

# Muslim Woman in Germany

**May Zeidani Yufani**

**None of us is free  
Until all of us are free**

## PROLOGUE

Muslim Women around the world are finding themselves between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the position of the Muslim woman, as also of white<sup>1</sup> women, is grave. From domestic violence, rape and abuse to a generally lower payment for the same work in lower, as well as in higher sections of the job market. Women still have to carry most of the load of managing a household and childcare, the welfare of other family members and increasingly also issues concerning their own economic survival. On the other hand, the position of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPoC) is as well, in many cases, deplorable. BIPoC residing in the so-called democratic West, such as migrants, refugees, Roma and Sinti and second and third generations of migrants are experiencing daily the xenophobic and racist systems of the West that allowed it to colonise so many places for so. Experiencing attacks on all fronts, BIPoC and Muslim women<sup>2</sup> find themselves in a political position that makes it harder for them to act in the democratic system. Pushed to choose a side in this endless war, it would mean either giving up your rights for equality as a woman or as a BIPoC person. In addition, Muslim women have their belonging constantly doubted. As an essential part of the concept of citizenship, the lack of sense of belonging can be a cause for not only many individual problems but also affects the ability of the group, in this case Muslim women, to take part in the democratic process as their rights dictate. Democracy is a contested aspiration when it comes to true equity and justice but if we do, for the lack of a better alternative, take it as our goal, we have to fight for its four

<sup>1</sup> I would like to clarify some of the terms that are going to be used in this text. The terms black and white are used as political positioning. Although they are understood as social constructs, one must acknowledge their influence. They mark the different privileges and positions of dominance, societal experiences of discrimination, and access to resources. In addition, the terms Western world and the West, are as well understood as a construct of great influence for the social, political and financial world. Just as white is a political position of power, privilege, and domination on an individual or intercultural level, the terms marking the West are also indicators of power and domination on an international and intercontinental level. Last but not least, is the term other – also understood to only as a social construct, which does not incorporate other values or qualities, but which is active in defining and identifying the self in the Western world. The other is relative and can be filled with the fashionable minority of the moment; the Jew, the African, the woman, or the queer.

<sup>2</sup> Clarification: Muslim women are not necessarily, but very often, BIPoC women. This paper will not discuss the question of whiteness in Islam.



central preconditions: i) free and fair elections; ii) active participation of the people, in politics and civil society; iii) protection of human rights of all residents; and iv) the rule of law and equality before the law. As far as Muslim women are concerned, it is the last three ones that European societies seem to struggle with.

In this strategy note I will give a brief background to racism in the German context. In many ways it is similar to any other European country, in some other ways it has its own special conditions. Then I will give a short overview mapping the German Media, its influence, and its hegemonic character. I will continue the mapping of gender Islamophobia in the discussed German context. Lastly, I will review the main objectives I consider urgent for a coalition focused on the fight against gender Islamophobia.

## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

### **Contradictory, Stagnant, Essentialised**

A decisive element of the image of the Muslim in Europe is that the traditions of the Muslim World are opposed to those of the Western tradition. It is important to mention that this notion is itself a colonial construct. Instead of using a spectrum of social, economic, and historical processes in describing and analysing the culture of the lands they colonised, Western scholars used indigenous cultures as an explanation for social and political phenomena<sup>3</sup>. These explanations conceive culture as static and unchangeable rather than a development across history that was constructed – and still being constructed – by international and local movements of people, goods and cultures, as well as by industrial developments and changes in economic, political circumstances and power dynamics.

Moreover, the construction of the Western – that is, Christian-Occidental – as a dichotomy of the Eastern – that is, for example, Muslim-Oriental – originates in the conviction that these contoured entities are absolutely homogenous and only function when they are placed in contradiction with each other. The homogenisation of these images means that only some of the practices of some of the subjects of a certain culture are considered as representative of that culture, while other minorities and marginalised groups within that culture are completely ignored and expelled. The notion of a bipolar world propagated by (ex-)colonial powers is accompanied by the understanding of the West as free, democratic, enlightened, and developed; whereas the other world and its people and traditions are necessarily backward, underdeveloped, unprogressive, irrational, and violent.

### **Representation, Participation, Belonging**

It is precisely because of these historical social and political conditions that representation of diverse Muslim voices on divers issues of social importance have to be achieved in order to

<sup>3</sup> A concept defined by Hall (1978) and Balibar (1991) as culturalism or cultural racism. Also discussed by Said's Orientalism (1978) and Spivak (1981) and Mohanty (1991) in the discussion of the Third World Women.

encourage the democratic participation of such individuals. The understanding of Muslim communities in Europe as stakeholders and beneficiaries of the democratic system will strengthen their sense of belonging and achieve a more inclusive and just society on the local and international level.

## CHAPTER 2: MAPPING GERMAN MEDIA

### Powerful, Homogeneous, Discriminatory

The media is a highly respected and powerful tool in the German democratic process. In a study from 2015<sup>4</sup>, 95% of the respondents stated that the media in Germany have a strong to very strong influence. In the same survey, 52% specified to be very satisfied with the quality of reporting in the German media. It is hence quite clear that the media is one of the strongest players in forming public opinion when it comes to the German context. It is therefore logical that it is also “[...] the most important source of stereotype formation and confirmation regarding Islam”<sup>5</sup>.

Germany is a country of immigration, more than a quarter of all people has a migrant background<sup>6</sup>. But this diversity is not reflected in the editorial offices and management of media companies<sup>7</sup>. Only 6% of the editors-in-chief have a migration background. However, it is precisely historically marginalised groups that are particularly affected by racism and discrimination that are not represented in those 6%<sup>8</sup>. German media houses do not know how diverse or homogeneous their editorial teams are, and as a 2020<sup>9</sup> research shows, they apparently do not want to know. Information about migration background or similar diversity characteristics of employees is often not documented. Most editors-in-chief consider diversity in newsrooms to be positive in principle. But hardly anyone is prepared to take concrete steps to achieve it. In an international comparison, the German media are clearly lagging behind.

Members of certain social groups, especially social minorities, are underrepresented in both fictional (e.g., films, series) and non-fictional (e.g., news and investigative) German media. At stake is both the quantity of BIPOC actors, journalists and talkshow moderators and guests as

<sup>4</sup> Vertrauen und Skepsis - Bürger und Medien. Eine Dokumentation des Beitrags von Prof. Dr. Renate Köcherin der Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung Nr. 292 vom 16. Dezember 2015

<sup>5</sup> 5 Schiffer, Sabine (2004): Die Darstellung des Islams in der Presse. Sprache, Bilder, Suggestionen; eine Auswahl von Techniken und Beispielen . Dissertation, Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. Translation by the Author. Not unlike the municipal administration see for example Diversität in Verwaltung und Co.

<sup>6</sup> The social category 'migration-background' describes people who, themselves or their ancestors, emigrated from another state. According to the Federal Statistical Office Microcensus - in 2019 approx. 35% of people under this category came from other European Union Member States. While the term appears to be quite functional for migration and integration research, it is hardly suitable for discrimination and racism research, since the probability of being discriminated against is distributed very differently within this statistical group. Central characteristics that may be the cause of discrimination, exclusion and violence - such as skin color, religion or ethnicity - are not or only insufficiently represented by the term.

<sup>7</sup> Results of the research “Viel Wille, kein Weg: Diversity im deutschen Journalismus” from May 2020, commissioned by the neue deutsch Medienmacher\*innen.

<sup>8</sup> Migration background from the following countries: Austria, Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Greece.

<sup>9</sup> See footnote number 7.

well as the quality of their representation. When BIPOC are represented, they are often portrayed in a negative light. News items portraying BIPOC are usually framed around problems, they are often portrayed as a threat, marked as foreign and necessarily not belonging and often as criminals, misogynists<sup>10</sup> and antisemites. Migrant families and refugees almost only appear in the media in Germany in the context of violence, poverty and social cultural and economic incompetence. This reinforces and perpetuates social prejudices and discrimination against minorities.

### CHAPTER 3: MAPPING GENDER ISLAMOPHOBIA

#### Foreign, Incompetent, Dangerous

Since the late 1970s and throughout the early 2000s the image of Islam and Muslims was greatly shaped by reporting of foreign affairs. The unproportioned reporting on international affairs of the Muslim world and the focus on negative events, mostly conflicts and war, with a selective attention to fundamentalist currents alone, have had far-reaching consequences: Islam and Muslims are described as foreign and intrusive and are equated with people, developments and political changes happening in faraway lands. Islam is held responsible not only for the developmental 'delays' in majority Muslim states but is also considered generally incompatible with individual freedom or economic and social progress<sup>11</sup>. The media focus has since shifted towards the Muslim population living in Germany and Europe, but has not changed in terms of content, marking Muslims as foreign and emphasising violence and conflict. Also, in this context Islam and Muslimness are blamed for a verity of social ailments<sup>12</sup>, from statistics of school dropouts, unemployment, the rise of antisemitism to the recent difficulty of the German system to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this framework Muslim women are constantly marked as both victims of this foreign "backwardness", e.g., the discourse on forced marriage and femicide, as well as its perpetrators, e.g., the discourse surrounding parenthood and education. They are seen as an obstacle to the "integration of Muslims" into German society and the headscarf is constructed as a visual symbol of "Islamisation" and the lack of will to integrate.

As I mentioned before, Muslim women are considered to be victims of the patriarchal values that are conceived as inherent in Islam. In this narrative, the Muslim woman are placed in competition with Muslim men. Incompetent to fend for herself, the Muslim woman is constructed as a passive being with no individual voice. Arguments against the headscarves, maintaining that it is a symbol of oppression are actively ignoring voices arguing for agency. Individual cases where headscarves are forced by family patriarchs are taken as a universal story for all scarf wearing women and instrumentalized as the example that proves the rule, despite women's own authentic account. In this framework, the Muslim woman is situated as an object that needs rescuing, even in spite of

<sup>10</sup> Cover pages of Focus, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Falter with racist portrayal of the white woman as a victim of "black" and "oriental" hands.

<sup>11</sup> Halm, Dirk / Liakova, Marina / Yetik, Zeliha (2007): Pauschale Islamfeindlichkeit? Zur Wahrnehmung des Islams und zur sozio-kulturellen Teilhabe der Muslime in Deutschland

<sup>12</sup> This narrative holds true for other historically marginalised groups.

herself. At this point, the Muslim woman is doubly silenced, not only does she not know when she is being oppressed, she also does not know what is good for her. Such positions, denying the right of Muslim women to self-determination, are propagated in mainstream media as feminist and progressive, even though they reproduce both racist images and the chauvinist image of the clueless and helpless damsel in distress. It is important to name this kind of racist and misogynist narratives as what they are and not let them enjoy the pretence of progressiveness in the name of women's rights. Associations like *Terre des Femmes* and the *Ibn Rushd-Göthe Mosque* in Berlin or the self-proclaimed "feminist" magazine *Emma*, are actively propagating anti-Muslim racism, are just a few examples of this kind of capitalisation on the position of the saviour of Muslim women and Muslim LGBTQ\*I as an extension.

Constructed as foreign, Muslims are presented as a threat to the existence of (white) Europe. This threat is physical, as Muslims are associated with violence. Muslims are seen as perpetrators of terrorism and therefore need to be monitored and policed. This narrative is drawn as a matter of fact by the German media and can be seen in the close reporting about nightly raids on suspicious Shisha Bars in densely populated neighbourhoods marked by a high percentage of migrants. Details, such as what was actually found or achieved in these raids, become inconsequential<sup>13</sup>. The criminalisation that is achieved by this kind of reporting is effective in dehumanising, frightening and marking the borders of segregation, as well as legitimising gentrification and over-policing of these neighbourhoods.

But the threat is also physical in the sense of the racist notion of a population exchange. Narrating Muslims as ignorant and illiterate, they are conceived as uninterested in family planning and means of contraception. Muslims are thought to bring more children to the world than the average white German family. In addition, the equation of migrant and Muslim puts the fear of numbers at a high. Despite murderous European border policies and collaborations with dictatorships regimes the constant flow of migrants fleeing war and hunger continues, albeit at a lower intensity. Nevertheless, the media obsession with migration and refugees leads to a very distorted picture; the actual value of immigrants in the total population in Germany is 15%, the average estimation is twice as high (30%)<sup>14</sup>. The disparity between the estimation and the reality is even graver when looking at the perception about Muslims estimated at 21% and which in reality is 5-6%<sup>15</sup>.

Racist concepts like *Überfremdung* [literally translated with over-foreignization, to mean foreign infiltration] and *Islamisierung des Abendlands* [Islamisation of the West] have migrated from the jargon of far-right nationalists into the mainstream media and are gaining legitimacy and frequency in usage and politics.

In addition, the threat is conceived as an ideological- cultural one. Islam, as mentioned before, is often described as a homogenous cultural mass that stands in an inevitable confrontation with the

<sup>13</sup> These raids often result in monetary fines for the sale of undeclared of juice and tobacco.

<sup>14</sup> The Perils of perception: Studie zur Kluft zwischen Wahrnehmung und Wirklichkeit. 2018. des Markt-und Meinungsforschungsinstituts Ipsos.

<sup>15</sup> These numbers are only estimates based on country of heritage, without taking into account self-definition and diversity in Muslim-majority countries.

West. In the pursue of this narration, a doubt is expressed in the ability of ethnocultural groups to coexist, placing Europeans versus Muslims as two homogeneous and mutually exclusive ethnocultural groups. The pivotal point of this debate is the idea of the lack of integration of Muslims into a system of “Western values”. The debate about the Muslim tradition, manifested by the headscarf and its oppression of women, obscure the unequal distribution of social and material goods in Germany.

This incompatibility is exemplified by the racist term legalistic Islamism. Here is an excerpt from the website of the Bavarian secret-service:

“Most Islamists in Germany refuse to use violence to achieve their goals. Non-violence-oriented, so-called legalistic Islamist groups pursue their extremist goals by political means within the existing legal system. [...] Legalist Islamists try to influence politics and society through lobbying. In doing so, they pursue a dual strategy: while outwardly they present themselves as open, tolerant and ready for dialogue, anti-democratic and totalitarian tendencies persist within the organisations.

This term is often used to criminalise pushbacks against Germany’s trials to ban the headscarf. In recent years, German policy-makers, inspired by France, have been drawing legal frames for the prohibition of the headscarf, justifying them on the ground of women’s rights, the protection of the public<sup>16</sup> from the transmission and influence of anti-Western values, and the tenacious insistence on maintaining the appearance of neutrality.

This last conceptualisation of neutrality has played a very strong role in the public debate since 2005, when 8 out of 16 German federal states passed similar laws prohibiting the headscarf in the workplace for all public officials. Some of the laws were formulated around a general ban against religious symbols. But the catalyser was a lawsuit brought before the German Constitutional Court, by a teacher who was discriminated against when applying for a position in the state of Baden-Württemberg. The court decided in favour of the teacher explaining there was no legal frame for rejection for wearing a headscarf, encouraging states to pass such legislations. The constitutional court has since declared any sweeping headscarf ban to be discriminatory but despite numerous court decisions<sup>17</sup> in favour of such claims of discrimination, the Berlin education administration has shown no signs of backing down and continues to reject and discriminate against teachers wearing headscarves.

The argumentation is very fluid and shifts according to the counter arguments put forward by critics of the law, but can be summarised in these three points:

1. The rights of parents and children to freedom from religion, which are conceived to be breached by the presence of a religious symbol, are more important than the rights of teachers for freedom of religion.

<sup>16</sup> In the context of the ban for school teachers, the argument is made for the protection of “our” children from the religiosity of those teachers who wear headscarves.

<sup>17</sup> BAG Urteil vom 27.8.2020 (8 AZR 62/19)

2. The potential conflict that could arise from the wearing of a hijab is greater than the practical infringement on the teachers rights.
3. Ignoring the intersection between religion, race and gender. The last claim proclaims that such discrimination does not hurt "Muslim women" because many Muslim women don't wear the hijab and are very welcome to work wherever they wish, and hence targets only women who insist on wearing the headscarf, for no real reason.

These three argumentation lines show the reproduction of many of the narratives I have discussed above. As we enter into potential conflict, we circle back to the narrative of incompetence, even when it comes to professional teachers, with long training and a master's degree in education. The fear of a conflict and of exceptionally unprofessional behaviour dictates the discourse. The argument refusing to acknowledge intersectionality is sometimes brought up alongside a pseudo-theological argument that the headscarf is not a religious command and that this insistence is a sign of extremism, which connects back to the narrative of the threatening Muslim. This can also be seen in the lines of argument for the burqa ban against the burka as a security necessity.




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Illustration image at the Tages Spiegel, for an article on the so-called Neutrality Law, a law prohibiting women in headscarves from working as teachers in Berlin.




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Image on the Facebook page of an initiative for the implementation of a burqa ban for Germany, reproducing the idea of a helpless woman in need of saving. Many discussions were led about the implementation of such a ban. The number of women who actually wear the Burka is estimated at 200-300.



FEMEN Protest vor der Ahmadiyya-Moschee (April 2013)

The counter FEMEN Protest organised by Betül Ulusoy (April)



CHAPTER 4: COALITION GOALS

**Coordinate, Redefine, Organise, Network**

There are many junctures at which work can begin, with the aim of deconstructing the distorted images mentioned in this paper. Indeed, systemic change is needed. A shift in policies, access to resources and thinking about material, economic and ecological conditions in Europe and the world. But also starting small could lead to big changes. In my view, the most important thing is to start with the definitions of what we deem imperative for the democratic system. Much of the leeway that allows such racist narratives to continue circulate and flourish is the lack of principled definitions of many concepts that are then instrumentalised. By creating a grounded definition of terms like; objectivity, neutrality and freedom as well as equality and equity, helps to prevent the instrumentalization of these terms. The pool of terms can also include a definition and a delimitation of gender Islamophobia and its intersections with other forms of gender discrimination and oppression such as anti-black, ableist, LGBTQ\*IA, etc. Imbedding this within the context of intercommunity solidarity would provide a rounded understanding of how power dynamics exert intersectional oppression. Accompanying such definitions with toolkits for learning and best practices for implementation, the MAGIC coalition would be doing a great service to both Muslim communities and civil society in Europe. Such toolkits could have various approaches and target groups such as educators, journalists, local politicians, refugee-related projects etc.

This does not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel. Much of the work is already achieved by grassroots local organisations and only needs coordination at European level by a project like MAGIC. In addition, an online archive and library could be provided concentrating scholarly writings and research done on the matter by the many brilliant minds that grace this movement. It is important to include both the academic work done on the topic as well as texts and resources created by activists, social workers and other actors.



A crucial element for the success of such a project is the attention given to the dissemination of the project's results. The European-wide organisation of such projects can put the necessary pressure on stakeholders and powerful actors on the national and European level to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves. In addition, advocacy on political parties to take a clear stand against Gender Islamophobia needs to be coordinated as a part of the postproduction of the project. In this, I mean a real door-to-door approach. Contacting politicians, whether engaged with the issue or not, and demanding them to stand against gender Islamophobia. Equally important is to raise awareness of gender Islamophobia in public narratives by organising workshops, conferences and professional training for aspiring journalist, both from within the communities and allies in the media industry. By raising awareness and promoting Muslim women's voices, the promotion of Muslim voices in the media and the empowerment of women within the Muslim communities can be achieved.

Bias and discrimination against Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular are not faced without resistance. In the course of the last 20 years, the issue of Islamophobia has received increasing attention in Germany, both at the grassroots level and in academia, and lately also in politics and legislation. Even though the racist language and positions are gaining in popularity, progressive streams are also recognising the need to push back. Associations such as Inssan e.V and the AMF- Action Alliance of Muslim Women, led by active members of the the Muslim communities, projects such as the Network against discrimination and Islamophobia and CLAIM-Alliance Against Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hate as well as *Bliq* and *Kopftuchmädchen*, which focus on media and information about Muslims and Muslim women. Additionally, smaller local organisations such as *WoW*, *Nafisa*, *HUDA e.V*, *Mina e.V*, *Bündnis #gegenBerufsverbot*, *Muslim Feminists Berlin*, *Zentrums für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung* to name only a few. Collaboration with such initiatives and projects is essential in order to amplify the voices of women in leadership positions in the diverse communities. Therefore, the networking of European actors fighting against gender islamophobia is a crucial goal for the success of the project. Creating the opportunity for activists from around Europe to come together once a year for a summit that discuss this issue could be a great opportunity. Alongside organising conferences, a Europe-wide mobilisation for action days and activities around key issues identified by existing initiatives and organisations could amplify the importance to be given to the issues at stake and increase the media coverage at a continental level.

When the facts do not create role models, role models can create facts. Inshallah.

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