



DECLARATION OF **MAGIC**

THE COALITION OF MUSLIM WOMEN AND COMMUNITIES AGAINST GENDERED ISLAMOPHOBIA IN SOCIETY

WHY YOU SHOULD JOIN THE COALITION OF MUSLIM WOMEN AND COMMUNITIES AGAINST GENDERED ISLAMOPHOBIA IN SOCIETY

The declaration highlights the importance of taking responsibility for making a tangible difference in the world, both inside and outside Europe, and prioritising issues such as Islamophobia, especially towards women. It stresses the need for individuals to be open to communication, debate and collaboration to effectively implement change, and encourages people to be visible and support each other in achieving their goals.

History is no longer just a thing of the past. People are actively shaping their history in the present for the future. They have the power to shape their destiny in the future by taking their fate into their own hands, and thus own the past, present and future. This means that people have the ability to determine their own futures by the action in the present, rather than being passive and simply accepting what has already happened in the past.

The delegates representing the Coalition of Muslim Women and Communities Against Gendered Islamophobia in Society, attending the Barcelona Ideas and Coalition Hub on the 21 and 22 November 2022 (Barcelona, Spain) call for:

- Working on adopting action plans on preventing and combating gendered Islamophobia in media;
- Compiling information on gendered Islamophobia by collecting data and ensuring that equality data is available;
- Creating an accessible archive and library to upload academic papers, projects or best practices on gendered Islamophobia;

- Helping to establish a common definition of gendered Islamophobia that considers structural and intersectional approaches and recognises specific discrimination against Muslim women;
- Engaging and providing support to civil society organizations (CSOs) by creating forums for expanding cooperation (MAGIC will provide European organisations working on gendered Islamophobia);
- Building networks, dialogue and cooperation among organisations, groups and communities of different religious and non-religious backgrounds;
- Accessing awareness campaigns and activities targeting the public that are working to prevent and combat gendered Islamophobia;
- Accessing materials and toolkits to train media professionals on inclusiveness and prevent gendered Islamophobia, and for organisations to stand against gendered Islamophobia.
- This coalition will serve as an exchange platform for organisations and media representatives that are interested in improving the content and substance of the MAGIC project.

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In this respect, its future purposes will be to:

- Raise awareness in public narratives and promote the idea that preventing and combating gendered Islamophobia is the responsibility of all members of society and, more specifically, a key element of ethical journalism.
- Combat media disinformation.
- Promote inclusiveness of diverse Muslim voices in the media based on their expertise, etc.
- Provide materials and toolkits to train media circles in inclusiveness and prevention of gendered Islamophobia.
- Create an intersectional alliance for human rights.

This Declaration was adopted on 22 November 2022 in Barcelona, Spain.

SOME BACKGROUND

OVERVIEW OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

Anti-Muslim discrimination and intolerance occurs when there is an incident or practice of unjustified differential treatment that targets Muslimness or the perception of Muslimness or the association of the person or property with Muslims and/or Islam. In recent years there has been a steep rise in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in Europe. Although it is deeply rooted in history and has a global nature, in recent decades Islamophobia has seen a rise in Europe as a result of diverse societal and political developments. Thus, discourses have developed that attribute to Islam a series of problems, conflicts and situations involving people of the Muslim faith.¹ Professor Salman Sayyid defines Islamophobia as a form of racism, in which the constitutive antagonism is directed at manifestations of Muslimness. These manifestations may vary depending on the local and regional context.

Islamophobic experiences may include a range of actions (including violence against property and persons, verbal abuse and micro-aggressions, and demonization that seek to deny Muslim agency).² Amnesty International has long been concerned about racial and religious discrimination and its specific impact on the human rights of Muslims across Europe. In Belgium, 46% of cases of Islamophobia reported to *Le Collectif pour l'Inclusion et contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique* (CIIB) in 2020 were related to discrimination in the media and online. In Spain, the 2021 report on hate speech in social media by the Observatorio Español del Racismo y la Xenofobia (OBERAXE) reported that 19.1% of hate speech is targeted against Muslim people.

The legal and political situation of Muslims living in Europe is similarly highly variable from one country to another, although European Union (EU) institutions are contributing to the process of homogenising minorities' rights and duties.³ For example, the French Defender of Rights has noted a "trend that the term 'Muslims' is used to refer, de facto, to Arab immigrants or individuals perceived as such... the religious marker tends to exacerbate the racial marker."⁴ In this respect, Islamophobia is increasingly recognised as a form of racism. It is important to note that often "ethnicity" or "race" operates as a proxy for "religious affiliation", and therefore individuals may be victims of anti-Muslim discrimination and intolerance based on their perceived ethnic or racial identity.

An Amnesty International study from 2022 showed how Muslim people and communities across Europe experienced discrimination in employment and education and included details of laws and policies that infringed on their freedom of religion or belief. Additionally, Muslims

¹ Bourekba, M. "The Fight against Islamophobia in Catalonia: A Challenge to Coexistence", *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, No. 33, 2022, pp. 191-198.

² S. Sayyid, "A measure of Islamophobia", *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, No.1, 2014, pp 10-25.

³ M. Mohammed, "Islamophobic Trends in Europe", *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2014. Available at: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/islamophobic-trends-in-europe/?lang=es>

⁴ French Defender of Rights, *Discrimination and Origins: The Urgent Need for Action*, 2020, p. 29.

have been selected on ethnic, not just religious, grounds, and have been increasingly homogenised under one racialised category.⁵ This report also notes that Muslims and those perceived as Muslims are subjected to a range of discriminatory and racist laws, policies and practices.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE APPROACH THAT FOCUSES ON GENDERED ISLAMOPHOBIA

A gendered sensitive approach is relevant in this context, as recent research on the topic shows that Muslim women are the main victims of Islamophobia because of the intersection between their gender and religious identities: they are women and they are Muslim, and for some that is made more evident through their clothing. Muslim women who do not wear a headscarf or another type of specific clothing are subjected to discrimination and Islamophobia because of their names, origin or colour, even though they were born and raised in European countries. They face a challenging situation resulting from multiple and intersectional discrimination on gender, religious belief, ethnic origin, migration background, and social status. The media, both traditional and online and including social media, has contributed to spreading stereotypes that are proving to be harmful to Muslim women, and Muslims in general.

The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) report *Forgotten Women* indicates that Muslim women suffer from the same inequalities as other women, but their perceived Muslimness worsens the situation. This same report, which analysed the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women in the field of employment and hate crime, found that Muslim women are the main targets of Islamophobic hate speech and violence, especially if they wear a headscarf. For instance, in the Netherlands and France, over 90% and 80%, respectively, of the victims of Islamophobic incidents reported in 2014 and 2015 were Muslim women, most of them wearing a visible religious symbol. In Belgium, 91% of dossiers in 2021 handled by *Le Collectif pour l'Inclusion et contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique* (CIIB) pertain to Islamophobia against women.

Moreover, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief highlighted the intersectional nature of discrimination and hostility experienced by Muslim women who “may face a triple penalty as women, minority ethnic and Muslim.” The Rapporteur also warned that “harmful stereotypes and tropes about Muslims and Islam are chronically reinforced by mainstream media, powerful politicians, influencers of popular culture and in academic discourse.”⁶

⁵ Amnesty International, “Regional overview of Islamophobia in Europe”, Index: EUR 01/5659/2022, 2022. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PACE-submission-Islamophobia-1-June-2022.pdf>

⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Countering Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief* (UN Doc. A/HRC/46/30), 2021.

In certain political and social contexts, the wearing of the hijab is imposed, and it is undeniable that Islamic law has been practised in a very patriarchal way in recent years; in other contexts, it is an example of women's power to exercise control over their bodies and to dress in a way that makes them feel comfortable. As journalist Shada Islam points out, gender-based discrimination occurs in democracies and autocracies, in secular and religious societies, and rich and poor nations. Moreover, in 2016 in the European Parliament the Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad pointed out: "All the women in my family wear the hijab. My dream is to be with my mother, in France, in Belgium, to walk with her, without being looked down upon or judged by Islamophobes and to walk with my mother in my country, Iran, without being arrested." In short, Muslim women are not a monolithic bloc, which means that they all have the right and freedom to wear the hijab, and to choose whether or not to do so. Thus, the gendered discrimination faced by Muslim women around the world is a phenomenon that affects all types of countries and is not just a Western or Eastern issue.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The media plays a key role in shaping imaginaries about certain groups and in influencing public opinion, as they are ultimately spaces of influence. Moreover, in recent decades, the proliferation of media diversification, programmes, talk shows and news has opened the range of opinions on all kinds of subjects. It is also important to note here the role of the media, since broadcast news, unlike cinema and literature, is presented as objective. Thus, by presenting themselves as informants of reality and guarantors of objectivity, media news discourses become "constructors of realities". As such, they are essential elements in the social construction of communities in terms of the sense of relevance, whether national or transnational. For example, the World Cup held in Qatar, the first in an Arab country, has left us with some examples of Islamophobia in the media:

- A Dutch newspaper published a cartoon of Moroccan men stealing the World Cup trophy. The image reinforced stereotypes of young Arab men in the Netherlands as criminals.
- A German TV suggested that Morocco's players raised their index fingers to show support for ISIS. The gesture is used by Muslims around the world to signify "tawhid", or the oneness of God.
- A cartoon in a French newspaper depicted Qatar's national team as bearded caricatures playing soccer while holding rifles and machetes.
- A photo caption in a British newspaper stated that Qataris are not used to seeing women in Western clothing, although 87% of Qatar's population is from other countries, including Western countries. The caption was later removed.
- A French journalist joked about there being "a lot of mosques" in Qatar.
- There was also one example when the players were compared to monkeys.

In that regard, the media plays a crucial role in the reproduction of gendered and Islamophobic stereotypes and prejudices, and such reporting influences social polarisation. In this vein, some of the conclusions of the latest analysis for the MAGIC project of the Spanish press were that:

- The appearance of Muslim women in the press continues to be linked to certain events, usually negative ones, in which they are the subject of attention (e.g., challenges around the wearing of the burkini – full body swimsuit) or when they are victims. Muslim women are usually ignored by the media when the story is not about their victimisation.
- The image of Muslim women in the media is still mainly discussed in a negative and essentialised way. The media continues to present Muslim women as silly veiled women and, in some cases, portrays them as the oppressed who love their oppressors.
- Muslim women continue to be perceived only as believers, and few news items reflect any facet other than their religious one. They are not asked to talk about other issues that are not related to religion, immigration, terrorism, the headscarf or Islamophobia.
- There is still a considerable percentage of Islamophobic resources in this type of news, which has a negative impact on the image of Muslim women since, at the same time, Muslim women are not provided with the space or means to counteract this negative and prejudicial opinion.

In the case of Belgian analysis, for example, the experts highlighted the constant exclusion of women's voices throughout all periods of media analysis as a worrying fact. Additionally, the experts 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". Another important aspect is that, very often, the pictures in the news do not represent Muslim women. Furthermore, it was mentioned that Muslim women tend to avoid contact with the media altogether, as they often feel it as a "humiliating experience". This includes how they are approached to talk about topics, and how often it is restricted to "Islamic" issues and far less related to their actual expertise. Finally, they also agreed that Muslim women in the news are often portrayed as a monolithic bloc and noted the problem of seeing individual figures as examples to talk about Muslim women as a whole. The European Islamophobia Report highlighted that the Belgian media remains a key platform in the dissemination of Islamophobic headlines.⁷

In short, in the current media discourse on Islam and Muslim women, there is a majority tendency to relate Islam to negative issues. Consequently, numerous studies have shown that, in much of the mainstream European media (especially in television and the press), a negative image of Islam predominates and is partly constructed through stereotypes.

⁷ E. Bayrakli and F. Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report*, Leopold Weiss Institute, 2021. Available at: <https://islamophobiareport.com/islamophobiareport-2021.pdf>



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MAGIC Consortium members



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