

MAGIC NATIONAL DISPATCHES

Mapping Muslim Women Voices
and Gendered Islamophobia and
Stereotypes in Media

A dispatch written by Media Diversity Institute

m
magic



This project is co-funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) under Grant Agreement no. 963678



Introduction

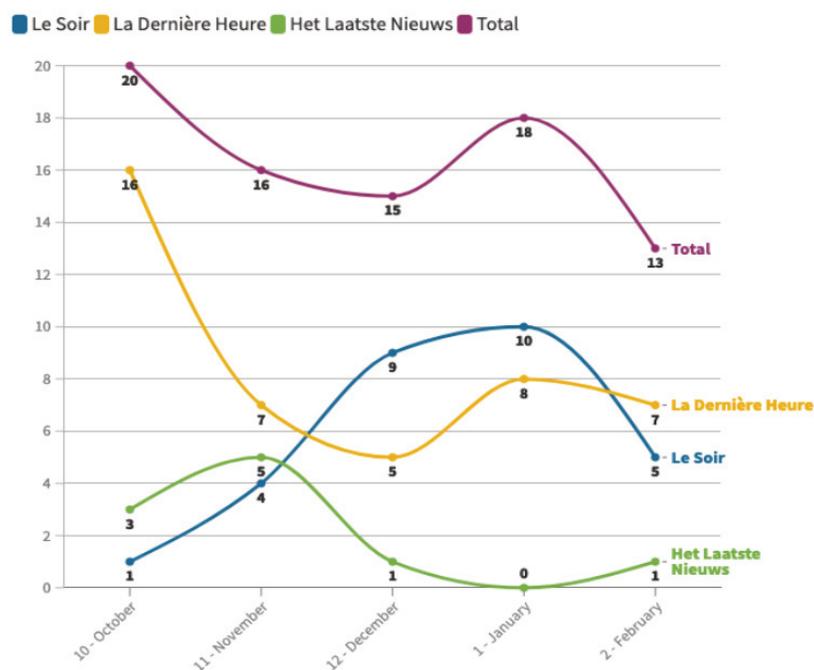
The MAGIC (Muslim women and communities Against Gender Islamophobia in soCiety) project aims to prevent gendered islamophobia in the media in Belgium and Spain through different activities, including media monitoring. This report presents the results of the second part of the analysis of the Belgian media, operated by the Media Diversity Institute, and covers the period from October 2021 to February 2022. The three Belgian media monitored as part of this project are *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, while the three Spanish media monitored by Al Fanar are *El País*, *La Razón*, and *ABC*.

A specific methodology was developed in the context of the project, aiming to analyse qualitatively and quantitatively how these six media report on Muslim women. It is important to note that only articles written by staff journalists or by the media's editorial staff were considered. All other information related to the criteria for filtering the articles and the systematised data can be found in the methodology documentation.

The results of this report were presented to Belgian experts during the second national consultation held online (see part 5 for further detail).

General Findings

Throughout this 5-month period, 82 articles were identified, amounting to a far smaller number compared to the 122 articles identified in period 1. While *Le Soir* articles halved when compared to last period, *La Dernière Heure* articles represented over 50% of the results, which heavily coloured the types of articles collected. *Het Laatste Nieuws* results remained consistent across both periods: Between 0-5 articles/month.

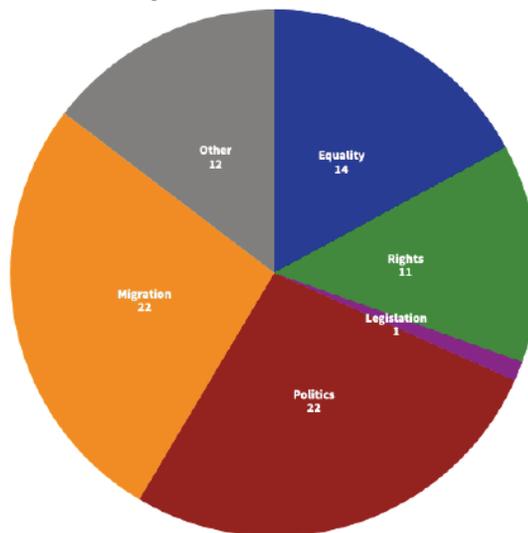


Own production

As we can see, the articles found under our search terms¹ mainly covered:

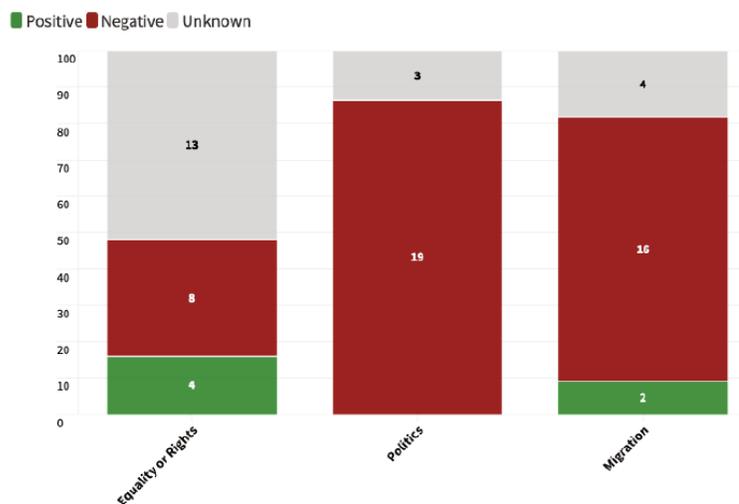
1. Articles discussing issues of inequalities faced by Muslim women or their human and citizen rights.
2. Articles discussing Muslim women as seen through the positions of politicians arguing with each other through public statements.
3. Articles presenting Muslim women through the prism of migration, either their own migration to or from Belgium or someone else's.

Primary Issue covered in the Article



Own production

Muslim Community Opinion by Issue Covered



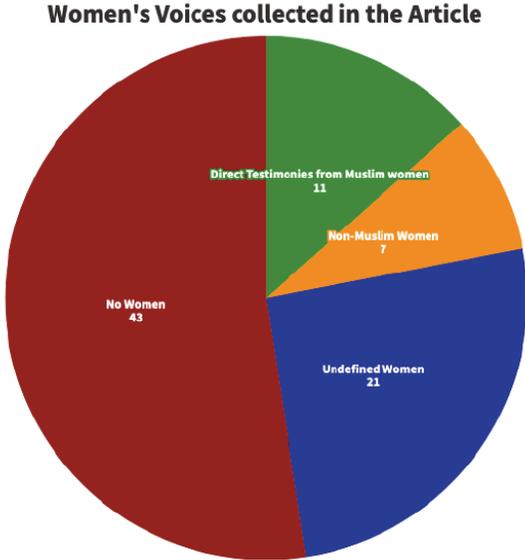
Own production

¹ Does the text deal with any of these issues? -Equality (1) -Rights (2) -Legislation (3) -Politics (4) -Migration (5) -Other (6)''

Articles presenting Muslim women as objects of political debate or “migrants” represent 67% of the articles which present the Muslim community negatively. By contrast, articles covering equality or rights comprise 4 of the only 6 articles to present the Muslim community in a positive light. Please note, however, that many articles which present Muslim women positively do so in opposition to Muslim men, and therefore often the Muslim community as a whole.

Lack of Muslim women’s voices

Unfortunately, in all these articles which primarily discuss women, female voices are rarely called on for testimony. Additionally, only 13.41% of articles clearly identify the women as Muslims in the article. Even if we assume that the Undefined Women are all Muslim, the total still leaves a mere 39% of articles which include the voices of the women they seem to discuss.

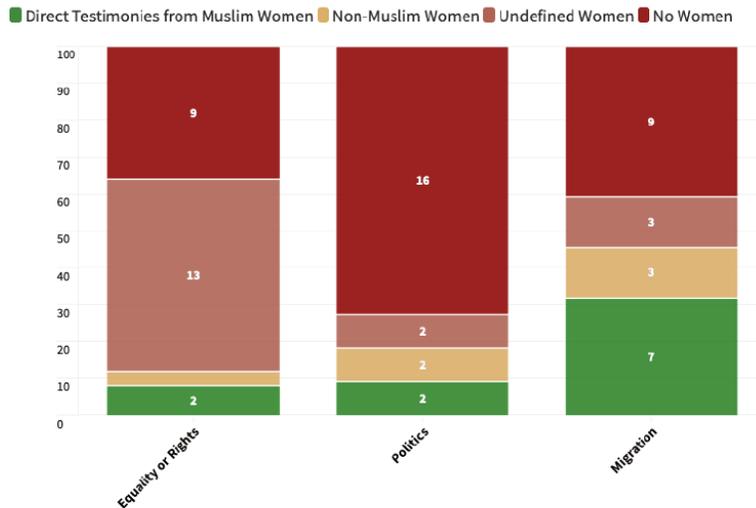


Own production

We can clearly see that articles covering Muslim Women through the focus of their rights or experience of inequality are far more likely to feature the testimonies of these women than articles referring to them as the object of political discourse.

The articles pertaining to migration tend to include direct testimonies of Muslim Women but their focus is more commonly on these women's religious identity than on their experience or perspective.

Women's Voices by Issue Covered in the Article

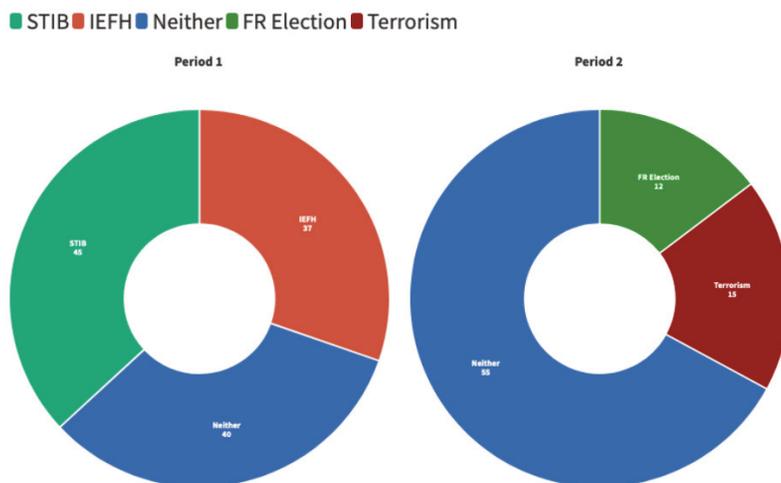


Own production

Personal stories over major themes

The second period was less marked by major themes and more focused on personal stories, except for two minor themes emerging in the French-language monitoring: The French election (primarily its far-right candidates), and terrorism (both discussing returnees from Syria and ongoing trials in Paris and Brussels.)

Coverage of Primary Themes in Periods 1 & 2



Own production

We note that many of these “personal stories” come from *La Dernière Heure* and are representative of that media’s reporting. The monitors note that in many French-language articles in our monitoring, Muslim women are more often presented as “manipulative”; while in the Flemish monitoring Muslim women are more often infantilised and presented as “victims”.

Case Study 1: Marc vs. his “ex-wife” in Morocco

This case concerns the story of Marc, a divorced father who tracked his son down to Meknes after his unnamed “ex-wife” took him there following a dispute over the custody and divorce settlements. While one can empathise with Marc, the articles covering this case lack the needed impartiality for such sensitive cases. To illustrate, the woman’s perspective is never discussed except to ridicule it, she is only ever described in comparison to her ex-husband, and her name is not given. By contrast, Marc is frequently presented both as a “family man” and a “success story”, and is regularly quoted.

While the woman’s religion is never discussed, enough weight is placed on her Moroccan background and “Other” status to assume she is considered part, or viewed as, a member of the Muslim community.

“Voilà neuf mois que je n’ai aucune idée du lieu où se trouve mon fils” : Marc dépose plainte au Maroc pour enlèvement d’enfant

Voici comment Marc, en prison à Meknès, est tombé dans le traquenard au Maroc

Marc, en prison au Maroc, victime du chantage de son ex-femme: "Elle réclame 8 000 € par mois et une villa avec piscine en Espagne"

As we can see, the headlines are rife with the partiality found throughout the body text: Marc is the only one cited, the child is presented as “his child”, his plight is described as a “trap”, and finally his ex-wife is only mentioned in the context of financial demands presented as “blackmail”.

Case Study 2: Racist subtitle quotes

The following headlines all contain quotes carrying negative opinions of Muslim women and their community. This raises questions around the problematic use of quotes in headlines and the harmful plausible deniability they offer journalists and their audiences.

**“Jouw volk maakte deze rommel, dus ruim jij het nu maar op”:
getuigenissen over racistische
regiomanager Action lopen massaal
binnen**

**Vrouwen met losse kledij en
hoofddoeken in zwembad,
schepencollege onderzoekt de zaak:
“Dit kan helemaal niet”**

**“Rot op met je boerka. Het zijn net
pinguïns”:
Erica Meiland overrompeld door haat na
uitspraken over islam**

Interestingly, in the last two article headlines, Muslim women who have been victimised are deemed the 'perpetrator' or seen as those who have caused the victimisation of the other(s). The monitors consider this phenomenon to be emblematic of the gendered islamophobia identified in this monitoring period.

Consultation feedback and reflections

The results of this report were presented during the second national consultation held online on the 25/03/2022, in which the following Belgian experts participated: Sarah El Massoudi, Billy Dopchie, Layla Oumourgh, Mouad Salhi, Helena Cazaerck.

Victims vs. Perpetrators

A rich discussion followed from the finding highlighting how Muslim women are often represented either as devious ('manipulative') or victims. While some participants agreed that "victims" or "manipulators", parallels well with the negative depiction of Muslim men as either "victims" or "aggressors," others voiced hardly ever seeing Muslim men represented as victims. One of the participants illustrated this point by referring to cases in which Muslim men are victims of conflict - for example, the Afghanistan crisis - and yet will often still be considered a potential threat (to Western society if given refugee status for example) or not enough of a victim to warrant aid.

The participants largely agreed that narratives infantilising and victimising Muslim women consequently result in the disempowerment of women and the dehumanisation of the Muslim community. This is in line with observations made by the monitors in periods 1 and 2 where they observed victimisation/humanisation of Muslim women only when they are seen as 'rebellious' against Muslim men and/or their community.

Do tabloids reflect the media landscape?

One of the participants questioned the project's decision to monitor Flemish tabloids as they are arguably not considered representative of the Flemish press. Another participant responded saying they don't believe other Flemish papers are in fact that dissimilar. In their view, they all lack in quality with regards to the representation of Muslims and Muslim women, despite the use of more sophisticated or subtle language. Without denying that there are individual journalists who do have the needed awareness, participants found that there are very few exceptions to this systemic and institutionalised problem.

The monitors consider the choice to include tabloids in this project important since they're a popular voice with a wide readership and thus very influential.

Muslims as active contributors to society often not seen as being newsworthy

Aside from the negative stories misrepresenting Muslim women, one of the participants noted that there is also a huge gap in positive stories being picked up on or published. The participant gave the example of their own efforts in trying to engage the media on a story

concerning the yearly Red Cross blood drive taking place in a mosque – an initiative which has been around for 15 years now. The Red Cross in Liège considers this particular blood drive one of their most successful ones due to the high participation rate and high (95%) viability rate of the blood collected.

The participant noted that every year their organisation reaches out to the media with the aim to secure coverage of this story. Despite these efforts, stories are rarely published about this event. In fact, this event was only covered once around 4 years ago, by a Christian radio in an inter-confessional story. The participants agreed that this speaks to a bigger problem of standalone or apolitical positive news stories from the Muslim community not being deemed newsworthy.

Paralysing effect on critical voices

Some of the participants noticed themselves and/or Muslim women in their network, disengaging from media requests and journalists due to the repetitive and stereotypical questions they tend to ask about their Muslim identity. Participants felt rejected or not taken seriously by journalists when they expressed views that did not fit the stereotypes assigned to Muslims in Belgium. The dehumanisation of Muslim women in media has also led to many Muslim women worrying about their voices being co-opted or being misrepresented if they do decide to engage with the media.

As a result, one of the participants noted that some members of the Muslim community have created separate media outlets - also referred to as “media safe spaces” - away from the mainstream. One of the participants welcomes this phenomenon and sees it as enabling more accurate and nuanced representation, whilst another participant worried about it leading to further exclusion of Muslim voices from mainstream outlets.

Problematizing headlines

The monitors asked the participants about the problematic use of headlines containing racist or negative quotes about Muslim women. It has been noted that from the headline examples of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, Muslim women who are the victim of something or someone are often presented almost not as a person, using passively formulated sentences.

Participants also felt like journalists hide behind the person who has the last say in the publishing process, and justify the usage of such headlines as an editorial choice to draw readers in. Another argument which the participants presented as commonly raised by some journalists is that the substance of the text is more important than the headline. Though this may be true, the fact of the matter remains that many people don't read an article beyond the headlines, especially if it concerns an article they must pay for.

Another participant provided an additional example highlighting the importance of headlines in representing and setting the tone for a story. The participant referred to a story covering Muslim designers and their work in the fashion industry. The story itself nicely detailed the

work of the professionals in question but the headline titled '*Worshippers of Armani and Allah*' came across as patronising and provoking ridicule to both one's professional career and faith. With these, and many other examples in mind, all participants agreed that more attention needs to be given to the harmful use or misuse of headlines.

About the project:

MAGIC is a project which aims to prevent gendered Islamophobia in Spain and in Belgium, in particular in media outlets, and to draw lessons useful for other European countries. It is funded by the European Commission, within the framework of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme.

In the span of two years MAGIC will work to map gender islamophobia in Belgian and Spanish newspapers with a twofold objective: to provide Muslim communities' leaders, Muslim women, and CSOs working on diversity with skills and tools to recognise and stand against stereotypes against Muslim women in public narratives and to promote inclusiveness of Muslim voices in the media.

MAGIC will do so not only through training of journalists & capacity enhancement and promoting awareness campaigns but also by fostering knowledge, dialogue, and mutual cooperation among Muslim communities' representatives, Muslim women, and CSOs and media practitioners.

Follow us at <https://magic.iemed.org/>

An information elaborated by Media Diversity Institute.

This publication reflects only the views of the author(s); the European Commission and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union are not responsible for any information it contains. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed).