

Editorial

# Introduction: “Love Jihad”: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Construction of the Predatory Muslim Male

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**Abstract:** The Introduction to this Special Issue on “‘Love Jihad’: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Construction of the Predatory Muslim Male’ provides a theoretical overview and suggests an analytical lens for how to understand “Love Jihad” and related notions of Islamization through marriage, sexuality, and reproduction. We define “Love Jihad” as the notion that Muslim men intentionally and strategically allure and entrap non-Muslim women with the intent to marry and convert them to Islam as part of an Islamization project. We suggest a two-fold understanding of the concept of “Love Jihad”. First, the concept needs to be understood as a globalizing trope, originating from India and spreading to a wide range of cultural and national contexts across the world. Second, we propose to understand the specific term “love jihad” beyond its referential specificity, and thereby broadening it into an analytical concept for exploring related concepts (such as “sexual jihad” and “demographic jihad”), as well as related notions of Muslim men as sexual predators (in certain geographical settings known as “rapefugees”). We therefore include in our analysis related notions such as Islamic womb fare, “grooming”, “The Great Replacement”, and “unethical conversion” in marriage where they relate to flows of gendered nationalist imaginaries of the Muslim “Other”. The aim of this Introduction—as well as the Special Issue—is to contribute to the study of Islamophobia as a global phenomenon and to deepen our understanding of the gendered imaginaries of anti-Muslim nationalist formations across the world.



**Citation:** Frydenlund, Iselin, and Eviane Leidig. 2022. Introduction: “Love Jihad”: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Construction of the Predatory Muslim Male. *Religions* 13: 201. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030201>

Received: 16 February 2022

Accepted: 17 February 2022

Published: 25 February 2022

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**Keywords:** love jihad; sexual jihad; demographic jihad; “grooming”; Islamophobia; anti-Islam; anti-Muslim racism; globalization; Great Replacement; nationalism; interreligious marriages

## 1. “Love Jihad”: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Construction of the Predatory Muslim Male

This Special Issue on “‘Love Jihad’: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Construction of the Predatory Muslim Male’ for *Religions* explores one particular trope, “Love Jihad”, within anti-Islam and anti-Muslim ideologies and practices (often referred to as “Islamophobia”). The aim is four-fold. First, we empirically explore the trope of “Love Jihad” across cultural and national contexts. The specific term “Love Jihad” should not, however, limit its conceptual expanse. Therefore, we secondly map the spread of the concept, including cases where the concept does *not* seem to take root beyond far-right platforms; related concepts, such as “sex jihad”, “demographic jihad”, “Islamic womb fare”, “grooming” and “unethical conversion” in marriage, are also included. This is due, in part, because we thirdly analyze the role of this particular anti-Muslim trope in constructing new forms of nationalism and nationhood, with a particular focus on how gendered imaginaries inform constructions of the nationalist “Self” and Muslim “Other”. Lastly, based on empirical findings, we use the trope of Love Jihad as a lens for further theorization of Islamophobia as simultaneously global and globalizing.

The last two decades have witnessed a sharp rise in negative depictions of Islam and Muslims (“Islamophobia”). For our purpose here, we use Erik Bleich’s definition

of Islamophobia as the “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims” (Bleich 2011).<sup>1</sup> By far, most academic attention has been paid to the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and North America (Bangstad 2014; Berntzen 2020; Allen 2020; Beydoun 2018, 2020; Esposito and Kalin 2011). Importantly, however, Islamophobia is not limited to the “West”: anti-Muslim hostility takes place outside of North America and Europe as well. For example, from 2014 to 2018, there was an outbreak of online harassment of Muslims on Chinese platforms such as Sina Weibo and Weixin (Stroup 2021). Further research has shown that in order to construct an image of ethnic unity at home, Chinese state media have drawn stark contrasts between Islam internationally and China’s Muslim minorities, framing Islam internationally as dangerous, but at the same time stripping Chinese Muslim communities of their “Muslimness”. This extremely negative depiction of Islam in the global context may unintentionally give rise to popular suspicion of domestic Muslim communities (Stroup 2021). Looking to the world’s largest democracy, India, the Modi era (2014–) demonstrates the power of anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist politics aiming to build a Hindu majoritarian state (Chatterji et al. 2019). Crucially, Hindu nationalism has a deep legacy of organized anti-Muslim mobilization that is intertwined with ethnic nation-state building (Leidig 2020). As several of the contributions to this Special Issue discuss, depictions of the Muslim “Other” within Hindu nationalism incorporates a gendered dimension of protecting Hindu women from Muslim men. Compared to India, Buddhist majority states in Asia, such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka, have experienced relatively little post-independence anti-Muslim violence. However, since 2011 Buddhist majority states have experienced massive proliferation of Islamophobia, online as well as in printed media and audio recordings, in addition to mass violence against Muslim minority populations, most notably the Muslim Rohingya population in Myanmar (Kyaw 2016, 2021; Holt 2016; Frydenlund and Jerryson 2020; Schissler et al. 2017; Frydenlund 2019).

Therefore, given the rise of anti-Muslim hate speech and violence in radically different cultural contexts across the globe, we analyze Islamophobia as a global phenomenon. By bringing together cases as diverse as India, France, and Norway we aim to show that certain Islamophobic subthemes stand out *across* different national contexts, with one of the most important subthemes being sexuality, reproduction and notions of the aggressive Muslim male. A global perspective on Islamophobia thus raises important questions about cross-cultural comparison, but as we shall discuss in detail below, also about transnational flows of Islamophobia, and hence, *globalization* of Islamophobia.

## 2. “Love Jihad” as Trope and Analytical Category

In this Introduction, we define “Love Jihad” as the conspiratorial notion that Muslim men strategically allure and entrap non-Muslim women with the intent to marry and convert them to Islam as part of an Islamization project. This definition gives emphasis to intentionality, as well as grand narratives of alleged Islamization of the non-Muslim world. While this can be interpreted as a minimalist definition of the term “Love Jihad” (capitalized), we also offer a maximalist definition of “love jihad” (lower case). For the latter, we propose to use “love jihad” as an analytical concept for exploring related concepts (such as “sexual jihad” and “demographic jihad”), as well as notions of Muslim men as sexual predators (in certain geographical settings known as “rapefugees”), as a means of situating the globalizing nature of Islamophobia. The term “Love Jihad” is also associated with several other concepts such as population jihad, “grooming”, forced/unethical conversion in marriage, uncontrollable male sexuality/rape, and “The Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, as they relate to flows of gendered nationalist imaginaries of the Muslim “Other”. In some cases, these various terms are used interchangeably, while in other cases, only one of the terms seems to have taken on popularity. Despite internal variation and nuance, however, what all these concepts refer to is the notion of an alleged Muslim demographic takeover, pointing to globalization and changing religious demographics, the politics of fertility, and even the concept of “womb-fare” (Goldstone et al. 2012). Another similar theme includes tropes of Muslim hyper-fertility as it fits with notions of “stealth jihad” (a concept

introduced by the anti-Islam activist Robert Spencer in 2008) and “stealth Islamization”—familiar tropes within European and North American anti-Muslim discourse. Finally, we suggest that “Love jihad”—as an analytical concept that captures alleged Islamization through sexuality and reproduction—is useful for cross-cultural comparison. While the specific Islamophobic trope of “Love Jihad” is moving beyond its context of origin in Asia, notions of Islamization through sexuality and reproduction are far more widespread than the very trope itself. We therefore suggest “love jihad” (the maximalist definition) as a useful concept for cross-cultural comparison, allowing for similarities as well as differences within gendered imaginaries of the nationalist “Self” and “Other”.

As pointed out in several of the articles in this Special Issue, in India (Frøystad 2021; Nielsen and Nilsen 2021) and Burma/Myanmar (Frydenlund 2021), the “Love Jihad” trope has historical precursors that are activated and regenerated by nationalist leaders and activists in the present. However, while contemporary “Love Jihad” campaigns in India certainly overlap with earlier nationalist assertions about Muslim men being disloyal (to women, and thus to the nation) and greedy (because they allegedly receive money to seduce Hindu women), we suggest that the contemporary version of this idea also contains important new dimensions. In fact, while “Love Jihad” originates from the context of Hindu nationalism in India, as discussed by Frøystad in this Special Issue, a genealogical approach reveals that the term itself is a result of globalization. While questions of Hindu-Muslim relations were intensified with Partition on the Indian subcontinent, and while interreligious marriages, or so-called love marriages have been highly contentious in Indian society, the post-9/11 narrative of the global War on Terror and subsequent securitization of Islam, re-framed anti-Muslim politics at the local level in India in particular ways. Semantically, then, “Love jihad” combines local cultural concerns of love marriages (and thus lack of control over the female body) with concerns over the rise of global jihadism. Importantly, the trope of “Love Jihad” shows how a post-9/11 “global grammar of Islamophobia” (Beydoun 2020) not only is exported and copied across the world, but also how it may be vernacularized and “resemiotized”<sup>2</sup> to suit local concerns.

Our minimalist and maximalist understandings of “love jihad” are limited with reference to certain practices. While this Special Issue is dedicated to the study of allegations of “love jihad” as a social construction of multiple nationalist formations across the globe, it would be naïve not to recognize the social reality of certain forms of “love jihad” *qua* social practice. We do believe, however, that a fine-grained level of analysis will be able to distinguish between nationalist imaginaries of the threatening Muslim male “Other” and “love jihad” *qua* social practice. While the former is explained with reference to nationalism and the legacy of colonial power dynamics, the latter refers to explicit practices in certain conflict-ridden contexts in which militant Islamist groups such as the so-called Islamic State instrumentalize “sexual jihad” as part of their recruitment programs. In such campaigns, “sexual jihad” entails Muslim women engaging in sex as a devotional act to “support” male jihadists.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Boko Haram, sexual violence and sex slaves have long been recognized as a concerning issue in North Nigeria (UN).<sup>4</sup> That such reports are used as “proof” for the evilness of Muslim men by far-right nationalists does not dismiss the existence—such as Islamic State or Boko Haram—of “sexual jihad” or “love jihad” as intertwined with a particular warfare strategy, or even as part of a specific interpretation of Islamist ideology. Thus, we recognize that in certain contexts, “love jihad” is not only a nationalist fiction of the hypersexualized male Muslim “Other”, but in fact a strategy applied by some militant Islamist groups either as voluntary civilian support to male fighters, as a tactic to convert non-Muslim women (such as in the case of the Jezidi women under ISIS rule), or as part of modern sex slavery, which is the case of both ISIS and Boko Haram (Maiangwa and Agbiboa 2014). Thus, in Syria or in Nigeria, the tropes of “sexual jihad” or “love jihad” resonate well with lived experiences of sexual violence as a weapon in war.

A second limitation to our definition of “love jihad” and to our object of study is controversy over interreligious marriages. Historically—and certainly predating European

colonial constructions of the Muslim “Other”—interreligious relations in the institution of marriage have been highly contested. Studies of interreligious marriage during the period of *La Convivencia* in Spain, for example, show that boundary work in a pluricultural context was of great concern for both Christian and Muslim legal scholars (Zorgati 2012). A salient topic within such debates was the question about conversion of the female partner. As discussed by Frøystad (2021), Frydenlund (2021), and Zorgati (2021) in this Special Issue, anti-Muslim conspiracy theories such as “love jihad” are added to already existing social processes of contestation and boundary work with regard to interreligious marriages.

Highlighted by the various contributions in this Special Issue, “love jihad” is interwoven with nationalist discourse across Asia and Europe, but from a comparative perspective such discourses entail similarities as well as differences. In liberal and secular Western Europe, specific Islamophobic discourses form part of so-called “femonationalism” (Farris 2017). According to Farris, this constitutes an exploitation and co-optation of feminist themes by anti-Islam and xenophobic campaigns. Farris argues that by characterizing Muslim males as dangerous to western societies and as oppressors of women, and by emphasizing the need to rescue Muslim and migrant women, these groups use proclamations of gender equality to justify their racist rhetoric and nationalist policies. While the nationalist perceived need to protect “native women” against the sexually threatening male “Other” is well documented in theories of nationalism, the need to “rescue” the Muslim female victim requires a more sophisticated analysis of colonial and imperialist legacies of racialization of sexism. Racialization of sexism refers to the Western (colonial) belief that sexism and gender violence belong to the non-Western, less “civilized” world. Thus, far-right nationalist actors in Western Europe, following established colonial tropes, are engaged in policies that seek to “rescue” immigrant/Muslim women (Farris 2017). However, it is to be noted that within the organized anti-Islamic movement, the salience of specific frames vary, and that “modern equality frames” is more prominent in for example Norway (with high levels of gender equality) as opposed to “traditional protector frames” (Berntzen 2020). The perceived need to rescue these women from the male Muslim “Other” seems less prevalent in other (non-Western European) nationalist imaginaries (see for example Vala in this Special Issue). It should also be noted that recent studies show that even within “modern equality frames”, the extent to which far-right activists engage in “rescuing” Muslim female “Others”, varies. For example, Katrine Fangen’s study of Norwegian anti-Islamic Facebook groups shows that participants are not concerned with rescuing Muslim women (as they are believed to have chosen their subordinate position), but rather with “protecting” Norwegian women, thus challenging Farris’ concept of femonationalism (Fangen 2020). Therefore, both notions of gender equality and patriarchal notions of the body-state are prevalent in contemporary nationalist imaginaries across different contexts.

### 3. The Indian Origin of a Globalizing Trope

From its origins in the Indian context, Hindu nationalist activists instrumentalized the idea of “Love Jihad” as the anxiety of Islamization of India projected onto the body of the Hindu woman. As one Hindu nationalist activist explains: “It’s a matter of Muslims taking over our blood and taking over our wombs—the wombs that would give Hindu children”.<sup>5</sup> In driving this concept, Hindu nationalist actors claim that Indian Muslims are conspiring to increase their demographic size within the Indian population by luring allegedly naïve Hindu women into a so-called “love marriage” and eventually converting them to Islam. “Love Jihad”—as an issue increasingly mobilized by Hindu nationalist activists—has in recent years gained attention by scholars working on India (Tyagi and Sen 2020; Gupta 2016; Sarkar 2018; Strohl 2019). These studies identify the cultural logic or schema of the need to control the female body as it relates to gendered imaginaries of the nation. Domination over sexual reproductive abilities has long been present in patriarchal institutions irrespective of nation states, but, importantly, the trope of “Love Jihad” takes a distinctly nationalist register.

As discussed above, in a post-9/11 world, Hindu nationalist activists expanded the semantic field of *jihad* to characterize what they perceived as another form of terrorism through seduction and marriage under the false pretense of love, empirically showcasing the transnational character of the very concept itself. This link between interreligious marriage and charges of terrorism was made explicit during the so-called Hadiya case in Kerala in 2017 (Tyagi and Sen 2020). While interreligious or intercaste marriages have long been controversial in India, the motif of “love jihad” added a new dimension to the stereotype of the Muslim male. It was even professed that Muslim youth were receiving funds from abroad for the purchase of designer clothes, vehicles, mobile phones, and expensive gifts in order to woo Hindu women and lure them away.

Hindu nationalist activism in India is highly organized, and importantly, knowledge about “Love Jihad” seems to stem less from experience or near first-hand knowledge of social realities than from structured campaigns and training programs organized by Hindu nationalist organizations within the Sangh Parivar, where Hindu women and girls are taught how to encounter the advances of the “Love Jihadists” (Tyagi and Sen 2020, p. 108). Additionally, public campaigns, for example in the form of large public posters that visualize the ways in which “Love Jihad” takes place, or the formation of vigilante groups (so-called “anti-Romeo squads”) who report “deviant” urban couples, shows that campaigns against so-called “Love Jihad” is a highly organized social phenomenon (Gupta 2016). When considering the family as the micro-unit of imagined nations, exercising “Love Jihad” measures are a method of securitizing intimacy with broader social and state relations. Consequently, “Love Jihad” is also a “regulatory mechanism to control the choice and mobility of young urban women identified as subjects of the Hindu Rashtra (the Hindu nation)” (Tyagi and Sen 2020, p. 3). Thus, nationalist discourse is not only employed against targeted populations, but “by laying its foundation in the dichotomy between security of the “Self” (women uncorrupted by the fluidities of modern life as ideal, permissible and desirable urban citizens), versus the danger of the “Other” (migrants, Muslims and other undesirable communities in urban public space)” (Tyagi and Sen 2020, p. 3).

Others have argued that “Love Jihad” is an example of a “moral panic”, that is, an exaggerated response to a perceived threat that a marginalized group poses to society. Along these lines, Muslim-Hindu marriages are seen as a threat to an idealized Hindu collective moral order, and that anti-Love Jihad campaigns “solicit an idealized Hindu family to protect the nation, making social and biological reproduction part and parcel of responsible citizenship” (Strohl 2019, p. 12). Fundamentally, “Love Jihad” is viewed as the transgression of religious communal boundaries that is policed at multiple levels. As Sarkar (2018, p. 16) points out:

Love Jihad campaigns derive their energy and legitimacy from an entrenched structure ... They are a mode of making ideal citizens—both men and women—of Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation state), of producing docile, submissive subjects who will not question regimes of power, be it parents and families, social norms, neoliberalism, religious majoritarianism or social hierarchies and injustice.

Consequently, research on “Love Jihad” can elicit important insights into how right-wing nationalism across the world influences notions of citizenship, away from neoliberal subjectivity to familial and religious community-based understandings of belonging to the political community.

#### 4. Travelling Tropes and the Transnational Flows of Islamophobia

Given empirical data that shows the occurrence of “Love Jihad” beyond India, there is reason to argue that the concept is diffusing from its place of origin to other social and cultural contexts. In fact, over the last decade, the trope of “Love Jihad”—and related concerns over Muslim male hyper-fertility and sexual aggression—have surfaced in India’s neighbouring Nepal (a Hindu majority country)<sup>6</sup>, as well as in Buddhist majority countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka. So far, very little has been published on the topic of “Love Jihad” outside of South and Southeast Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, there is a high degree

of geographical variation with regard to fears of Islamization, and consequently, the role of the Muslim “Other” in nationalist and/or religious imaginaries. For instance, in South Africa, with its small Muslim minority, Muslim—non-Muslim intermarriage seems to cause little controversy where the significant “Other” of Afrikaner nationalism continues to be the Black male (who would not be Muslim, but Christian, or identify with indigenous African religions).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, high levels of Christian-Muslim contestation and controversy between the Christian-dominated South and the Muslim-dominated North in Nigeria presents a contrasting case. As discussed above, sexual violence committed by Islamist groups is a *de facto* social issue for a large number of Nigerian women and young girls. For our purpose here, the Nigerian case is also important in exemplifying the actual spread of the “Love Jihad” trope to a radically different cultural context. While we have not been able to establish the genealogy of the concept in Nigeria, a text that *claims* to have introduced the concept to Nigerians explicitly states that “Love Jihad” is a plot to Islamize Nigeria. The text, which was first published on the digital platform Nairaland.com (accessed on 28 August 2021) in 2016 by a writer referred to as “IndianBwoy” opens as follows:

Fellow Nigerians. I wish to hereby inform you that the concept of **Love Jihad** has finally taken root in your dominion in the year 2016. Although “Love Jihad” may have existed since earlier on, but in a more subtle manner and you people never realized it until now. [emphasis in original].<sup>8</sup>

The text further introduces the alleged dangers of “Love Jihad” and makes calls for legislative action (similar to India) to be taken in Nigeria. Nairaland.com (accessed on 28 August 2021) is Nigeria’s sixth most visited website, and given Nigeria’s Christian-Muslim contestation and Boko Haram’s sexual enslavement of young Nigerian girls (discussed above), one could expect that “Love Jihad” would easily take root in society. Nonetheless, although this case clearly demonstrates digital transnational flows between (assumed) Indian activists and Nigerian websites, future research would need to explore the localization and vernacularisation of this concept in Nigeria.

Along similar lines, while the specific trope of “Love Jihad” is of limited circulation in Scandinavian publics, news about “Love Jihad” in India is shared on far-right media platforms, such as the Norwegian *Resett*.<sup>9</sup> *Resett* reported on the 2020 “love jihad laws” in India, under the headline: “Hindu nationalists wage war against Love Jihad”. From the commentary sections, it is clear that such online activists very clearly link the concept to what they see as a “wider problem with Islamic marriage practices” beyond India. According to one commentator: “The same thing is happening in Norway and other European countries. To take the women of the Infidels is part of the plan. Very few women agree to that. We have lost control over ‘our women’, while ‘they’ have steel control over ‘theirs’. We are losing.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, when “love jihad” is applied as an analytical category relating to a wider cluster of meanings in Islamophobic discourses regarding sexuality and reproduction, as pointed out by Zorgati in this Special Issue, “love jihad” themes are present in Scandinavian publics, albeit to a much lesser degree than in India. As further discussed in Leidig’s article within this Special Issue, the adoption of the “Love Jihad” trope has gained attention among far-right actors based in the UK and North America, who have more actively adopted the narrative as one among many in their web of anti-Muslim nationalist discourses. Diaspora Hindu nationalist activists in the UK have additionally indicated interest in the trope and use it as a mobilizing register within minority identity politics (Leidig 2019).

Previous research has shown how the anti-Islam movement in Europe and North America has, since its inception post 9/11, been transnational, both in terms of institutional co-operation and in digital spaces (Bangstad 2014; Berntzen 2020; Ganesh 2020; Leidig 2020). For example, from 2015–2016, anti-Islamic Facebook groups originated from 182 countries around the world, and on average, each group had members from 30 countries (Berntzen 2020). With reference to the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway (to date the largest right-wing extremist attack in the “West”), our reading of the perpetrator’s “manifesto” show that the

text has more references to Hindu nationalism than to the so-called Eurabia<sup>11</sup> conspiracy theory, with the text particularly global in outlook.<sup>12</sup> While not referencing “Love Jihad” or “sexual jihad”, the “manifesto” indicates obsession with gender, sexuality and demographic warfare. Importantly, this is not only addressed from a white nationalist, but also from global contra-jihadist point of view, which openly endorses multiple forms of anti-Muslim nationalism.

### 5. The Aim of This Special Issue

Thus far, existing research on “Love Jihad” focuses solely on the Indian context. This research shows how “Love Jihad” can be seen as one of the ways in which “right-wing organizations attempted to realign the urban public sphere in accordance with a gendered Hindu civil order” (Tyagi and Sen 2020, p. 104). However, more scholarship is needed for our understanding of how the concept of “Love Jihad” spreads in Indian society, and moreover, how it relates to Hindu nationalist politics at large. Furthermore, we need to understand the ways in which the trope of “Love Jihad” (and related concepts) spreads globally and informs notions of the “Nationalist Self” vs. the constructed “Muslim Other” across national contexts. We conceived of this Special Issue in response to this need. By bringing together scholars from a wide range of disciplines and specializations, we hope to shed new light on Indian specific developments, but also to bring this area of knowledge in conversation with similar cases in the broader region, as well as in Europe and North America. Uniting the contributions of this Special Issue is a focus on anti-Muslim conspiracy theories in relation to sexuality, reproduction, and the construction of the predatory Muslim male. Research on “Love Jihad”, we argue, adds to our understanding of how specific tropes can travel from one cultural context to the other, resulting in long-term transnational exchange. As such, this Special Issue on “Love Jihad” contributes to the ongoing academic conversation about global Islamophobia, as well as the transnational dimensions of nationalism.

In the article “Sound Biting Conspiracy: From India with “Love Jihad””, Frøystad (2021) argues that resistance to Muslim-Hindu marriages has a long historical legacy, and following the patrilineal logic, marrying a daughter out of one’s group has been strongly rejected by Hindu, as well as Muslim, families. However, in 2003 a new language of “jihad” entered Hindu nationalist rhetoric, partly, but not only, inspired by contra-jihadist authors such as Robert Spencer and Bat Ye’Or. In 2005, the concept of “Love Jihad” was mentioned in public by a Hindu nationalist activist called Pramod Muthalik, although as Frøystad points out, “it is still not known exactly how, when, and where interfaith courtship was first construed as a modality of jihad in its own right” (Frøystad 2021, p. 17). Discussing how the neologism “Love Jihad” caught on in the Indian public sphere, Frøystad suggests that we see it as an atomized symbolic message, which is construed in a “sound biting process”, defined as the art of inventing and repeating slogans, neologisms, and other compressed messages. Therefore, the trope “Love Jihad” did not invent this specific anti-Muslim conspiracy theory, but helped to popularize it across the Indian public sphere. Finally, and a crucial point for this Special Issue, Frøystad makes the observation that “Though the neologism itself was of Indian origin, the genealogy of thought that underpinned it, reflects a transnational exchange motivated by a series of local and global events” (Frøystad 2021, p. 18).

As argued by Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen in ‘Love Jihad and the Governance of Gender and Intimacy in Hindu Nationalist Statecraft’ (Nielsen and Nilsen 2021), “Love Jihad” has now become crucial to the politics of Hindu nationalist statecraft, culminating (so far) in the passing of the *The Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance* in the state of Uttar Pradesh in 2020. The law does not explicitly mention “Love Jihad”, but the government spokesperson who presented the law did mention the need for the law with reference to “Love Jihad”. Analysing the ordinance, Nielsen and Nilsen show that in contrast with laws from other Indian states that similarly regulate religious conversions, the new Uttar Pradesh ordinance does not invoke the notion of “freedom

of religion” in its name, but is explicit about its aim to prevent conversions. [Nielsen and Nilsen \(2021\)](#) further show that “love jihad” laws, and the wider conservative politics of gender and intimacy within which it is embedded, feeds into the authoritarian politics of the Modi regime, in which Muslims are consistently portrayed as enemies of the Indian nation. As such, Nielsen and Nilsen argue, laws against “Love Jihad” contributes to the rise of an “ethnic democracy” in India, anchored in Hindu nationalism and a concurrent rejection of non-Hindu minorities.

Importantly, the “Love Jihad” trope has effects beyond national or state-level policies. Taking securitization theory as their starting point, [Malji and Raza \(2021\)](#) show in their article ‘The Securitization of Love Jihad’, that the perceived threat of “Love Jihad” has been increasingly utilized as a Hindu nationalist tactic to promote fear and create support for increased securitization policies both domestically and in foreign policy. The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) are often framed as addressing the perceived problem of Muslims living in India illegally, but as Malji and Raza note, the CAA and the NRC are also aimed at preventing future Muslim immigration. From a Hindu nationalist perspective, “Love Jihad” is linked to the question of Muslim immigration from Bangladesh, and in the states of Tripura and Assam, calls are made for anti-“love Jihad” laws, as well as “re-conversion” (*ghar wapsi*) of non-Hindu Indians to Hinduism. Internationally, anti-Muslim policies such as CAA and laws against “Love jihad” have caused some negative reactions from Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Turkey, whereas Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have strengthened ties under Modi’s rule.

The question of illegal Muslim immigration is also at the fore in nationalist discourses in neighbouring Burma/Myanmar. In the article ‘Protecting Buddhist Women from Muslim Men: “Love Jihad” and the Rise of Islamophobia in Myanmar’, [Frydenlund \(2021\)](#) shows that while the Indian neologism “Love Jihad” has scarce reference in contemporary Burmese Buddhist discourses, tropes of aggressive male Muslim sexuality and (forced) conversion through marriage (“love jihad”) have become one of the core issues in Buddhist protectionism in Burma/Myanmar. In addition, while notions of ethnicity and race certainly follow colonial racialized logics, fears about Muslim males in Burma/Myanmar take place in the context of intra-Asia intimacies. Thus, anti-Muslim nationalism in Burma/Myanmar cannot be reduced to being a US export product in the context of the global War on Terror, nor to theories of “whiteness”. Rather, its understanding requires a sophisticated analysis of locally specific historical legacies and their entanglements with regional, as well as global, flows of anti-Muslim sentiment.

In transitioning to a global perspective, the article ‘From “Love Jihad” to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers’ by [Leidig \(2021\)](#) traces the transnational flows of constructions of the hypersexualized Muslim male through a comparative analysis of “Love Jihad” in India and the spectre of grooming gangs in the UK. The study shows remarkable similarities across Hindu nationalist and Western far-right groups concerning the representation of Muslim men as savage and barbaric; Muslim sexuality as an instrumentalized tool of demographic warfare toward achieving the “Islamization” of India and Europe; “native” Hindu and white women constantly existing in a vulnerable state and needing protection by militant Hindu and white men; and an invoked sense of urgency to save Hindu and Western civilization. Furthermore, far-right female social media influencers act as key nodes in bridging narratives of love jihad and grooming gangs as shared aspects of transnationality, illustrating how local ideological narratives of Muslim sexuality are embedded into global Islamophobic tropes of gendered nationalist imaginaries online.

As shown by [Sian \(2021\)](#) in “‘Love Jihad’, “Forced” Conversion Narratives, and Interfaith Marriage in the Sikh Diaspora’, narratives of Muslim men tricking assumed vulnerable women into Islam can also be found across the Sikh diaspora. The Sikh case is not well known and adds important insights into how the trope works in a minority situation in India, as well as in Europe and North America. Building on qualitative



interviews with Sikhs in the UK, US, and Canada, the study reveals that Sikh Islamophobia centres around regulation of Sikh female bodies, fears of the preservation of community, and wider anxieties around interfaith marriage. Decolonial Sikh Studies becomes imperative, Sian argues, in the endeavour of challenging “the toxic discourses of misogyny, patriarchy, and Islamophobia” (Sian 2021, p. 13).

In this Special Issue, we have also included cases not often considered within the study of global Islamophobia generally, or in the study of “love jihad” more specifically. Focusing on Central Europe, in particular the Czech case, we flesh out important differences as well as similarities of “Love Jihad” as a globalizing Islamophobic trope. In the article ‘Jihad.cz: Interpreting Jihad, Sexual Jihad and Demographic Jihad in the Czech Anti-Islamic Milieu’, Vala (2021) shows how Islamophobia can be produced and thrive in a country with a miniscule Muslim population, but still feature akin to a “national hobby”. The rise of Islamophobia in the Czech Republic began after 9/11, but was exacerbated with the 2015 arrival of Syrian refugees in Europe. Importantly, Czech Islamophobic attitudes are often linked to earlier anti-Roma tendencies, criticism of the EU, and nationalism,<sup>13</sup> thus fitting into pre-existing patterns of prejudice and exclusionary nationalism. Inspired by Robert Spencer’s notion of “stealth Islamization”, Czech Islamophobic discourse is increasingly concerned with notions of demographic, sexual, or population jihad, in the context of theories about the “Great Replacement” (Vala 2021). In contrast to India and Burma/Myanmar, “Love Jihad”, or related notions of demographic jihad or sexual jihad, are *not* embedded within pre-existing endogamous marriage patterns or colonial racial legacies, but relate to nativist nationalism, defence of the nation state, and anti-EU sentiments.

With its imperial legacy in the Muslim world, its particular notion of secularism (*la laïcité*), and with the largest Muslim population in Western Europe (but still only around 5 per cent), the question of Islamophobia is particularly relevant in the case of France. In ‘The Terrorist and the Girl Next Door: Love Jihad in French Femonationalist Nonfiction’, Tebaldi (2021) discusses the role of “Love Jihad” in true sex crime novels. A semiotic analysis of visual and textual representations shows that these stories reflect, dramatize, and sexualize broader social constructions of the monstrous Muslim; from far-right conspiracies of “The Great Replacement” to femonationalist debates about veils and republican values. Resembling the “Love Jihad” controversies in South and Southeast Asia, several of these novels focus on conversion in marriage of non-Muslim women, or sexual enslavement of female converts to Islam or non-Muslim women (such as Christians or Yezidi women). This clearly echoes the French author Renaud Camus’ now infamous book *Grand Remplacement* (2011),<sup>14</sup> but differs in important ways: in Camus’ book, the evil agents are the European elites (similar to the Eurabia conspiracy theory) who foster population replacement, whereas in the “Love Jihad” conspiracy theory, evil intent and agency is attributed to Muslim men, as Tebaldi importantly observes. The true crime sex novels scale-up assumed differences between the French and the Muslim man to the level of the nation. As Tebaldi points out: “not only will the single Muslim man violate a woman, but all migrants will violate the borders of *la France*. The cherished nation is imagined as a female body, threatened by the other, and the woman is imagined as the nation, whose purity and fertility must be protected. The national symbol of France is a beautiful young woman, called La Marianne” (Tebaldi 2021, p. 6). The function of love jihad related concepts in French popular culture, then, is to make women seek mono-cultural marriages and invest in nationalist politics.

A recurrent theme in this Special Issue is that “love jihad” may be understood as part of a larger cluster of meaning related to fear of love across religious and cultural boundaries, and of losing “our” women to “foreign” men. Zorgati (2021) explores in ‘Love Jihad in Contemporary Art in Norway’ the extent to which “love jihad” tropes and themes thrive in postmodern, secular Norway (and Sweden), where gender equality is particularly emphasized and where patriarchal structures are far less prevalent than in India or Myanmar, for example. Zorgati finds that tropes infuse the Scandinavian variant of the love jihad discourse: the oppressed Muslim woman; the dangerous Muslim man; the blonde, white woman; and the gentle, but threatened white man. In such far-

right discourses, it is pointed out, where the female body represents the boundary of the nation, Scandinavian women are either feminist traitors or vulnerable girls. Importantly, however, far-right discourses of “love jihad” are met with debate and resistance, noticeably in contemporary art work, for example, in music by the nationally famous and widely acclaimed Norwegian hip hop group *Karpe* (Zorgati 2021).

We end our reflections in this Special Issue with Zorgati’s article, hopefully leaving our readers with the impression that our joint research efforts, across time and continents, will challenge Islamophobic constructions of the Muslim man, as well as the assumed dangers of interreligious/exogamous marriages. We also hope that our collective effort in this Special Issue will stimulate further research into the role of gender in anti-Muslim nationalism(s) across the globe.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Research Council of Norway grant number 287230.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 The term is highly contested with the academic community divided over its usage. While some prefer anti-Islam and anti-Muslim views, see e.g., Berntzen (2020), others, particularly racism scholars, often use the term “Islamophobia”. For detailed discussions on the genealogy of the term “Islamophobia”, see Bravo Lopez (2011); for conceptual clarifications of the term, see Bleich (2011).
- 2 For more on the concept of resemiotization, see Leppänen et al. (2014) and Tebaldi (2020).
- 3 “Jihad Al-Nikah” in Arabic. The actual extent of this practice remains highly disputed.
- 4 See for example UN Security Council report on “Conflict-related sexual violence”, S/2021/312, published 30 March 2021, available at [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2021\\_312.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_312.pdf) (accessed on 22 September 2021).
- 5 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/muslim-hindu-couples-love-jihad-hit-list-facebook-interfaith-relationships-extremism-violence-a8325106.html> (accessed on 22 September 2021).
- 6 For example, there are specific Facebook groups dedicated to “rescue” Nepali girls from “Love Jihad”.
- 7 Thanks to Sindre Bangstad and Nina Hoel for sharing their insights on interreligious relations in South Africa with us.
- 8 Nairaland, <https://www.nairaland.com/2988085/love-jihad>, last accessed on 24 August 2021.
- 9 <https://resett.no/2020/11/29/india-hindunasjonalister-til-krig-mot-kjaerlighetsjihad/> (accessed on 5 September 2021).
- 10 The original post reads: “Det samme skjer i Norge og andre europeiske land. Å ta de vantro kvinner er endel av planen. Veldig få kvinner er enig i det. Vi har mistet kontrollen på “våre” kvinner, mens “de” har stålkontroll på “sine”. Vi taper».
- 11 For more on the Eurabia conspiracy theory, see Bangstad (2014).
- 12 Our reading of Anders Behring Breivik’s 2083—*A European Declaration of Independence*. The contra-jihadist blogger «Fjordman», who was central to Breivik’s ideological formation and who also influenced US-based organizations like jihadiwatch.com, was an active disseminator of the trope of “Muslim rape epidemic” Enebakk (2012).
- 13 Importantly, Vala argues, Islamophobia in the Czech Republic is not strongly linked to anti-Semitism, but rather to anti-Roma racism.
- 14 “The Great Replacement”, the manifesto published online by the 2019 Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant, is a specific reference to Camus’ book. Also, it is to be noted that French far-right politician Eric Zemmour supports this theory arguing that “Le grand remplacement touche toute la France”, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MzCYmCRN10> (interview from 6 January 2022).

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