

## Essi Zahedi and Abdou Gaye's Forum at SUNY New Paltz on Islamophobia

Cabot W. Peterson  
November 18, 2016



The [Islam Forum](#), founded and promoted by Essi Zahedi and Dr. Abdou Gaye, held its latest presentation on the campus of SUNY New Paltz on November 18, 2016 as part of the [22nd Annual Multicultural Education Conference](#).

The conference, which ran from 8:30 AM-3:00 PM in the Student Union Building, offered a morning and afternoon session with eight different topics presented in each session. The Islam Forum's topic was entitled Islamophobia: The Impact of Media Bias on Students, was well received by the

audience that filled the room and spilled over into the adjoining hallway.

Islamophobia: The Impact of Media Bias on Students. This workshop focuses on Islamophobia by uncovering media-based stereotypes regarding Islam. Students in schools are often faced with answering to bias and may experience alienation, exclusion and bullying. The presenters create a format for understanding the source and impact of bias against those perceived to be Muslim



*Essie Zahedi*

Essi and Abdou “set the stage” for the topic and the following discussion by explaining the language and imagery which the media may use, where certain terms, phrases, photos, cartoons and video-clips can be perceived as “bias, stereotyping or prejudice.” Abdou then shared a brief testimony about his own experience, “as a teacher and as an African with a Muslim background.”

The topic, which was selected by the conference organizers, proved to be very popular. The presentation of the hour-long program inspired, as Abdou put it, “lots of question and contributions from the audience. There were a lot of high school teachers from around the New Paltz area who were very interested in the topic.

“They [teachers] said that they have lots of young students who are Muslims or are related to Muslims that are bullied or feel ill-at-ease with some attitudes toward them, especially in recent days and months. That is why they wanted to come to the discussion.”



*Abdou Gaye*

The conference was another step forward for the Islam Forum. Essi and Abdou continue their work to educate the public about Islam while creating an environment for open discussion. Their own personal experience within Islam - both in terms of how it is put into practice from a religious perspective but also from a political one- is immensely valuable to the community at large.

Both Abdou and Essi have experienced Islam, but from different sides: different countries and different sects. Abdou was born and raised in the Sunni-dominated nation of Mauritania, the [Islamic Republic of Mauritania](#), as it is formally called. Essi was born and raised in the Shia-dominated nation of Iran, the [Islamic Republic of Iran](#).

“We are trying to bring our understanding and our experience in Islam to a greater circle, to the larger community,” said Abdou. We tell them that we are not really speaking from books or from an intellectual kind of agenda but from our own personal experiences. People like that, they can relate to that type of conversation.”

The Islam Forum has plans for future speaking events and conferences. Essi and Abdou are hoping to continue speaking in schools and on campuses, but are open to all types of forums and venues. A newsletter may also be published, with outreach on social media too.

“Our purpose is to help people who don't know about Islam,” said Abdou, “and where they can learn, literally, from those who have been a part of this [Islamic] religion, this community.”