

MAGIC NATIONAL DISPATCHES

Mapping Muslim Women Voices
and Gendered Islamophobia and
Stereotypes in Media

A dispatch written by Media Diversity Institute



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



Introduction

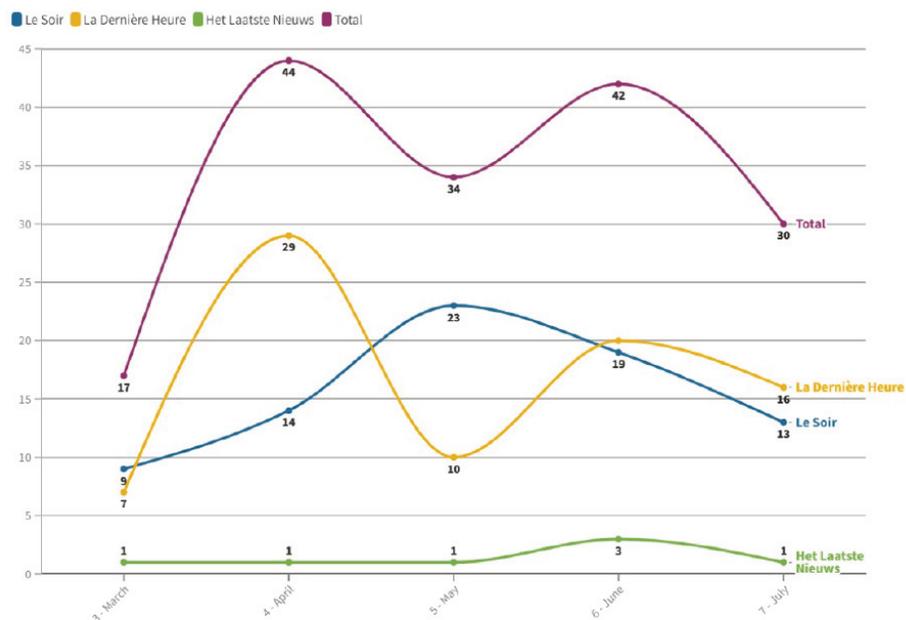
The MAGIC (**M**uslim women and communities **A**gainst **G**ender **I**samophobia in so**C**iety) project aims to prevent gendered islamophobia in the media in Belgium and Spain through different activities, including media monitoring. This report presents the results of the third part of the analysis of the Belgian media, operated by the Media Diversity Institute, and covers the period from March 2022 to July 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 qualitatively and quantitatively analyse 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 third national consultation held online (see part 6).

General Findings

Throughout this 5-month period, 167 articles were identified, amounting to a far larger number compared to 122 articles identified in period 1 and 82 in period 2. The articles were published fairly equally across the last four months, with March being a comparative slump, closer in output to the last period.



Own production

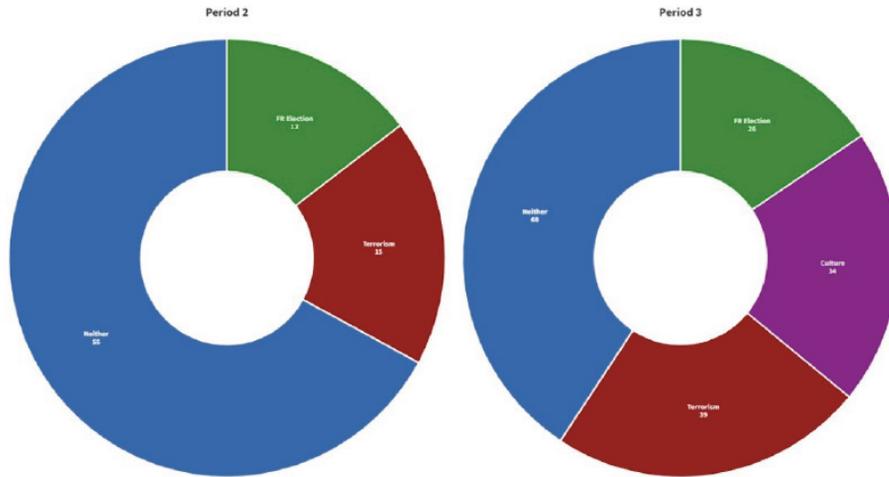
With regards to the topics characterising this period, the following has been identified:

1. The French electoral coverage rose to 16.25% (primarily in *La Dernière Heure*), and Terrorism coverage rose to 24.38% (fairly evenly balanced between *Le Soir* and *La Dernière Heure*).
2. These were joined by Cultural articles, which represented 20.63% of the total data set, and were predominately found in *Le Soir*.

The increase in themed coverage compared to the second period supports the monitors' conclusion that the 2nd period's non-themed coverage was as a result of a "summer slump" with a lack of major driving events.

Coverage of Primary Themes in Periods 1 & 2

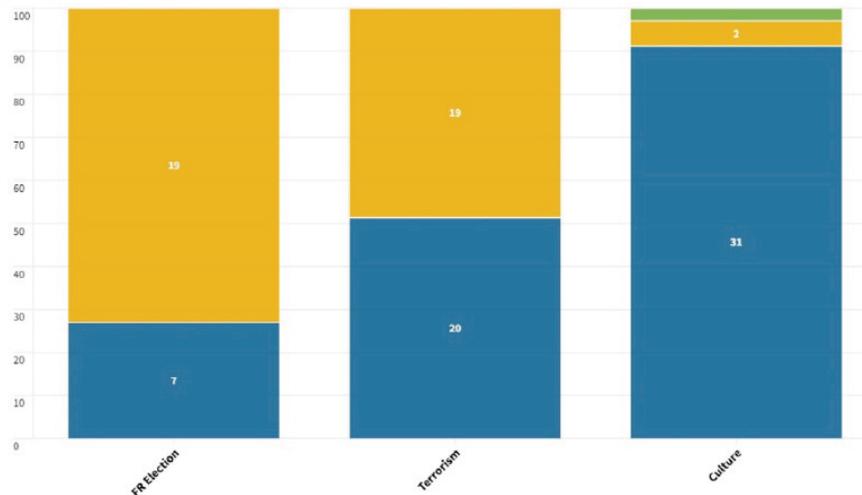
■ Terrorism ■ Culture ■ Neither ■ FR Election



Own production

Media by Topic Covered

■ Le Soir ■ La Dernière Heure ■ Het Laatste Nieuws

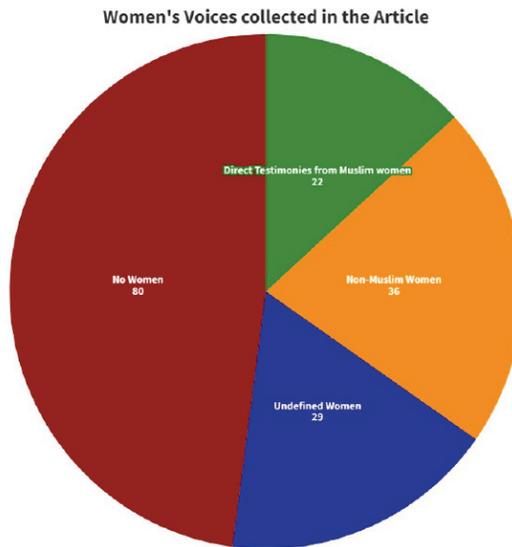


Own production

Lack of Muslim women’s voices

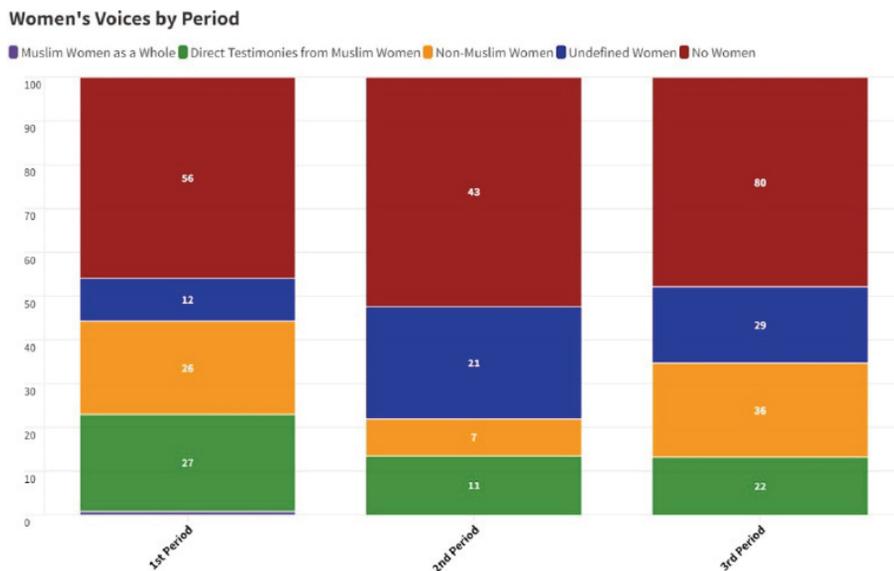
Similar to the first and second period, in all the identified articles which primarily discuss women, female voices are rarely called on for testimony. Additionally, only 13.17% of them are clearly identified as Muslim women in the article.

Even if we assume that the Undefined Women are all Muslim, the total still leaves a mere 30,54% of articles which include the voices of the women they discuss.



Own production

The monitors note that the consistent exclusion of women’s voices throughout all three periods warrants concern. To further illustrate, a Pivot Table was used to analyse the results across all three monitoring periods, creating a graph that shows us the number of articles citing women in each monitoring period.



Own production

The Table shows how articles including Muslim women's testimonies dropped precipitously in the second and third periods, as the first period included a greater deal of commentary from the former IEFH Commissioner in the coverage of the polemic surrounding her nomination.

By contrast, in the third period, the greater preponderance of non-Muslim women's voices reflects citations by French right-wing politicians in the larger coverage of the French presidential election, and therefore should not be read as supportive of Muslim women.

Dubious title choices

The third period once again highlighted issues related to dubious titles utilised to serve "clickbait" purposes. In other words, in the search for clicks and engagement, titles are often selected by editorial staff which not only go against the article's content but also tend to reinforce harmful stereotypes.

«Moderniser l'islam ou islamiser la modernité?»

DH Le vivre-ensemble à Molenbeek: "J'entends, plus qu'avant, que le Coran doit décider de ce que l'on peut faire "

Plongée au coeur des quartiers difficiles de Bruxelles. Avec une évolution au niveau religieux.

Case in point, the titles highlighted here all negatively frame Islam and reproduce negative stereotypes with the first title simplistically assuming there are only two scenarios pertaining Islam: either to 'modernise' the religion or face an 'islamified' modernity. As for Title 2, in referring to both Molenbeek – an area already painted as a "hotbed for extremism" – and the Quran does little to provide the needed nuance often missing in discussions about marginalised communities. Finally, both title 1 and title 2 carry an element of fearmongering about Islam and thus consequently its followers.

Culture and Society articles

As noted in the general findings, the third period is characterised by the number of Cultural articles meeting the criteria for filtering articles. The problem with such articles is that their assumed function is to entertain or recommend cultural activities or products and thus they rarely warrant criticism or scrutiny. And yet these articles have not proven unproblematic and deserve closer attention.

Case Study 1: “La Puissance du Corps des Femmes”

Elle est louée à un couple de vieux Marocains mais envahie par leurs enfants, leurs belles-filles, leurs petits-enfants qui jouent, parlent haut, crient, parquent leurs bagnoles n'importe comment dans la rue. Et par Nour, la cadette des quatre enfants du couple, la seule fille. Qui a fait des études, travaille chez Ikea, s'isole dans sa chambre dès qu'elle le peut, a sur le monde un regard pénétrant, hors de la tradition musulmane en vigueur dans sa famille. Elle travaille chez Ikea, a 28 ans, n'est pas mariée. Elle a un garçon dans le corps.

The above section is taken from a review of “Maison Miroir”, a novel by Belgian author and journalist Aliénor Debrocq. The novel is ostensibly about “the cohabitation of communities and feminist emancipation.” The review, however, is rife with what we can see is at best clumsy clichés, and at worst rank islamophobia. This is, unfortunately; emblematic of many “Culture” articles in this period, as many of these articles feature metaphors and stereotypes as a way to suggest the tone and themes of the cultural artefacts they are covering.

Case study 2: *Vader bindt minderjarige dochter vast en bewerkt haar kapsel met een tondeuse omdat ze geen hoofddoek wilde dragen*

“Het is een jong meisje dat zich volop wenst te ontwikkelen met vrienden, maar ze wordt hierin beknot door haar vader”, sprak de advocaat op het proces. “Zo verplicht hij onder andere de hoofddoek bij zijn dochters, maar legt hij ook tal van andere regels op.”

There were a few articles addressing this issue found under the ‘in de buurt’ (‘society’) section on *Het Laatste Nieuws*. These articles concerned an abusive father who faced charges as he had physically abused/attacked his children. Interestingly, the focus was predominantly on his daughter who, according to the article in question, suffered this mistreatment because she refused to wear the hijab, and less so on his son who had also faced abuse.

The quote included in this case study is a statement made by the lawyer on the case. It can be translated as:

“She is a young girl who wants to fully develop with friends, but she is curtailed by her father;[...] “For example, he makes the headscarf compulsory for his daughters, but he also imposes many other rules.”

Both essentializing the hijab issue over the other abusive patterns that took place within that household, and the paternalistic tone of the lawyer quoted reaffirm stereotypes about the hijab as a hindrance to a woman’s development or social life among other clichés. Additionally, the photos contained in these articles all portray a young girl wearing hijab who either sits in the back or is leaning over her table giving off an image of meekness.

Consultation feedback and reflections

The results of this report were presented during the third national consultation held online on the 22/09/2022, in which the following Belgian and French experts participated: Arthemis Snijders, Jehanne Bergé, Pamela Morinière, Ahmed Abdi, and Nora Belhadi.

The experts broadly touched upon the following key questions against the backdrop of the monitoring results:

1. Why do we think Cultural articles are so often problematic?
2. Why do these outdated stereotypes still persist in media coverage?
3. Have you seen coverage of these themes change throughout your professional experience? How?
4. Is it any better in Flanders than in Brussels or Wallonia?

Looking beyond the journalist

All participants addressed the need to look beyond the journalist in question. As a few participants noted, certain editorial choices go beyond what journalists are responsible for. However, as others flagged, some journalists may passively dismiss these issues by saying 'it is not my responsibility/fault'. All participants agreed that all actors involved should be engaged constructively on these matters and should be held responsible for deterring xenophobic messaging.

With regard to Culture articles, all agree that this area of reporting deserves more scrutiny as these articles often get a lot of traction. As one participant noted, these articles are not just light hearted but are also often those producing gendered islamophobia, primarily through an Orientalist or Othering lens.

A participant noted that it is important to examine a given media platform and its 'brand' to better understand the problematic nature of its reporting. Some newspapers encourage sensationalist reporting, and therefore to attract more readership they may engage in more of what the participants called 'bad journalism'.

On the subject of problematic images, a participant referred to research conducted on stock images of Muslim women. This research - according to the participant - showed how these images often fail to truly represent and capture the rich diversity of the Muslim community. Instead, pictures tend to represent women in similarly disempowering ways. The monitors note that the pictures identified in this third monitoring period similarly fail to honestly represent Muslim women. Additionally, some pictures have been around for a very long time and as a result have been used and re-used in a variety of articles.

Consequences on Muslim women's participation

Similar to the second period, one of the participants mentioned how Muslim women tend to avoid engaging with the media altogether as it often feels like (or is associated with) a 'humiliating experience.' This includes the manner in which they get approached to speak about topics, and how often it is restricted to 'Islamic' issues and much less on their actual expertise.

The way forward

Participants agreed that things have been changing but only incrementally so. Additionally, most didn't see a clear difference between reporting in Flanders than in Brussels or Wallonia.

One participant noted that we should do more than just offer training; that rather these issues need to be unpacked from within. Another participant called for stronger grievance or complaint mechanisms to ensure that there is more accountability through diverse ways to flag issues. A third participant noted the importance of being inclusive of younger people and students when talking about a variety of topics (climate change, etc.) which are relevant to their lives beyond simply their religion.

The overall advice expressed by the experts in this respect was to rebuild trust with Muslim women and mainstream their voices, by engaging them professionally on issues beyond the assumed Islamic sphere, and if Islam is the topic, to respect professional boundaries and the agency these women hold.

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).