad as entrenching stereotypes and inflaming tensions. “I think it’s in poor taste. I think it feeds into a racial stereotype,” said Toronto resident Bryan Carras, referring to both figures depicted. “It’s an oppressive form of expression. It makes me sick to think of the countries where there’s human rights problems and where (the hijab) is everywhere,” he said.

A [Reddit post](#) of the ad sparked more than 200 comments in less than six hours last week. Some were supportive: “I suppose it’s good for these messages to be out there, as a reminder — to victims as well as perpetrators — that this s**t isn’t acceptable.”

Others less so. “It creates a further divide between people by playing on a stereotypes (sic),” one commenter typed. “You think it’s just white people spewing Islamophobic rhetoric?” wrote another.

A fourth quipped in response: “It’s almost as though, in this instance, white men take things ‘too personal’ and need to stop ‘looking for reasons to be offended...’”

More than 80 per cent of Muslim respondents in an [EnviroNics survey](#) last April said they were very proud to be Canadian, 10 per cent more than non-Muslims. Yet an assumption

remains “that people who look different are not from here,” says Patricia Wood, a York University geography professor who focuses on diversity and urban citizenship. Not only can that harm a person’s sense of belonging or safety, it’s simply not accurate, especially in Toronto, Wood says. Nearly half of the city’s residents identify as “visible minorities,” according to the 2011 National Household Survey. Just over half of Toronto’s population was born outside of Canada, but that’s a point of unity, not division, says Councillor Joe Cressy.

“The history of Toronto is that of newcomers welcoming newcomers. While we like to pat ourselves on the back as an inclusive and welcoming city, we know that beneath the surface often lies prejudice, suspicion and sometimes hatred,” he said.

The ad confronts xenophobia and forces Torontonians “to challenge themselves and think about, ‘What does it mean to be a Canadian and a Torontonian?’” Cressy added. The ads, rolled out this week, will run until July 10.

The campaign comprises an \$80,000 chunk of the city’s \$820,000 program to support Syrian refugees post-arrival. Put forward by Cressy last October, the program includes a housing registry for refugees and an intergovernmental, interagency task force.

The ad campaign arrives six months after two women wearing hijabs were [accosted at Sherbourne station](#).

It also comes in the wake of inflamed rhetoric around Islamic extremism following the June 12 mass shooting that targeted members of the LGTB community in Orlando.