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STRATEGIC **NOTE**

Women affected by Islamophobia in the European Union: reality and ways forward

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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

Islamophobia is growing rapidly in Europe, but is still hardly recognised **as a specific form of racism.** The mainstreaming of far-right ideas in media and political circles, based on the Islamophobic narrative, is leading to an increasing number of attacks on (those perceived as) Muslim individuals, property, activists and civil society organisations through discriminatory policies and practices.

In its annual report on activities in 2019, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe mentioned that "xenophobic nationalism continues to frequently portray Islam as a religion alien to the national culture and identity of many member states. Anti-Muslim rhetoric makes Muslims wearing signs of their religion far more vulnerable, while multiple discriminations further worsen the situation, especially for Muslim women. (…) The elections to the European Parliament and to several national parliaments saw a further rise in the popularity of ultra-nationalist parties in some countries. However, it is not enough to look at the number of seats won in parliamentary elections. What is remarkable is that an increasing number of mainstream political parties adopted restrictive policies on migration and integration that were previously associated with right-wing parties."

Structural and institutional racism is particularly acute for Muslims[1]. A variety of laws in Europe disproportionately affect Muslims or those perceived as Muslims. As a recent ENAR report shows, counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation narratives and policies have a discriminatory impact on many areas of Muslims' lives, as they contribute to racializing and problematising Muslims and approaching them as an homogenous group. For example, in France, a bill on "support for the respect of the principles of the Republic", as proposed or amended, includes discriminatory measures against Muslims and contributes to increasing suspicion against all Muslims. Indeed, one of Senate amendments mentions the need to ban the wearing of headscarves in public spaces for women under the age of 18.

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[1] For definition of structural and institutional forms of discrimination, read ENAR's report "Intersectional discrimination in Europe: relevance, challenges and ways forward" https://www.enar-eu.org/intersectionalityreport

Muslim women who wear religious dress are particularly affected by inequalities because they are at the intersection of different forms of oppressions, especially racism and sexism. Their 'Muslimness' is also the most visible. It is important to consider the role of institutions, laws and policy in exacerbating disadvantages encountered by racialised women, and especially Muslim women. Institutions perpetuated 43.8% of the discrimination cases dealt by the CIIB. According to the Open Society Justice Initiative's report, "the attempt to prevent Muslim women who wear headscarves and face veils from entering certain spaces, however rationalised, can be attributed to increasing Islamophobia in Europe. Almost all restrictions on religious dress were introduced after 9/11. The global discourse surrounding the attacks and the subsequent "war on terror," supported by the "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, provided various justifications for restrictions on religious dress for Muslim women." In several countries, they are also particularly vulnerable to violent racist attacks.

It is also important to look at the psychological impact of this widespread discrimination that is often not recognised as such, even by those who are supposed to protect them. Muslim women develop avoidance strategies when it comes to participating in society/labour market/education.
Exclusion and discrimination have also been exacerbated by COVID-19 and counter-terrorism policies that further racialize Muslims, identifying them as potential threats. This is also having a concrete impact discourses on the inclusion of Muslim women.

ADDRESSING ISLAMOPHOBIA: KEY RESPONSES AND STRATEGIES

The misconceptions and demonization surrounding the fight against Islamophobia and visible Muslims in general need to be challenged, more evidence needs to be collected and be visible in order to improve the recognition of Islamophobia and influence policy makers. This should lead to informed anti-racism/anti-discrimination policies and support the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation at national and European level. Institutions need to recognise and politically address Islamophobia as a form of racism that can lead to human-rights violations.

In 2015, the first coordinator on anti-Muslim hatred was appointed by the European Commission. This led to an increased focus on the issue at European level and several high-level events on the topic. Increased awareness of intersectionality and structural forms of inequalities also supported the recognition of the specific discrimination faced by visible Muslim women. The mass protests against racism following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement put anti-racism back on European and national political agendas and contributed to increased awareness of specific manifestations affecting Muslims. The historic 'Hijabi fight back' demonstration in Belgium is certainly a testimony to this.

The new EU anti-racism action plan published in September 2020, includes the need to combat anti-Muslim hatred and recognises the structural and institutional aspects of racism.

Under this new plan, member states are encouraged to adopt and improve national action plans against racism and there is a call to address all forms of racism under this policy framework. The EU gender equality strategy also calls for an intersectional approach to gender equality. Key legislative opportunities could also ensure that Muslim women's issues are addressed. These include the need for the European Commission to launch infringement proceedings against member states that fail to properly implement the employment equality directive, the victims' rights directive or the framework decision against racism and xenophobia. The so called "horizontal directive", blocked since 2008, which aims to close loopholes in the protection against discrimination on grounds of religion and belief, sexual orientation, disability and age, should be reviewed to secure non-discrimination of Muslim women (which is not the case in the current text).

As highlighted in our Equal@work toolkit on women of colour in the workplace, "The EU institutions' approach in the field of non-discrimination has not adequately respond to structural and intersectional discrimination. EU anti-discrimination legislation focuses on an individualised, incident-based understanding of discrimination. This approach does not address structural discrimination based on power imbalances beyond simple cases of unequal treatment. In specific cases, EU institutions do not provide sufficient protection for racialised women in cases of intersectional discrimination. In two recent judgements, the Court of Justice of the EU maintained that, although restrictions on the wearing of headscarves in the workplace could constitute discrimination, such prohibitions could be justified in certain limited circumstances, especially for office jobs."

Towards a working definition on Islamophobia
The United Kingdom's All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims proposed a working definition in 2019, which was based on a wide consultation involving experts, politicians and representatives of Muslim communities: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". This definition underlines the link between Islamophobia and racial justice and includes Muslims and those perceived as Muslims in its scope.

Following a meeting organized by the European Coordination on Anti-Muslim Hatred, a group of civil society organisations has been working on drafting- a definition of Islamophobia to be adopted at the European level. It is in the final stages. It is also a concrete outcome of the former coalition against Islamophobia. Claim and Dokustelle have also worked on a German definition included in a report drafted by Farid Hafez. ENAR does not use a specific definition for gendered Islamophobia. It uses a definition of Islamophobia, and we take a structural and intersectional approach to the issue, ensuring that there is the connection between different types of oppressions, especially sexism and racism but also that "gendered" does not only involve women, but also men who are perceived as Muslim and who are often much more policed because of the gendered and racial prejudices against them. Gendered should also include the dimension of non-binary and gender non-conforming people.

MAGIC'S COALITION: SUGGESTIONS OF APPROACH

It is crucial to work as a coalition that is safe enough for Muslim women affected by Islamophobia, but at the same time diverse enough to build solidarity and power between racialised groups and allies. The alliance should primarily include organisations that are led by racialised women and have an intersectional approach to inequalities. It is important to define clear terms of reference and ground rules for the coalition and clarify its objectives from the beginning. There is an urgent need to strengthen and resource the movement. Different levels of coalition could also be identified, i.e., one that defines the strategy and is composed of Muslim women and, secondly, a group of key allies. The coalition could undertake the following activities:

- **Create and coordinate a multilingual European communication campaign.** A strong counter-narrative needs to be developed with innovative and powerful messages that can be widely disseminated and that can support all other actvities. The coalition could develop a European campaign with powerful images of Muslim women in different situations (not only at work, but also in roles that can help self-identification, such a mother, friend, etc.). With the support of communication professionals, such as Social Movement Technologies, creative images with innovative content could be developed, along with a strong outreach/communication strategy, both offline and online, to reach a diverse audience. This campaign could be encompass and be linked to all caolition activities.

- **Identify lists of blogs, online and offline media, podcasts** where Muslim women can write articles and opinion pieces and participate in podcasts. Training sessions could be organised to support these women develop their wrtiting skills and be able to articulate their narratives publically. Articles and podcasts are safer media tools to be able to develop these kinds of narratives with less risks of provoking cyber-bullying. This activity could be complementary to the first one.

- **Provide strategic resources to existing initiatives.** There are a number of initiatives launched by Muslim women in support of Muslim women and other marginalised groups. These initiatives have the advantage to being grassroots and connected to very specific and local needs. A comprehensive support scheme could be developed to resource these initiatives that do not normally have access to funding or other resources. A grant scheme could be launched for micro-projects with objectives in line with MAGIC's objectives. A series of capacity-building webinars with external professionals on diverse issues could also be designed. An indirect objective of this activity could be an extensive mapping of initiatives by and for Muslim women and the dissemination of these initiatives at a wider European level. For example, the new S.P.E.A.K. collective in the Netherlands will issue a paper on deconstructing the neutrality argument and will need support.

- **Organise a delegation of Muslim women to meet with policy and decision-makers in Brussels.** There are a number of policy developments at the EU level that could have an impact on Muslim women's lives, including the need to review equality legislation to include an intersectional approach. However, policy and decision-makers rarely hear to

Muslim women's concerns. Once opportunities and key messsages for advocay have been identified, a delegation composed of Muslim women from different countries could be organised to meet identified influential stakeholders. A short advocacy training session could be organised on the first day to develop advocacy skills. One of the outcomes of this activity could be a policy brief.

• **Identify public figures and well-known companies that can publicly support campaign activities and disseminate positive narratives about Muslim women, in an intersectional way.**

KEY RESOURCES ON ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

European Islamophobia report https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com

Forgotten women report - ENAR https://www.enar-eu.org/Forgotten-Women-the-impact-of-Islamophobia-on-Muslim-women

Restrictions on Muslim women's dress in the 28 Member States - Open Society Justice Initiative https://www.justiceinitiative.org/publications/restrictions-muslim-women-s-dress-28-eu-member-states

Fundamental Rights Agency data base on anti-Muslim hatred 2012-2020 https://fra.europa.eu/ en/databases/anti-muslim-hatred/home

UN Special Rapporteur on Religion and Belief – report https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session46/Documents/A_HRC_46_30.docx

ODIHR coalition building guide for tolerance and non-discrimination https://www.osce.org/odihr/385017

MAPPING RELEVANT INITIATIVES/ACTORS WORKING AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

WoW With or Without http://www.wow-withorwithout.com/ – Germany

Meld Islamofobie https://www.meldislamofobie.org/ – The Netherlands

Speak www.we-speak.nl – a new collective consisting of (Muslim) women based in the Netherlands fighting against racism, islamophobia, and exclusion

BOEH! https://boeh.be/ A feminist and anti-racist platform working specifically against religious dress restrictions in Flanders, Belgium

Karamah EU – Belgium https://karamah.org/ar/karamah-eu-conference-in-belgium/

Collectif Les cannelles, Brussels https://fr-fr.facebook.com/collectiflescannelles/

FEMYSO – Forum of Muslim Youth and Student Organisations

Alliance Citoyenne – France (specific projects with Muslim women including campaign in football Les Hijabeuses and a trade union for Muslim women)

Action Droits Musulmans – France (legal support)

Collective against Islamophobia in Europe

Collective Hijabi fight back Belgium

Dokustelle https://dokustelle.at/ Austria