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Multiple discrimination against Muslim women in Europe: for equal opportunities

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons

Rapporteur: Ms Tülin ERKAL KARA, Turkey, Group of the European People's Party

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons welcomes the report by the rapporteur of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Ms Athina Kyriakidou, which highlights the contribution of Muslim women to European society and supports the draft resolution proposed.
2. The committee notes the many important questions raised in the report and welcomes the innovative perspective taken by the rapporteur who looks at the issue of empowerment of Europe's Muslim women, highlighting their efforts to achieve gender equality and equal opportunities.
3. From a migrant perspective, the committee underlines the need to take into account the process of feminisation of migration and the specific patterns of female migration. While family reunification remains the most feminised type of migration, migrant women are increasingly turning to irregular forms of migration as a result of their search for a better life for themselves and their families.
4. The committee strongly supports the argument that Council of Europe member States need to take a range of positive measures in order to create the necessary conditions and support the process of empowerment and integration of Muslim women with a migrant background. Such measures need to promote equal rights and fair chances, allow non-discriminatory access to education and employment as well as to citizenship and political rights, and encourage their full participation in public life. Moreover, it is necessary to convey a more truthful picture of migrants in general and Muslim women in particular to European public opinion.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

While emphasising its full support to the draft resolution tabled by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons proposes the following amendments:

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 12327](#), Reference 3706 of 4 October 2010, modified on 8 October 2010 and 7 October 2011. Reporting committee: Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. See [Doc. 12956](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 25 June 2012.



Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 2, insert the following new paragraph:

“Many Muslim women are migrants or their descendants and face particular problems in the process of feminisation of migration. These problems include, inter alia, restrictions on family reunification and recourse to irregular migration due to the closing of regular channels of migration.”

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 6.1.6, after the word “Europe’s”, insert the words “ethnic and religious”.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 6.2.2, replace the words “have managed to reconcile their Muslim religious faith with their European identity” with “have been successful in European society”.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 6.2.3, after the words “specific training”, insert the words “on tolerance”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.3. add the following new sub-paragraph:

“promote family reunification policies and access to nationality and dual nationality for migrants and their descendants as a means of integration and ensure that there is no discrimination in terms of gender, religion or ethnicity in the implementation of the laws and rules relating to these policies.”

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.5, insert the following new sub-paragraph:

“allocate sufficient funds for the teaching of the language of the host country”.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Erkal Kara, rapporteur for opinion

1. Introduction: Europe’s Muslim women – a migrant’s perspective

1. Estimates put the number of Muslims in Europe at between 40 and 60 million,² including between 15 and 20 million in the European Union – a number that is expected to increase significantly. These figures do not take into account the rising number of conversions to Islam among native Europeans as well as irregular migrants of Islamic faith. While the report points out the lack of official data on the exact size and composition of Europe’s Muslim population, there is also a need for both gender and migrant-specific statistics broken down, *inter alia*, by age, origin, field of employment, legal status, etc. Only the availability of detailed gender and migrant-disaggregated data enables the development and implementation of specific policies tackling the issues of equality and integration of Europe’s Muslim women effectively.

2. Europe’s Muslim women are an integral part of European society. Muslims have lived in the Balkan and Caucasus regions, in the Iberian Peninsula, in Cyprus, Sicily and Malta for centuries and autochthonous Muslim communities are still present today. The majority of the population in Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo³ and Turkey are Muslims. In many of the other Council of Europe member States, and in particular in western European countries, Muslims have settled as migrants. This includes those who came in the context of decolonisation, migrant workers as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

2. These figures do not include Turkey and Azerbaijan, which alone have an estimated Muslim population of more than 80 million people.

3. All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council [Resolution 1244](#) and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

3. As a result of different immigration policies, family reunification and settlement began to alter the demographic, social and political dynamics of Europe's Muslim communities in the course of the 1970s and 1980s with an increasing feminisation of migration over recent years. The report highlights that women currently represent more than 52% of the immigration flow to Europe. While women arrive increasingly in their own right and as heads of family, many women continue to move in the context of family reunification, which remains the most feminised type of migration.

4. In spite of the fact that migration often has a negative connotation, it has contributed in a positive way to the development and spread of civilisations. In fact, due to migration, societies have further developed their creative capacities and dynamism. For this reason, migration should not be perceived only in terms of its negative consequences. We should not also forget that through the feminisation of migration, it is women who benefit the most from migration.

5. Despite the fact that many of Europe's Muslim migrants have lived in their countries of residence for a long time, the report mentions that only a small proportion have obtained the citizenship of their country of residence. This illustrates the tendency in Council of Europe member States in recent years to restrict access to nationality for migrants and their descendants. The Committee on Migration has underlined in the past that policy and practice in Council of Europe member States do not sufficiently take into account the specific patterns of female migration while introducing even stricter rules on family-related migration.⁴

6. As a consequence, women – who are most affected by these measures – increasingly turn to irregular forms of migration. Muslim women in an irregular situation are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation. Little is known about the real extent of these problems due to the fact that they are rarely reported. The Parliamentary Assembly, in its [Resolution 1509 \(2006\)](#), addressed the situation of irregular migrants and stressed the need to protect their human rights.⁵

7. Furthermore, I would like to point out here that although Ms Athina Kyriakidou's report is comprehensive in many aspects, it does not emphasise enough the necessity to accept migration by Muslim women as their basic individual right and freedom in search of better living conditions.

8. Muslim women who come to Europe as asylum seekers, in many cases, face gender-related persecution or gender-based violence, which may give rise to claims for international protection.

9. The Assembly has in the past focused on integration of migrants and migrant women as well as on discrimination against Muslims and human rights violations suffered by Muslim women.⁶ Future work needs to look at the issue of Muslim women from a different perspective, which takes into account the voices of Muslim women in present-day Europe and considers them as actors of change, while pointing out the obstacles they face on their way to empowerment as highlighted by the rapporteur of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

2. The context: European public opinion

10. European public opinion has a rather hostile image of migrants and of Islam. Since 11 September 2001, the political climate has become increasingly uncomfortable and security questions have dominated public policies to the detriment of integration policies. Although only a small minority of Muslims in Europe follow orthodox or extremist teachings, Islam has been at the centre of public debate and has often been caricatured as a "fundamentalist" religion that by default puts women into a position of "submission".

4. [Doc. 10796](#), opinion on the integration of immigrant women in Europe (Rapporteur: Ms Stoitsits, Austria, SOC).

5. [Resolution 1509 \(2006\)](#) on human rights of irregular migrants. See also: [Recommendation 1985 \(2011\)](#) on undocumented migrant children in an irregular situation: a real cause for concern.

6. See, *inter alia*, [Recommendation 712 \(1973\)](#) on the integration of migrant workers with the society of their host countries, [Resolution 631 \(1976\)](#) on the integration of migrants into society as regards education and cultural development, [Recommendation 1206 \(1993\)](#) on the integration of migrants and community relations, [Recommendation 1500 \(2001\)](#) on participation of immigrants and foreign residents in political life in the Council of Europe member States, [Recommendation 1625 \(2003\)](#) on policies for the integration of immigrants in Council of Europe member States, [Resolution 1437 \(2005\)](#) on migration and integration: a challenge and an opportunity for Europe, [Resolution 1478 \(2006\)](#) on integration of immigrant women in Europe, [Resolution 1327 \(2003\)](#) on so-called "honour crimes", [Resolution 1605 \(2008\)](#) and [Recommendation 1831 \(2008\)](#) on European Muslim communities confronted with extremism, and [Recommendation 1927 \(2010\)](#) and [Resolution 1743 \(2010\)](#) on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe.

11. It should be pointed out, however, that the fact that some politicians present a hostile image of migrants and thus declare the end of multiculturalism does not mean that multiculturalism is no longer valid. It is the common ground for the present-day international community and, therefore, living in harmony with different cultures is an indispensable condition of our times; it is a reality to be learned and well managed.

12. Media attention, political debates and public discourse were often articulated on narrow issues like the headscarf and the integral veil, forced marriages, polygamy and so-called “honour crimes”, creating anxiety among the non-Muslim European public. These controversies exacerbated the perception of Islam as a challenge for European values and reinforced the feeling of stigmatisation of Muslim communities in Europe. It is rare to see reports of Muslim women as success stories of integration. It is interesting to note, however, that the media gives little attention and coverage to racist attacks occurring against members of minority groups in Europe.

3. Beyond the headscarf debate and victimisation

13. The report rightly considers the focus on the headscarf and dramatic situations involving Muslim women as “narrow and simplistic”. There is a need to move beyond the headscarf debate, as it veils the most important challenges and underlying issues such as necessary social and political transformations, unemployment, social exclusion, racism, discrimination, gender-based violence, inter-generational conflicts, and lack of equal opportunities. It is necessary to understand and appreciate the complexity of Europe’s female Muslim population and its contribution to and involvement with European society.

14. The rapporteur also agrees with the argument that, until now, the political debate on Europe’s Muslim women focused only on their status as “passive” and “oppressed” victims. It is important to move away from the dual victim image representing Muslim women as victims of patriarchal norms and family structures in their communities on the one hand, and of prejudices and discrimination coming from the non-Muslim population in contemporary European societies on the other. Europe’s Muslim women are in fact facing multiple challenges and have to claim their rights as women, as individuals, as Muslims and as members of society at the same time.

4. The empowerment of Europe’s Muslim women of migrant background

15. The rapporteur welcomes the innovative perspective taken by the rapporteur of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination who looks at the issue of empowerment of Europe’s Muslim women, highlighting their efforts to achieve gender equality and equal opportunities in European societies. The rapporteur strongly supports the argument that Council of Europe member States need to take a range of positive measures in order to create the conditions and support the process of empowerment and the integration of Muslim women with a migrant background.

16. As integration should be considered a two-way process, the active participation of Muslim women is a necessary condition for successful empowerment. In an earlier opinion, the committee underlined the need to highlight the positive contribution that migrant women can make in the integration process. As primary care providers, they also play an important role in the integration of their children.

17. In order to promote equal rights and fair chances for Europe’s Muslim women, Council of Europe member States should take further political measures to promote and implement equality between women and men in all areas of life. Such policies need to extend and consolidate migrant women’s rights by altering the traditional stereotypes on the role of women and should empower women in their communities by enabling them to fully exercise their political and socio-economic rights.

18. One of the key factors for the empowerment and integration of Europe’s Muslim women is fair and non-discriminatory access to education and employment. Learning the language of the country of residence is a necessary condition not only for access to the labour market, education, qualifications and vocational training, but also for building up social ties and bonds within the host society. Through greater diversity in employment of Muslim women with a migrant background, one could overcome certain gender divisions that are reinforced by the fact that they heavily dominate certain sectors of employment. In this context, new projects should be initiated to promote the learning of languages of the host countries of Muslim women.

19. The integration process of Europe’s Muslim women of migrant background should in time lead to democratic participation through non-discriminatory access to citizenship and political rights. Access to nationality and dual nationality should be encouraged and supported, and applicants should enjoy protection from excessively strict conditions, discretionary decisions, withdrawal of residency or other status and

statelessness. Regarding the democratic participation of migrants in general and of Muslim women in particular, basic political liberties and the right to vote in and stand for elections need to be extended. This applies to Muslim women at local, regional, national and European level and the constitution of consultative bodies.

20. Moreover, it is necessary to convey a more truthful picture of migrants in general and Muslim women in particular and provide for a deeper understanding of Islam in European society. Media can play an important role in changing this image and building bridges. Together with political leaders, they have a responsibility to refrain from stereotyping Muslim women and issues affecting them.

5. The obstacles to empowerment and integration

21. There are nevertheless still many obstacles to empowerment and integration of Europe's Muslim women of migrant background. These challenges often prevent them from finding the right balance between their desire to preserve their Islamic and migrant identity and their desire to integrate in their respective societies. By tackling these obstacles, Council of Europe member States can contribute to making these women less vulnerable and less dependent on men and male traditions.

22. The report highlights that large numbers of Europe's Muslim women are experiencing multiple discrimination based on ethnic origin, race, religion, gender, traditions and their background. Council of Europe member States need to take specific measures to address this multiple discrimination of Muslim women of migrant background in all aspects of society and everyday life. The rapporteur underlines that misunderstandings and discrimination are also a result of restrictive immigration policies and legislation.

23. All actors in society, including politicians and the media, need to participate in combating racism, Islamophobia and discrimination based on religion. Migrants in general and Europe's Muslim women in particular are victims of racism, verbal and physical attacks and stigmatisation on a daily basis, at school, at work and in the streets. These incidents can create obstacles for the empowerment of Muslim women, who feel inhibited and insecure. In this respect, Council of Europe member States must oppose all forms of discrimination or violence on grounds of religion or belief, as pointed out in [Resolution 1846 \(2011\)](#).⁷

24. Of particular concern is the issue of violence against Muslim women, including physical, sexual and psychological forms of violence in the host country because of their religious beliefs and cultural and social behaviour. These women need to have access to protection and rehabilitation.

25. In [Resolution 1765 \(2010\)](#), the Assembly underlined the need to appropriately take into account gender-based violence and gender-related persecution in any asylum determination process and to ensure gender sensitivity of the asylum system.⁸

26. In addition, socio-economic disadvantages needs to be further reduced. Low education and qualifications, low employment rates and little prospect for social mobility remain a problem. Improving this situation may be difficult when disadvantageous socio-economic conditions combine with other factors, such as the lack of knowledge of the language, the persistence of archaic cultural traditions, generation conflicts, and discrimination or suspicion on the part of the non-Muslim majority population.

27. Another obstacle is the marginalisation and social exclusion of Europe's Muslim women of migrant background. In the past, the migration process of Muslim women of the first and second generation joining their husbands produced a situation of isolation and dependency. Political choices of European countries have exacerbated this segregation. Muslim women with large families are particularly vulnerable to isolation.

28. Finally, no successful transformation is likely to happen until Muslim men are involved in the process of empowerment of Muslim women. The Assembly already pointed out in its [Resolution 1641 \(2008\)](#) that the involvement of men is a prerequisite for achieving equality between the sexes.⁹

7. [Resolution 1846 \(2011\)](#) on combating all forms of discrimination based on religion.

8. [Resolution 1765 \(2010\)](#) on gender-related claims for asylum. See also [Resolution 1635 \(2008\)](#) on combating violence against women: towards a Council of Europe convention and [Resolution 1662 \(2009\)](#) on action to combat gender-based human rights violations, including abduction of women and girls.

9. [Resolution 1641 \(2008\)](#) on involving men in achieving gender equality.