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GENERAL INFORMATION ON MUSLIMS IN FINLAND

The first Muslims to settle in Finland were ethnic Tatars from Russia, who arrived in the country in the late 19th century while Finland was still under the rule of the Russian Empire. In 1917, Finland became fully independent from Russia, but the Muslim Tatars who had already partially settled in the country as soldiers or salesmen stayed on. For the Tatars, the bureaucracy in Finland offered more favourable conditions than the political tensions in Russia. Finally, independent Finland granted the Muslim Tatars citizenships in 1920. Today, Finland's Tatar minority is a well-established cultural and religious minority, with congregations in Helsinki, Järvenpää and Tampere, and is composed of approximately 600 members.

However, within a century the Muslim community in Finland has become ethnically, linguistically, culturally and religiously heterogeneous. In the second half of the 20th century, the number of Muslims immigrating to Finland began to increase rapidly. Since the 1990s, Finland received refugees according to the UNCHR quotas and asylum seekers outside any quotas. Even so, since the second half of the 20th century, Muslims have also arrived in Finland for work, study and family reasons. Today's Muslim ethnic communities are largely composed of Somalis, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Kosovo Albanians, Iranians and Bosnians. Moreover, the Syrian civil war and the refugee influx that followed have affected immigration from Muslim-majority countries to Finland. Nevertheless, statistics provided by the Finnish Immigration Service show that, between 2015 and 2020, the largest group of new arrivals granted a residence permit has been immigrants of Russian or Ukrainian nationality. The only "Muslim-majority" country in the list of the top five countries receiving residency permits from 2015 to 2021 was Iraq, with Syria and Afghanistan appearing interchangeably with the top seven list. Therefore, even right-wing nationalist politics loudly advocates against a "mass immigration" of Muslims or an "Islamisation" of Finland by Muslim immigration, the statistics show another reality. Moreover, as the demographic profile of most Muslims in Finland is of foreign origin, Islam has long been perceived as a "religion of immigrants", a religion of "others", not of "Finns", i.e. of white people born to white Finnish nationals. Otherization is a recurrent theme in right-wing nationalist political speech, as Muslims and Islam are portrayed as incompatible with "Finnish values" or even "Nordic values".



Since Finland does not include an obligation to be registered in a certain religious institution and does not require citizens to provide personal data on religious affiliation for the census, there is no official number indicating the size of the Muslim community in Finland in total. Therefore, the national Statistical Institution of Finland can only provide information on the number of individuals who have voluntarily registered as members of religious congregations. For the year 2020, the number of Muslims in this regard was the following: Total 19.347 / Men 10.766 / Women 8.581. However, researchers estimate the size of the community to be significantly bigger, totalling between 110.000-120.000 people, which is approximately 2-2.2% of the total Finnish population. It should be noted that the estimate is partly based on the self-declaration by Islamic communities and congregations.

ISSUES CONCERNING MUSLIM WOMEN

In general, religious freedom is well protected in Finland, and Muslims do not suffer from far-reaching legal restrictions on their religious practice, as is the case, for instance in France, Belgium, or Germany. There is no ban on the hijab or burqa, even though the far right and Islamophobic actors such as the Finns Party (PS) have tried to introduce them. The Islamic headscarf is especially problematised when public discourse emphasises a socio-cultural identity that is based on a Christian tradition, whereby the hijab – as a symbol of Islam – is framed as the symbol of a spatial and temporal “other”, which does not belong to modern Finnish society. In Finnish discourse, examples can be seen in political statements that create dichotomies between Islamic sartorial practices and “Nordic identity”. When the covered Muslim woman is even portrayed as reluctant to be part of the larger society, unwilling to integrate, women are forced to justify and defend their position in society and public spaces as equal citizens. However, the main issue lies exactly in the “immigranisation” of Islam, of Islamic practices, and of Muslims as such. If religious practices, such as the headscarf, were treated as a domestic issue, i.e. if a conversation about the religious life of Finns were created without compartmentalising Muslims into the non-Finnish category, the conversation would be very different, as representatives of other religious communities would then attend the conversation as well. Yet, this is easier said than done. The above-mentioned Tatar community, with its highly centralised representation, often makes public statements that convince the non-Muslim “Finnish” public of the “goodness” of the Tartars. The headscarf is rejected as a practice and references to Finnish history and, for instance, the involvement of Tatar men in Finland’s wars are brought up to “justify” the Tartars’ membership in Finnish society. For Tartars, discrimination has been a “non-issue” and therefore Islamophobia is not recognised either. The Tartars, “white” looking and easy to “pass”, are hence juxtaposed – by Tartars and the Finns when arguing about the problems Muslims face in society – with Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Somalis, and even converts who, unlike the Tatar community, complain of discrimination biased by Islamophobic attitudes.

Regarding political debates on the headscarf in Finland, two different positions on Muslim schoolgirls wearing the headscarf have been presented in parliamentary discussions since 2004. Directly after France’s decision to ban the hijab in public schools, MP Päivi Räsänen

(Christian Democratic Party) submitted a written question asking for the government's position on such bans in Finland. In 2018, inspired by the Austrian debates, MP Laura Huhtasaari (Finns Party), with the support of her party colleagues, filed a motion requesting the government to take measures to ban headscarves for girls in kindergartens and pre-schools. The arguments for the headscarf ban have been based on the idea that the headscarf would be a barrier to girls' access to equal opportunities with their peers. In her motion, MP Huhtasaari noted that the headscarves contribute to the emergence of "parallel societies". In her view, Muslim girls who are "forced to wear the headscarf by their parents will be more likely to be marginalised from the majority already in their childhood". Moreover, she argued that the headscarf would contribute to gendered discrimination, as Muslim parents do not force their children to wear any specific clothing. Agency is not an uncommon discursive theme in debates about Muslim girls and women. In 2013 and 2016, the Finnish MP Vesa-Matti Saarakkala (Finns Party) argued in his (failed) legislative proposals on the face veil ban that such was necessary "because there were reasonable grounds to believe that Muslim women in Finland or elsewhere in Europe in principle do not wear the face veil out of their own free will".

Hence, it can be said that, following the general Islamophobic stereotype that Muslim women are oppressed by their families/male guardians, the headscarf is reduced to a practice that can supposedly only be imposed on girls and then associated with an imposed gender identity. The Finnish Party's presidential candidate, Laura Huhtasaari, argued during her presidential election campaign that "women in the Nordic countries are free" and therefore wanted to advocate for a face veil ban. She argued that the face veil was by no means a woman's free choice, but that real freedom would be when she "as a woman from a Nordic country, can decide in the morning whether to wear jeans or a skirt". The emphasis on her cultural and geographical identity can be analysed in the sense that it implies a misrecognition of any Muslim woman living in Finland or another Nordic country as a "Nordic woman" and instead hints that she is the racial other belonging to another space and not within the identity that the speaker claims to dominate.

One of the biggest problems facing Muslim women is unemployment. By gender, the national unemployment rates for men and women are 11.8% and 9.1%, respectively. This compares with 65.4% for Arabic-speaking women and 49.5% for Somali-speaking women. Again, there are no numbers by religious affiliation and active civil society actors have not been able to conduct any studies related to Muslim women's employment, but the rates by ethnicity provide good guidance. In fact, there is no legislation banning the wearing of headscarves in the workplace, but employers have the right to decide this as a possible company policy. The only professions that have so far gone public in not accepting the hijab for female employees have been the police and the military. In 2020, the issue of the hijab as part of the police uniform was raised anew and is being investigated by the Ministry of the Interior. In 2021, a Muslim girl had signed up for voluntary military service but was rejected because of her desire to wear a turban under the military garment. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman gave a strong statement and encouraged the military forces to re-evaluate its uniform guidelines. As the argument against the turban, which as such would not even have been visible under the military headwear, was

that all soldiers should look the same, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman noted that uniformity does not imply equality. Furthermore, the military should be able to adjust their image to the multicultural and diverse nature of the Finnish society. Similar discussions have been brought up in the case of the police uniform, as in other Nordic countries the hijab has already been accepted as part of the uniform.

Finally, as reported by the Finnish Police University in its annual report on hate crimes, in 2019 (latest publication) 60% of hate crimes with Islam as a religious bias were reported by women. This at the same time while for religious bias Islam in all reported cases reported was at the forefront of the motivation list. In terms of hate crimes, the victimization of women is evident due to their higher visibility as Muslims. At the same time, hate crimes in Finland should be considered from an intersectional perspective, as, for example, European-wide reports have shown that Finland is scoring the highest in terms of hate crimes and discrimination of people of African Descent. Despite all the negativity, in the area of social inclusion 2021 witnessed a positive development, as the Finnish Football Association declared its support for the hijab worn by female players and even promised to give free sports hijabs to girls in need.

The Finnish media has long been uncritical of narratives about Islam and Muslims, especially when it comes to reporting the Islamophobic attitudes of politicians. Muslim women have not been given much voice when it comes to offering counter-narratives about Islam or even representation of Muslim community in the civic sense. In 2020, the media gave attention to 11 Muslim women who, along with their children, were going to be repatriated from Syria, having travelled there to join the “caliphate”. The heated political debate about the rights of these women and their children to return to Finland caused verbal and physical harassment of other Muslim women in Finland, as they were accused of being “ISIS-wives” and “terrorists”.

However, for about a year now, the Finnish media has started to include Muslim women into news reporting on topics that are not related to Islam per se, which has previously been the case, as Muslim women had been invited – if at all – to comment on timely issues that were somehow related to religion. This is a positive development in terms of representation and normalisation of Muslim women's presence and role in society. Examples of such news are a discussion on university entrance exams (with a young Muslim woman at the centre of the story); the pros and cons of multilingual families (where the mother is a Muslim woman); entrepreneurship (with a Muslim woman); the presentation of professionals in the health sector (with Muslim women as example).

Unlike other European countries where there are Muslim-led journalistic platforms, magazines, or projects working that emphasise the importance of providing alternative narratives/perspectives – while respecting also the “insider story” when it comes to reporting on minorities –, Finland is still in “baby’s shoes” when it comes to media diversification in terms of Muslim voices. However, “Migrant Tales” as well as “Ruskeat Tytöt” (eng. brown girls) are initiatives that emphasise POC narratives and disclosing the biased reporting of Finnish mainstream media.

NGOS FOR MAGIC COALITION

The issue of determining the factual size of the Muslim community is urgent, as the need for trustworthy numbers on the Muslim population is evident from the perspective of policy design and advocacy. At the same time, the Finnish Muslim community has little agency in terms of political representation: communities are in many aspects divided by ethnicity and no central voice has been established. The Finnish Muslim community can benefit from the MAGIC project in terms of a positive impact on media reporting, as well as offering the NGOs guidelines on how to monitor biased reporting and hate speech in the media. Moreover, the Finnish Muslim-led civil society as well as the media makers can benefit from the MAGIC project in terms of emphasizing the importance of diversifying Muslim women's voices and giving them the opportunity to represent themselves without the need to be religionised/otherized in dominant biased narratives about Muslims. On the one hand, the Finnish Muslim community needs empowerment measures to gain their voice while on the other hand, the non-Muslim Finnish community (media representatives and politicians) can benefit from help to form networks and alliances with Muslim communities. The following NGOs and institutions would be beneficial to work with in reaching such objectives.

- Non-Discrimination Ombudsman: <https://syrjinta.fi/en/front-page>
- The Union of Journalists in Finland: <https://journalistiliitto.fi/en/>
- Migrant Tales (contact : Enrique Tessieri): <https://www.migranttales.net/>
- Finnish Muslim Forum: https://www.facebook.com/Suomen-Muslimifoorumi-ry_100285305474850/
- Amal RY (Muslim- and women-lead NGO that concentrates on work with Muslim women from the social work perspective): <https://www.amalry.fi/in-english/>
- Nuoret Muslimit RY (the biggest Muslim youth organization): <https://www.facebook.com/nuoretmuslimit/>