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European Muslim communities confronted with extremism

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

Rapporteur: Ms Gisela WURM, Austria, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men fully supports the draft resolution and the draft recommendation tabled by the Political Affairs Committee. However, it would like to present a small number of amendments to underline that women and girls are, on the one hand, often the first victims of extremism in European Muslim communities, but that, on the other hand, they can also be important actors of change in their own communities.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

Add two new paragraphs after paragraph 8.3: "Combat all forms of discrimination and violence (particularly forced marriages, sexual mutilation of women, so-called 'honour crimes') which, in the name of misinterpreted religious texts or customs, violate the fundamental rights of women and equality between women and men;

Combat all forms of cultural or religious relativism which justify discriminatory practices and human rights violations directed at women or other groups in society."

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 8.5, add after "background": "including women,".

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

Add a new paragraph after paragraph 8.5:

"promote and support activities intending to increase the standing and the role of Muslim women in Europe and overcome stereotypes confining them to subordinate and passive roles, for example through appropriate teaching in schools and awareness-raising campaigns in the media."

1. See [Doc. 11540](#), tabled by the Political Affairs Committee.



C. Explanatory memorandum, by Mrs Wurm

Introduction

1. The rapporteur welcomes Mr Mota Amaral's report. Muslim communities in Europe are facing extremism. This situation has special effects on women, who are the first victims of religious fundamentalism, but who can also bring about important changes in their community.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly has considered the situation of Muslim women in Europe in various reports, including "Integration of immigrant women in Europe",² "Women and religion in Europe",³ and "Situation of women in the Maghreb".⁴

Women, the first victims of cultural and religious fundamentalism

3. The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men regularly denounces the threat posed to the human rights of women and girls by cultural and religious relativism. This threat is, unfortunately, particularly pronounced in Muslim communities, even in Europe. In fact, the first victims of Muslim fundamentalism are often not the society or the polity at large (via intercommunity violence or even terrorism), but the women and girls within the communities themselves, many of whom suffer severe, repeated and sustained violations of their human rights at the hands of extremists within their communities or at the hands of relatives influenced by the extremist ideology of Islamic fundamentalism.
4. It is thus imperative to fight all cultural and religious relativism of women and girls' human rights. As the Political Affairs Committee's rapporteur points out in his conclusions (paragraph 29), "European states are founded on the principle of secularism (in French: *laïcité*)". Mr Mota Amaral rightly suggests, in paragraph 18, that the "process of mutual understanding should imply a frank and open debate over ... some practices – be they religious or cultural – which, although accepted or tolerated by Muslim communities – sometimes even in Europe are and should continue to be rejected by European societies: inequality between men and women, honour killings, polygamy, forced marriages and harassment...". The Parliamentary Assembly has condemned these practices on several occasions.⁵ Alas, they are still current, and the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men intends to denounce them in forthcoming reports on "Abduction and illegal confinement of women and girls in the name of practices contrary to human rights" (rapporteur: Ms Papadopoulou, Cyprus, ALDE) and "The urgent need for action on so-called 'honour crimes'" (rapporteur: Mr Austin, United Kingdom, SOC).
5. While such practices as so-called "honour crimes" and forced marriages find few defenders in Europe with the exception of Islamic extremists, the introduction of certain parts of *Sharia* law unfortunately has found some defenders. Most recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that the adoption of certain aspects of *Sharia* law in the United Kingdom seemed "unavoidable".⁶ Of course, the Archbishop was not referring to Islamic penal law as practiced in some states, but rather to some aspects of civil law. However, the position of women in *Sharia* law (as currently practiced by fundamentalist states) is not equal to that of men, also in civil law. The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men adopted a whole report on "Respect for the principle of gender equality in civil law"⁷ as recently as last year, which pinpointed several areas where discriminatory foreign law provisions based on *Sharia* law put women at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to divorce or child custody, to name but two examples.
6. It should also be noted that it is not even necessary, unfortunately, for discriminatory and extremist provisions based on the *Sharia* to be made law, or to be accepted as a "parallel" legal system in Europe. Extremists have made considerable inroads into European Muslim communities, and women and girls may be forced – or feel forced – to adopt certain lifestyles without any legal provisions enforcing them. The restrictions imposed on women and girls – in particular by their own relatives (influenced by extremists) or by peer pressure – can range from being/feeling forced to don the veil, over restrictions on the freedom of movement,

2. [Doc. 10758, Resolution 1478 \(2006\)](#) and [Recommendation 1732 \(2006\)](#), rapporteur: Gülsün Bilgehan, Turkey, SOC.

3. [Resolution 1464 \(2005\)](#) and [Doc. 10670](#), rapporteur: Ms Rosmarie Zapf-Helbling, Switzerland, EPP/CD.

4. [Doc. 9487](#) and [Resolution 1293 \(2002\)](#), rapporteur: Ms Yvette Roudy, France, Socialist Group.

5. [Doc. 10590, Resolution 1468 \(2005\)](#) and [Recommendation 1723 \(2005\)](#) on forced marriages and child marriages, rapporteur: Mrs Rosmarie Zapf-Helbling, Switzerland, EPP/CD.

6. BBC News 24, 7 February 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7232661.stm.

7. [Doc. 11177, Recommendation 1798 \(2007\)](#), rapporteur: Ms Svetlana Smirnova, Russian Federation, European Democrat Group.

to being forbidden to ride a bike: in the Netherlands, a fatwa issued in 2007 forbids Muslim women to ride bicycles, since, according to the clerics responsible, “contact with the bicycle’s saddle has a sexually arousing effect on women, and this makes the bicycle a prohibited object”.⁸

7. As Mrs Bilgehan emphasised, immigrant women are discriminated against on two grounds – sex and origin. In [Resolution 1478 \(2006\)](#), the Assembly called on the member states to “take all necessary action to protect the rights of immigrant women and to combat the discrimination they face in their community of origin, by refusing all forms of cultural and religious relativism which could violate women’s fundamental rights” (paragraph 7.14). I can but repeat this call to fight all forms of cultural and religious relativism propagated by Islamic fundamentalists, which counts Muslim women and girls as its prime victims.

Relying on women to integrate successfully and combat extremism

8. However, Muslim women are not just victims of Islamic fundamentalism: they can also be a positive actor for change, within both their communities and society at large. In particular within immigrant communities, women – as wives, daughters and mothers – are often expected to conform to and also to transmit “traditional” values. These values have, unfortunately, often been corrupted by the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism, which can end in women themselves imposing on other women (for example, daughters or daughters-in-law) practices which violate human rights.

9. On the other hand, women can also be a bulwark against such practices within their own communities if they are given the freedom and the means to emancipate themselves and to benefit from the education and the human rights culture in European society at large. As Mrs Bilgehan pointed out in her report (*op. cit.*), the face of migration has changed, and women now make up roughly half of all migrants. It is in these women that host states need to invest. I am convinced that ensuring the access of immigrant women in Europe to education, training, employment, social and cultural rights and health services help ensure that they are able to integrate into society and will lead to greater social cohesion in the host country – and have a knock-on effect on the ability of Muslim communities in Europe to effectively fight extremism.

10. This is why it is so important that the measures proposed by the Political Affairs Committee in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the draft resolution include a gender dimension. Too often, the participation of people with an immigrant background in political parties, trade unions and NGOs is limited to men. Too often, the voice of Muslim women is not heard, either in their own communities or in society at large. Thus, special efforts should be made to increase the standing and the role of Muslim women in Europe and to overcome stereotypes confining them to subordinate and passive roles, for example, through appropriate teaching in schools – including Muslim faith schools where they exist – and through awareness-raising campaigns in the media.

Conclusion

11. The draft resolution tabled by my colleague, Mr Mota Amaral, thus has my total support, and I hope that he and the Political Affairs Committee will approve the amendments I am suggesting, to ensure that the rights of women in European Muslim communities confronted with extremism are fully respected, and that Muslim women’s potential as agents of positive change is realised.

Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee.

Committee for opinion: Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men.

Reference to committee: [Doc. 10705](#) and Reference No. 3145 of 7 October 2005.

Opinion adopted by the committee on 14 April 2008.

See 13th Sitting, 15 April 2008 (adoption of the draft resolution and draft recommendation, as amended); and [Resolution 1605](#) and [Recommendation 1831](#).

8. Information from the site www.elpha.com posted by the organisation, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, “Netherlands: fatwa forbidding women to ride bicycles causes stir”, www.wluml.org, 7 January 2008.