

CROSS COUNTRY REPORT

Mapping Muslim Women Voices
and Gendered Islamophobia
and Stereotypes in Media:
Belgium and Spain

A dispatch written by **Fundación Al Fanar**



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MAGIC (**M**uslim Women and Communities **A**gainst **G**ender Islamophobia in **S**o**C**iety) is a European project whose main objective is to prevent gendered Islamophobia in the media. The project has been conducted in both Belgium and Spain, and its actions notably include analysis of news articles featuring Muslim women published in the written press. This analysis has been carried out in three monitoring periods (May-September 2021, October 2021-February 2022, and March-July 2022), a total of 15 months.

The newspapers monitored are: *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure* and *Het Laatste Nieuw* in Belgium and *El País*, *La Razón* and *ABC* in Spain. For the press analysis, a specific methodology has been developed with the objective of analysing the pieces qualitatively and quantitatively.

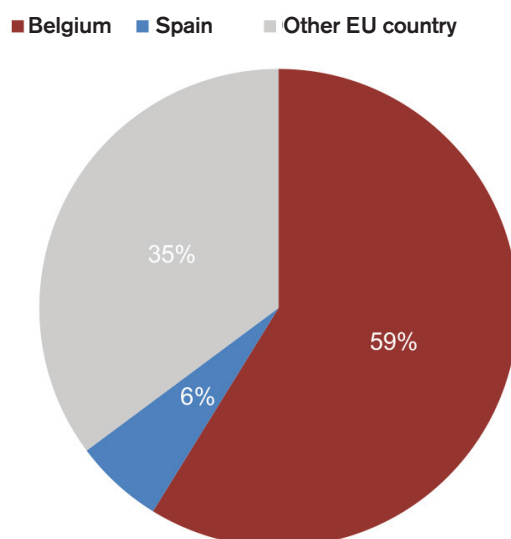
The results of these monitoring periods have already been published, but this report describes the differences and similarities found in the news treatment of Muslim women in the two countries.

Significant difference in number of articles

One of the first significant differences between Belgium and Spain is the number of news articles published featuring Muslim women. On the one hand, the Belgian media published a total of 371 articles during the 15 months of the study. On the other, the number of articles published by the Spanish media analysed is 125 in the same period. That is, three out of four news articles (74.8%) of the sample analysed were published in Belgium, which is a major difference with Spain.

This disparity between the two countries is also reflected when studying the geographical scope of the articles analysed. It must be remembered that the geographical filter of the news articles in the sample is limited to Europe, so news from mostly Muslim countries, such as Iran or Pakistan, has not been analysed in this project. In this sense, 58.80% of the published stories took place in Belgium, and 35.18% in other countries of the European Union but only 6.02% within Spain. Therefore, interest in Muslim women in Spain is minimal, including the Spanish media, which publishes more news articles about Muslim women in Europe than in Spain.

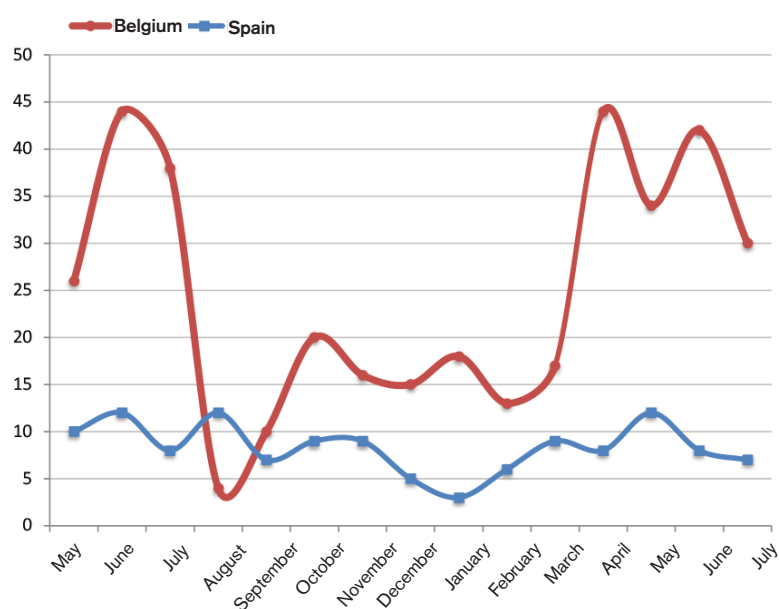
Graph 1: Geographical news filter



An interesting fact to highlight is that in Belgium only one news story about an event in Spain featuring a Muslim woman has been published. However, Spain has not reported any event in Belgium concerning Muslim women. This may be due to the fact that, although both countries are European, there is a distance between them as they are not neighbours, unlike Spain-France or Belgium-France. Moreover, Muslim women are still a very small minority group in both countries to be of interest in other European countries unless they are involved in very controversial and international matters, such as a terrorist attack.

The difference between the two countries is clear, which may be due to the fact that Muslim women in Belgium have a much greater presence in Belgian society than Muslim women in Spain. Therefore, the more presence this group has in the society in which they live and the more active they are – or seem –, the more presence they will have in the media. From this data it can be deduced that the Belgian press is more sensitive to and aware of Muslim women; what happens to them is important.

Graph 2: Distribution of news by country



Own production

Another difference between the two countries is found by observing the distribution of articles over 15 months. In Belgium there is a phenomenon called “summer slowdown”, which refers to the drastic decrease in news published in August 2021, as can be seen in the graph above. However, in Spain this does not happen, the evolution follows the same dynamic as the previous months. It is also interesting to observe the peaks corresponding to the specific news, this being more common in Belgium than in Spain, where the line is much flatter. This aspect, supported by the number of news articles published in both countries, reinforces the conclusion that news related to Muslim women has a much greater weight in the Belgian media where specific events are covered, most of them controversial, with several stories during a certain period of time.

The interview: Belgium more interested in personal accounts

When analysing the type of news featuring Muslim women in both countries, news-based articles prevail. We find the interesting aspect when we look at data related to interviews. In the Spanish press they feature in 7.20% of articles (9 pieces); while in the Belgian press the percentage is 16.98% (63), more than twice as much as in Spain. This data suggests that Belgian media is more interested in listening to Muslim women and what surrounds them since this is the most direct format to provide a space for minority groups so they can talk about any issues that interest them.

However, the fact that the Belgian press gives more space to interviews is not necessarily positive, since not all of them are with Muslim women. In fact, interviews with people who repeat negative stereotypes about Muslim women and who attack the hijab as a symbol of the patriarchal control of women are more prominent. Similarly, seven of the 63 published interviews have Islamophobic sources and in nine of these the journalist makes Islamophobic comments.

It is also true that if we carefully examine the interviews published by the Belgian media, we see that on several occasions the same content is published hours or days apart, which swells the figures with respect to the Spanish media. We have some examples of this:

- "Port du voile: la voix des femmes, au delà des débats" [Wearing the veil: the voice of women, beyond the debates], on 18/06/2021 by *Le Soir* and "Récits de voiles, elles témoignent" [Stories of veils in their own words] published on 19/06/2021 by the same newspaper.

Another difference in the field of interviews is that in the Belgian media we find more testimonies from Muslim women about a subject. There is a notable Belgian case concerning the former government commissioner of the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (IEHF), a Muslim woman wearing a hijab who was appointed government commissioner, a post from which she quickly resigned after a wave of attacks on social media and political reactions. Several interviews were conducted on this subject, but the most important is with the former commissioner herself. Meanwhile, in Spain there was a similar case: Fátima Hamed, spokeswoman for the *Movimiento por la Dignidad y la Ciudadanía* in Ceuta became news in November 2021, as one of those invited to the event organised by the Vice-President of the Government Yolanda Díaz, together with the Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau and the then leader of *Compromís* Mónica Oltra in Valencia. The event aroused controversy both in the mainstream and social media since, for part of society, Hamed with her hijab has no place in a feminist event. The difference with the Belgian case is that none of the Spanish media analysed interviewed Fátima Hamed.

Common interest in international information

When we analysed the sections containing news articles featuring Muslim women, Belgium and Spain coincide in some points.

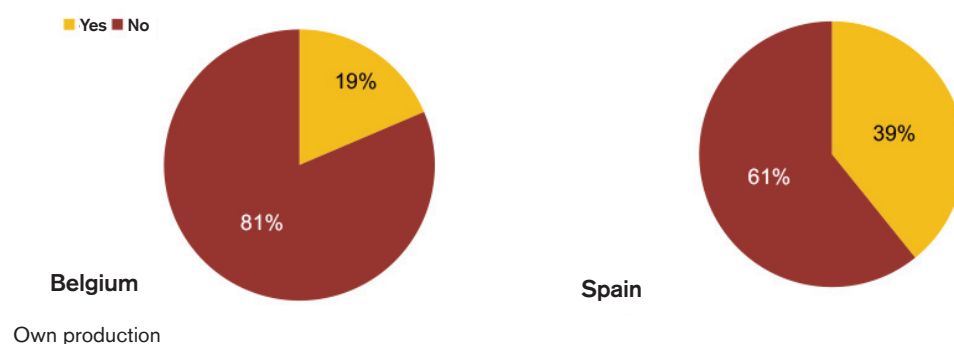
Although it is true that in Belgium these articles have been mostly published in the society section and in Spain in the international section, there are some points in common. Events in other European countries (international section) have a great weight on the media agenda of both countries, and they also coincide in one of the most important international events: the French presidential elections of 2022, since France is still a neighbouring country of both Spain and Belgium, and the question of Muslim communities in general and of the hijab in particular has been controversial for more than 10 years due to the measures implemented by the French government.

The difference is found in the culture section, where in Spain it accounts for 8% of news and in Belgium 13.7%. In the Spanish media this section notably consists of neutral news, such as the premiere of the *Miss Marvel* series, whose protagonist is a Muslim woman, or positive news without Islamophobia. However, in the Belgian media it is a controversial section: reviews and articles full of Islamophobic and misogynistic stereotypes, often under the guise of humour.

Cordon sanitaire, a wholly Belgian resource

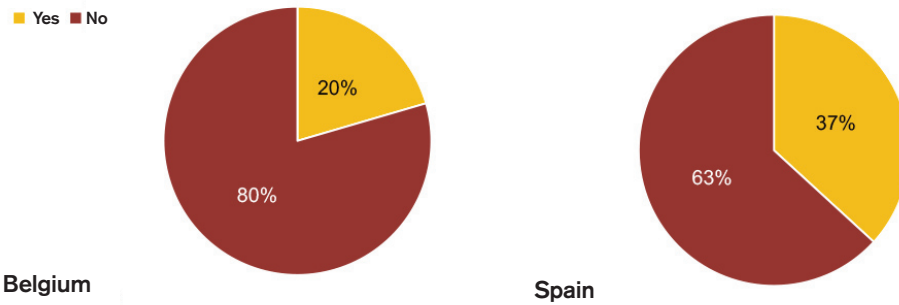
The cordon sanitaire could be defined as a measure to avoid giving visibility to extremist ideas by not covering them in the media. The Belgian press, during the period analysed, used this policy on a daily basis to avoid giving voice to far-right political figures. However, in international news, the cordon sanitaire is not maintained, an example of which was the coverage of the French elections. However, the Spanish media does not follow this policy in its news. The debate on the usefulness or not of this measure is wide and varied. Those who are against this measure argue that far-right politicians are part of the news landscape and that leaving them out of the focus of the press would only give wings to their victimising discourse and would leave readers without the full context of the political reality. In the various meetings that we have had in order to analyse the results of each of the six National Dispatches with journalists and Muslim communities, a consensus has been reached that, if Islamophobic statements or sources are reported, journalists should comment on this in the article, avoiding normalising racist discourse as an everyday thing and being very careful not to be dragged into this type of bias in their own writing.

Graphs 3 and 4: Are there Islamophobic sources in the news story?



As can be seen in the graph on the Belgian press, 19% of the articles analysed contain some Islamophobic sources, but the difference with the Spanish press is important as this percentage doubles, with 39% from Islamophobic sources.

Graphs 5 and 6: Are there any Islamophobic comments and/or statements by the journalist in the news story?



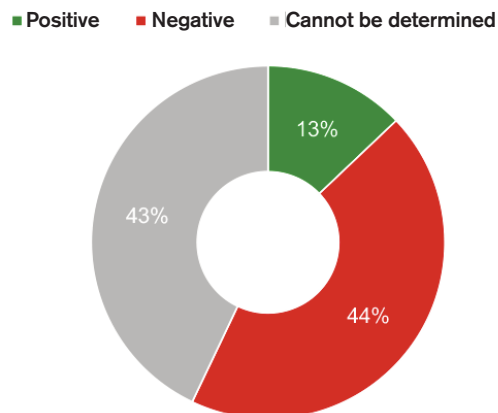
Own production

When analysing whether there are Islamophobic comments and/or statements by the journalist in a news story, the same dynamic is confirmed as when talking about Islamophobic sources: a greater presence in the Spanish press where we have been able to verify that when the article contains an Islamophobic source there are more possibilities of the journalist making Islamophobic comments.

The image of the Muslim community, negative in both countries

The results are clear: a negative image of the Muslim community continues to dominate the media. This is not surprising if we take into account that most of the issues dealt with by the media are negative and controversial, in addition to the data above: having Islamophobic sources and the fact that journalists themselves make Islamophobic comments only accentuates existing negative opinions about Muslims as a group.

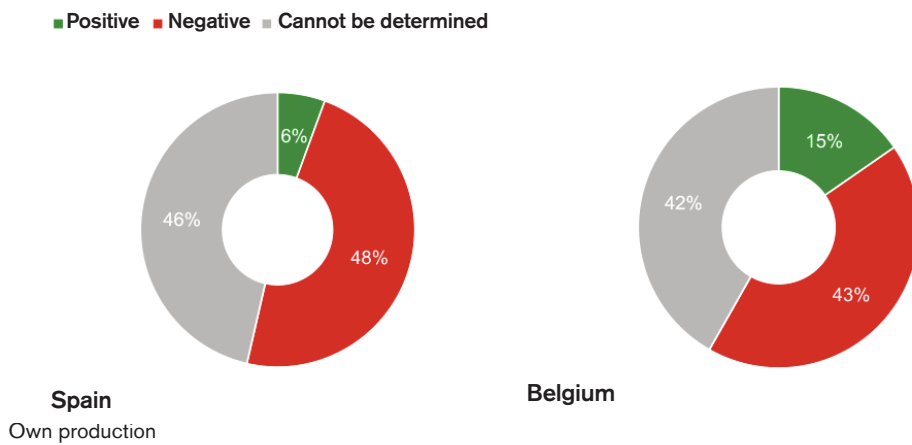
Graph 7: Image of the Muslim community



Own production

As we can see in the graph above, of all the news stories analysed from both countries, 44% are negative and only 13% positive. If we break down the data by country, we find a very similar dynamic: nearly 50% convey a negative image of the Muslim community and a much lower percentage for positive news, although in this case it is more than double in Belgium compared with Spain (15% and 6%, respectively).

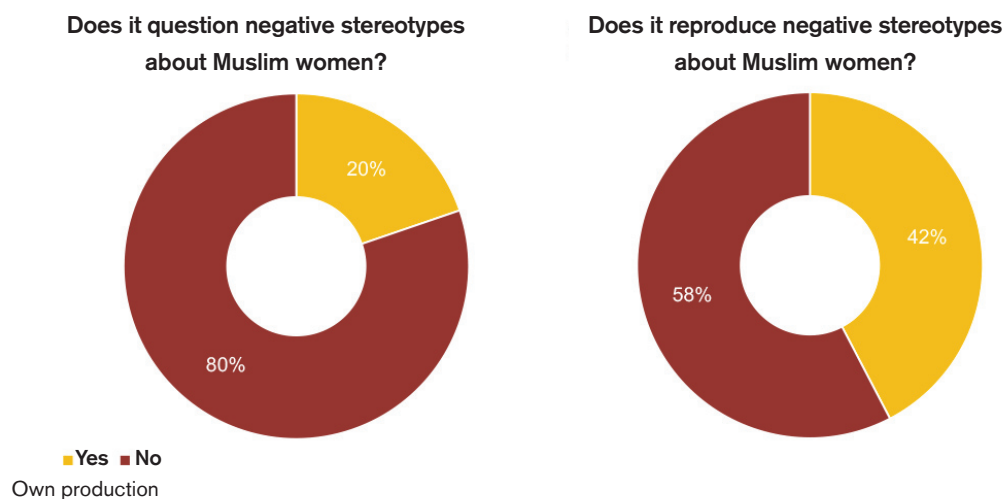
Graphs 8 and 9: Image of the Muslim community



It is clear that the difference between the two countries in terms of negative image is not significant, although the difference in articles published in one country and another should always be taken into account. This only confirms once again the poor image of Muslims in Europe, and that this is not a unique feeling in a single country. Future research must to certify academically whether this trend is maintained in other countries as the present research seems to indicate.

The following graphs also confirm this negative trend, where we find a media that is far from questioning of the existing negative stereotypes about Muslims in general and about Muslim women in particular (80% of the news does not challenge them). Moreover, in 52% of the articles analysed from both countries, not only do they not serve to combat these biases but they reproduce the existing negative stereotypes about this group.

Graphs 10 and 11: Stereotypes about Muslim women



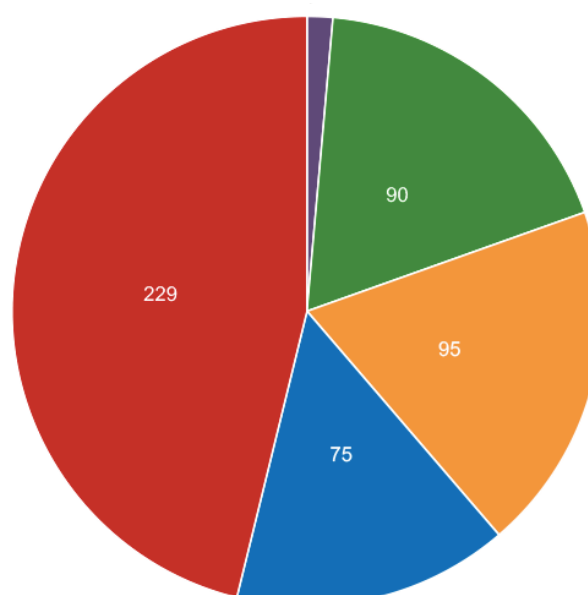
Taking this data into account, we can conclude that the fact that a great deal of news is published about Muslim women is not necessarily positive. The example is clear: on the one hand, we have the Belgian press with a large number of articles published in comparison with the Spanish press, but the reality is that in both countries there are still Islamophobic sources and comments and a negative image of Muslims in Europe. This has been one of the most general comments of the National Consultations, especially by the Muslim representatives who explained how they mostly shy away from the few calls they receive from the media in the face of the general feeling that they are mistreated in the media. This distancing generated by journalistic malpractice creates a loop it is difficult to get out of, as given the lack of general trust in the media the Muslim community takes refuge in social media to express itself within its limitations and the absence of Muslim voices in the mainstream media, as has been shown by this research.

Muslim women, silenced in both countries

The lack of female voices in this type of news is one of the major problems facing the press in both countries. Despite the fact that, in principle, Muslim women are the main or secondary protagonists in these news items and that a high presence of female voices in general and Muslims in particular would be expected, the reality is very different. Of all the news stories analysed in the two countries, less than 20% contain any statement from Muslim women. Another equally important fact is that in 46% of the news there is no female voice, either Muslim or non-Muslim, which shows the media's limited interest in the accounts of women in general and of Muslim women in particular. They talk about them but not to them.

Graph 12: Female voices

- Muslim women understood as a whole
- Women who are identified as Muslim women
- Non-Muslim women
- Voices of women who cannot be identified as Muslim or not
- No voice



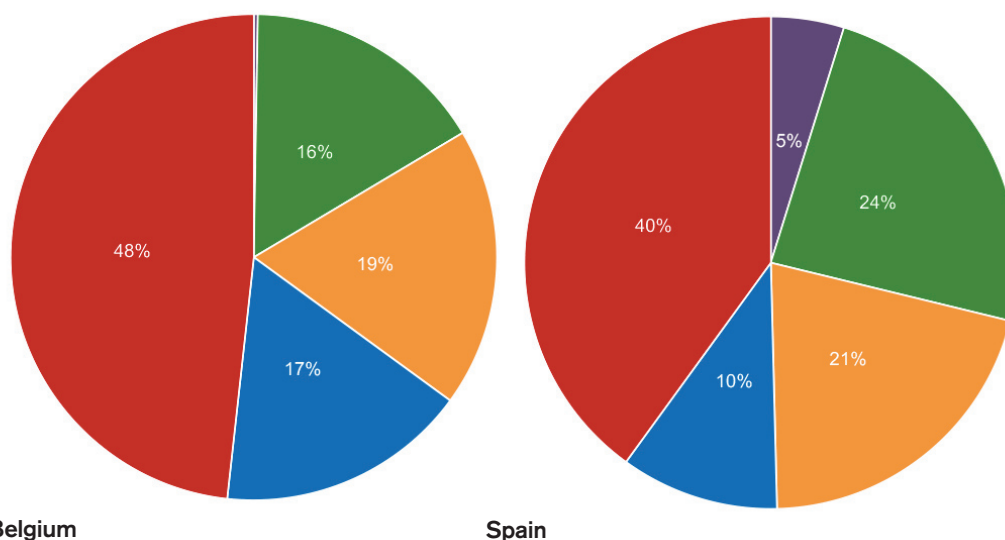
Own production

Breaking down the data from the Belgian and Spanish press, interestingly the presence of Muslim voices is slightly higher in Spain: 16% of the news stories in Belgium have Muslim voices and 24% in Spain, although the limited Spanish sample means that with just a few cases the percentage changes significantly. This is interesting, as the Belgian press has published more articles but has made less effort to use sources from Muslim women compared to the Spanish press. This suggests that perhaps if the volume of Spanish articles were similar, the percentages would converge downward.

The percentage where there is no female voice is also similar: 48% and 40% of the Belgian and Spanish news, respectively, taking into account that the sample is not the same in both countries.

Graphs 13 and 14: Presence of Muslim women's voices

- Muslim women understood as a whole
- Women who are identified as Muslim women
- Non-Muslim women
- Voices of women who cannot be identified as Muslim or not
- No voice



Own production

This only shows once again how little interest the Belgian and Spanish media have in providing Muslim women with an outlet to talk about their stories, projects or problems. There is a clear need for spaces in which Muslim women can build a narrative away from the conflict and negative stereotypes so common in the media narrative. Based on this data, the journalists and Muslim people who have been consulted in the MAGIC project agree that it is necessary to find ways to create a relationship of trust and transparency between journalists and the Muslim communities so that the news and true data that serve to counteract so many years of reproduction of negative stereotypes can be effective.

At the moment, as we mentioned above, it is the minority communities themselves, in this case the Muslim communities, who create their own safe spaces for news, especially on

social media and in some alternative media, which have taken the lead over traditional media in establishing a relationship of trust with Muslim sources.

In the same vein, the Belgian experts consulted focus on the creation of media platforms by Muslims who have felt neglected by the traditional media in their desire to find a safe space. There are different opinions on this issue: for some, Muslims should not limit themselves to creating their own media but should try to create a stable relationship with the traditional media to avoid their potential marginalisation; for others, this type of media is cause for celebration since it represents a more accurate representation, even if it does not reach the general public.

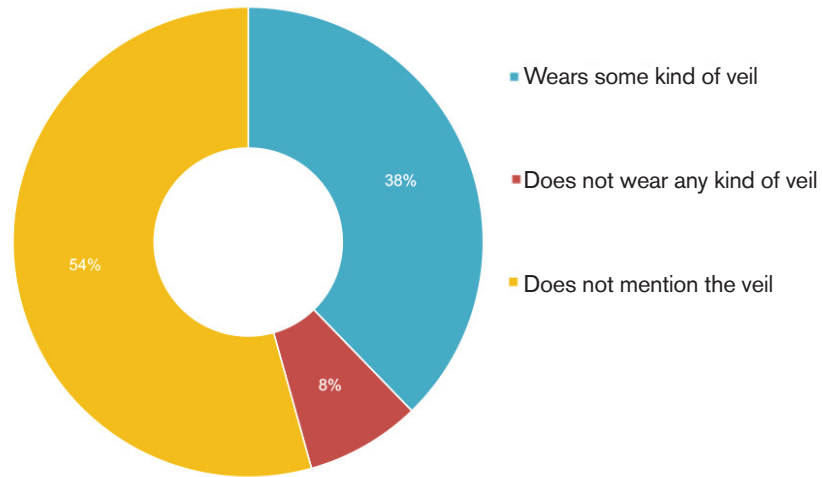
Another of the aspects highlighted by the participants of the National Consultations is their disconnection in relation to the media. There are many who decide to eschew the media after a bad experience that generally revolves around the repetition of stereotypes, and simplistic and convoluted questions by journalists. And even cases in which accounts and comments are misreported. These episodes only distance these women from the mainstream media and reinforce the search for safer spaces, even if they have to create them themselves.

Moreover, both the Belgian and Spanish experts agreed that another of the aspects that characterises the media's relationship with Muslim women is that, as we have confirmed in the news analysed, they are only used to talking about Islam and Muslims, whereas Muslim women are almost never used as specialists in their professions or as citizens who give their opinion on any subject. Muslim women are presented only as believers, nothing is known about them beyond their religiosity and their faith. Similarly, they lose their individuality by being presented exclusively as believers, thus eliminating all the existing diversity in this group, both in Spain and Belgium.

The hijab

According to the different Muslim women and experts consulted during the process of preparing these reports, in recent years the hijab has ceased to be a garment limited to the private sphere to become part of the public debate. This garment, which until then was a private part of the spirituality of every Muslim woman, whether she wore it or not, was seen from one moment to the next as the subject of political, social, state, legal and educational debates. Therefore, it is not surprising that the media reported on this supposed problem and all its aspects. The image of this garment and the women who wear it is clear, and the press reproduces it on its pages: it brings together millions of women under the same image without showing their diversity, a diversity that, of course, underpins the reasons why they wear this garment or not.

Graph 15: Presence of the veil in the news



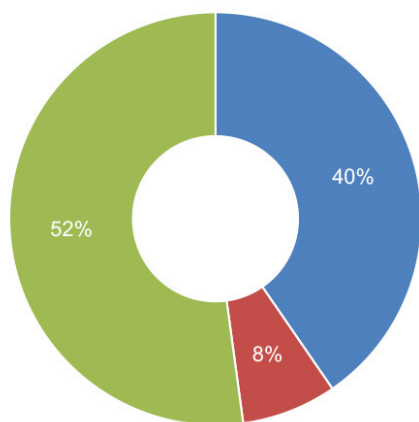
Own production

Although this was the trend until a few years ago, the data from this study, corroborated by the perception of the experts consulted, whether men or women, is that less is said about the veil. This is reflected in the statistics, as in 54.34% of the news analysed (the combination of Belgian and Spanish news) the veil is not mentioned, and when it is mentioned, the journalist refers to it as negative in only 8.06% of the news. This data is positive as it shows that the media in general and journalists in particular are beginning to distance themselves from the inseparable idea of the Muslim woman and the hijab, even the stereotype of the hijab as a symbol of Islamic patriarchal oppression.

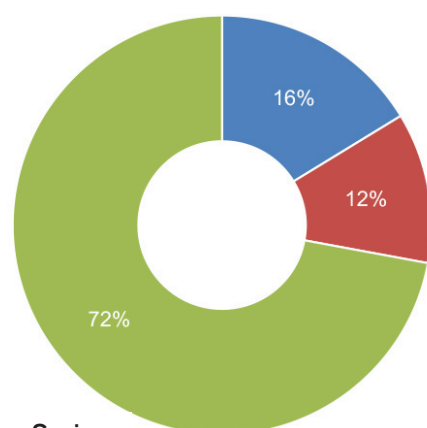
On the other hand, when the hijab appears in the news and in 69.37% of the pieces it is depicted in a neutral way, the idea that it is an obligation imposed on them is no longer so prevalent (17.44%). Moreover, if we break down the data according to country, we find some interesting details: in the Belgian press there is a greater presence of Muslim women wearing hijab.

Graphs 16 and 17: Presence of the veil in the news

■ Wears some kind of veil ■ Does not wear any kind of veil ■ Does not mention the veil



Belgium



Spain

Own production

The difference between one country and another may be due to the fact that, during the monitoring period in Belgium, two of the most repeated topics in the media revolved around the veil: the case of a woman discriminated against in her workplace for wearing the hijab and the appointment of a hijab-wearing Muslim woman to a government post.

Additionally, in the Spanish case we did not find any article in which the voices of Muslim women talk about their decision to wear the hijab, while the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* published an article entitled “Port du voile: la voix des femmes, au delà des débats” [Wearing the veil: the voice of women, beyond the debates] (06/18/2021). This article features the accounts of several women who describe their experience in relation to the hijab; some of these stories are positive and others are negative. In Spain, those testimonial articles related to the hijab in which it is always talked about in a negative way and always by ex-Muslims or women who are highly critical of Islam stand out. The other side of this subject is not reflected in the Spanish media.

A similar thing happens with the issue of the full coverage swimsuit or misnamed ‘burkini’. In both countries they report the news that in Grenoble, a French town, the use of full coverage swimsuits in municipal swimming pools will be allowed. At the national level, in Spain only *ABC* reported the news: “El Ayuntamiento de Elche autoriza el burkini en las piscinas como excepción a los bañadores largos prohibidos” [Elche City Council authorises the burkini in swimming pools as an exception to the prohibited full coverage swimsuits] (23/05/2022). However, it does not include the experience of any Muslim woman. In the Belgian case, the only national news related to this issue is found in *La Dernière Heure*: “Pour UNIA, le burkini a tout à fait sa place dans les piscines: ‘Une interdiction générale constitue une forme de discrimination’” [For UNIA, the burkini unquestionably has its place in swimming pools: “A general prohibition is a form of discrimination”] (24/01 /2022). Unlike the Spanish press, although there is no direct input from Muslim women, it does give voice to an organisation that supports its use.

The good use of pictures

Another space where we can be optimistic is in the matter of the pictures used to cover the news stories analysed, an important fact indeed given the growing importance that pictures are gaining compared to the reporting in the media. The results of monitoring the use of pictures in the news in which Muslim women appear undoubtedly provide the best data from the entire analysis, since 89.92% of the pieces use pictures that do not fall into stereotypes. This is a clear improvement over previous studies, such as that of the Observatory of Islamophobia in the Media in Spain.

Negative themes prevail

Among the articles analysed there are some themes that have been repeated over time and in various media outlets. These are both national and international, which is not surprising given the high number of articles published in this last section. It also highlights the fact that the main issues do not coincide in the two countries.

Four main themes stood out in the Belgian media. The first was the previously mentioned case of a sentence against a company for discriminating against a Muslim woman who wore a hijab. The

second, which we have already discussed, was the appointment of a hijab-wearing Muslim woman to the post of government commissioner of the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (IEFH). Her appointment attracted numerous criticisms from society and the political community, which eventually led to her resignation. The scope of this story was broad in terms of sources and accounts: political detractors, supporters, and even the protagonist herself.

The third topic that the Belgian media reported extensively was the French elections during the period from October 2021 to April 2022. These stories stand out for notable Islamophobia due to the Islamophobic sources and quotes from French politicians that in many cases also prompt journalists to make anti-Muslim comments.

Finally, the coverage of some events related to terrorism stands out: the coverage of attacks in Europe, on former Belgian nationals by ISIS, and the trials for the attacks in Paris and Brussels. These news stories were notable for the negative portrayal of the Muslim community through generalisations.

In the Spanish press, some themes are repeated: the case of two women students who were prohibited from entering their school for wearing the hijab. This case was picked up by the media when the *Asociación Marroquí para la Integración de los Inmigrantes* denounced it as a case of Islamophobia. Despite the fact that these articles are free of Islamophobia, they end up giving the impression of a Muslim family that does not adapt to Spanish and Western values.

Another issue that aroused the interest of the Spanish press was the full coverage swimsuit. These news stories stand out for the lack of Muslim voices, since the media does not ask them for their point of view, not even when they occur in Spanish territory, such as the story about this in Elche. Other issues with the same repercussion were an attack in Norway where a man murdered several people and injured many others in a Norwegian town, the participation of Fátima Hamed in the event organised by Yolanda Díaz, which we have already discussed, and the murder of two sisters from Terrassa in Pakistan by their brothers in what has been dubbed an "honour killing".

Although, as previously stated, media outlets do not agree on the most widely covered issues, they do concur on other matters: most of the more serious issues mentioned above are linked to a conflict in which the Muslim woman is involved directly or indirectly.

The prevalence of this type of news only makes the negative image of the Muslim community repeatedly occupy the collective imaginary. They are presented as people who cannot or do not want to adapt to Western values (issue of the burkini or hijab), that their values go against the established way of life in Europe (the appointment of a Muslim woman to public office or the case of Fátima Hamed), who are a danger to themselves (murder of the young women from Terrassa) or to others (terrorism). Moreover, these news stories only accentuate the otherness and foreignisation of the group, the barbaric and retrograde *them* against the civilised and educated European *us*.

Conclusions and recommendations

The monitoring for 15 months of news stories featuring Muslim women in Spain and Belgium has resulted in some conclusions:

- There is still a great lack of Muslim women voices in the media.
- There is a presence of Islamophobic sources in these news stories, as well as Islamophobic comments by journalists.
- The issue of the hijab is losing prominence in the news and is usually treated in a neutral manner, although some negative accounts about the garment remain.
- The theme of the articles in which Muslim women appear continues to be mostly negative, which results in a negative image of the Muslim community.
- The use of pictures in this type of news has improved considerably.
- Muslim women continue to be corseted under the exclusive premise of being a believer. They do not exist beyond their faith, erasing all existing individuality and diversity.

Next, we summarise the recommendations agreed upon with the experts who participated in the analysis of the data, with proposals for a media free of gendered Islamophobia and that includes an alternative narrative:

- Include the voices of Muslim women both when talking about them and in news that goes beyond their religiosity: daily, social and professional issues, etc.
- Provide spaces for Muslim women to discuss the problems they face, thus achieving a media that challenges negative stereotypes.
- Establish from the media a long-term relationship of trust and respect with Muslim women so that they are not called on only when the urgency of current events demands it. This relationship can be beneficial for both parties: Muslim women will have a direct contact in the media for any question of concern, and the journalist will have a direct source of trust in the Muslim community.

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 Fundación Al Fanar.

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