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Multiple discrimination against Muslim women in Europe: for equal opportunities

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

Rapporteur: Mr Raphaël COMTE, Switzerland, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

A. Conclusions of the committee

- The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media welcomes the report by the rapporteur of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Ms Athina Kyriakidou, particularly for bringing forward a series of positive measures to empower Muslim women to overcome multiple discrimination and to reconcile their Muslim and European identity. The committee fully supports the draft resolution proposed.
- While in agreement with the thrust of the draft resolution tabled by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media wishes to further develop specific recommendations with regard to “integration policies and the promotion of respect” and proposes the following amendments.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, delete paragraph 6.1.7.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.1.1, add the following new sub-paragraph:

“pursue initiatives in the field of intercultural education relating to diversity of religions and non-religious convictions in order to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and the culture of ‘living together’, drawing on the principles set out in the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education (CM/Rec(2008)12);”

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, at the end of paragraph 6.2.4, add the following words:

“and that they dispose of support structures to help them remain in education;”

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 D (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.4, add the following new sub-paragraph:

“in co-operation with non-governmental organisations, develop specific training programmes for older Muslim women who wish to access employment to gain skills and qualifications;”

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.6, add the following new sub-paragraph:

“develop awareness-raising campaigns and introduce dissuasive sanctions for government agencies and banks against discrimination of Muslim women in allocation of loans and grants for business start-ups;”

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Comte, rapporteur for opinion

1. Introduction

1. The rapporteur for opinion welcomes the positive approach adopted by Ms Athina Kyriakidou and the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination to reflect the complex reality of Muslim women in Europe, many of whom want to be actors of change and empowerment, and to seek favourable conditions that could enable them to fulfil their aspirations and reconcile their Muslim and European values and identity in today's multicultural societies in Europe.

2. A number of research studies undertaken with or by Muslim women themselves move away from simplistic and stereotyped images of Muslim women in Europe and reveal a situation that is much more fluid, complex, and multi-layered depending on personal experiences, origin, the local environment, social class, age, access to and level of education, marital status, the presence and influence of the extended family, etc. Within such complexity and diversity, some common features can nevertheless be drawn. To illustrate the point, the rapporteur for opinion refers to the findings of the King Baudouin Foundation study.²

3. *Emancipation within tradition:* Although archaic and patriarchal features that undermine female autonomy and equality persist among Europe's Muslim communities, many Muslim women are emerging as independent, determined individuals. Empowered by an increased level of education and by independent access to religious knowledge, they have the potential to become important actors of radical transformation from within tradition that does not need to go through radical means. However, knowledge of the language of the country of residence and employment opportunities are the keys to their full success.

4. *Belonging to Europe:* Muslim women (European citizens or long-term residents), and particularly the young generations, feel proud to fully belong to Europe and appreciate in particular the promotion of European values such as the rule of law, democracy, freedom and respect of diversity. For this reason, they feel particularly frustrated when they are discriminated and misrepresented as passively submitted to Islam. Another source of prejudice is the judgmental mentality of closely-knit minority communities. Nevertheless, Muslim women in Europe demonstrate resilience and an ability to face prejudice in a rational and balanced way.

5. *Diversity and integration:* Muslim women feel privileged to live in democratic European countries where the rule of law is in place and which protect gender equality, diversity and fundamental freedoms. Benefiting from these rights and freedoms and being well integrated are also the two key things that the Muslim women wish for their children and the future Muslim generations in Europe.

6. *Aspirations:* Their recurring dreams are to be respected as individuals, to live in peace and within the law, to feel integrated, to receive a good education, to have a decent job and to have a happy family life.

2. Silvestri S. (2008), *Europe's Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges*, research report, City University London and Cambridge University, King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels, www.kingbaudouinfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/KBS-FRB/3_Publications/PUB_1846_MuslimWomen_03.pdf accessed (date).

2. Integration as a two-way process

7. Both the Council of Europe and the European Union are strongly promoting social, economic and cultural inclusion of Europe's Muslim and other communities as a key factor to build an inclusive society. Integration is seen as a two-way process, building through intercultural and interreligious dialogue the capacity of all people to live together with full respect for the dignity and distinct identity of each individual, the common good, pluralism and diversity, non-violence and solidarity.

8. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the European Cultural Convention (ETS No. 18) in 2005, the Council of Europe adopted its strategy for developing intercultural dialogue which defined several lines of action, such as:

- respect for cultural rights and the right to education;
- introduction of inter-sectoral policies promoting cultural diversity and dialogue;
- development of knowledge of history, cultures, arts and religions;
- support for cultural activities and exchanges as a means of engaging in a dialogue;
- strengthening of opportunities for teachers to obtain training in the fields of education for democratic citizenship, human rights, history and intercultural education.

9. The Parliamentary Assembly, through its Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, has built up close co-operation with the intergovernmental sector of the Council of Europe to develop those lines of action into policy guidance (White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue) and practical tools that could be useful to the member States in their efforts to build more cohesive societies. Particular reference could be made to Assembly [Recommendation 1884 \(2009\)](#) on cultural education: the promotion of culture, creativity and intercultural understanding through education, [Recommendation 1720 \(2005\)](#) on education and religion, [Recommendation 1927 \(2010\)](#) on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe, [Recommendation 1962 \(2011\)](#) on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue and [Recommendation 1990 \(2012\)](#) on the right of everyone to take part in cultural life.

10. The rapporteur for opinion therefore believes that many Council of Europe instruments could be specifically adapted for integration of Muslim women in Europe and fully agrees with the analysis of Ms Kyriakidou that Muslim women need to be encouraged and helped in their quest for better integration and equality in society. This is necessary not only for their own well-being and fulfilment, but also for the cohesion of European multicultural societies. Particularly as Muslim women can and should play a key role to help new generations reconcile Muslim and European values and identity.

11. In this regard, the rapporteur for opinion advocates that public authorities at national and local levels need to gather more comprehensive data on the socio-economic status of Muslim women (participation in the labour market, income levels, inequality and poverty, educational achievement, home ownership, etc.) and to explore the specific problems affecting gender relations among the Muslim communities, so that effective social and family policies can be deployed. With the help of non-governmental organisations, public authorities should also seek to obtain a clear picture of Muslim women's activism and interests so that these positive resources can be drawn to improve cohesion of society. Given that local authorities are key actors in this process, the rapporteur refers to [Resolution 318 \(2010\)](#) of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on cultural integration of Muslim women in European cities, which provides excellent political guidance at local level.

3. Access to education and intercultural education in schools

12. The right to education is a fundamental human right guaranteed under Article 2 of the first Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5). However, not all Muslim girls and young women in Europe benefit from that right.

13. The rapporteur for opinion believes that support mechanisms should be developed to help Muslim girls and young women to fully integrate and remain in the compulsory education system and beyond. Education is not only a means to prepare for the labour market, to support personal development and to provide a broad knowledge base, but it is also one of the most important pillars of integration. As has been pointed out in a recent report published by the Open Society Foundation, "Schools contribute to integration since they provide opportunities for interaction between pupils and parents of different ethnic and religious backgrounds". The

rapporteur for opinion shares the analysis in the report that experiencing ethnically and culturally mixed environments from an early age helps to cultivate good relations, mutual understanding and respect for diversity, and as a result prevents the development of prejudice.³

14. Both the Council of Europe and UNESCO have developed a wide range of policy guidance and practical tools to assist member States in their educational reforms. Rising up to the challenges of multicultural societies in Europe, the Committee of Ministers adopted in 2008 the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue which identifies education as one of the key areas for the success of intercultural dialogue.

15. Within the formal curriculum in primary and secondary education, the intercultural dimension spans across almost all subjects with a particular importance in history, language education and the teaching of different religious and non-religious beliefs and common values. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media has contributed to this process with several key reports on history teaching, on education and religion, and on cultural education to promote intercultural understanding through education.

16. Furthermore, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education in 2010, which focuses on the teaching of democratic rights and responsibilities and active participation in relation to civic, political, social, economic, legal and cultural spheres of society and on teaching the broader spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms in every aspect of life. This charter provides conceptual and practical guidance to the member States.

17. Other practical guidance of direct relevance to this report are the “Guidelines for educators on countering intolerance and discrimination against Muslims: addressing Islamophobia through education”, which the Council of Europe recently published together with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODHIR) and UNESCO.

18. The rapporteur for opinion therefore considers that many good instruments and practical tools exist which could now be used and implemented in the member States.

4. Access to vocational training and employment

19. Not all Muslim women have the means and the capacity to actively participate in society. Inability to speak the language of the country of residence and lack of employment opportunities or a low level of education can seriously undermine their engagement. This may be particularly the case for older generations of Muslim women living in Europe. Positive measures are therefore needed to overcome such barriers and empower them to gain confidence, skills and professional qualifications to fully integrate in European societies.

20. Any strategies to make it easier for Muslim women to find jobs should be based on government action, in terms of recognition of work experience and qualifications, the provision of basic and further vocational training and the introduction of positive measures to encourage employers to hire Muslim women. Such strategies should involve non-governmental organisations, which play an important role in improving the skills of Muslim women, and also trade unions which have a special duty in the work place to fight discrimination and social inclusion, ensuring that the rules on equal treatment are respected.

21. The rapporteur for opinion further underlines that business creation should be also considered by public authorities when developing positive measures and strategies to help Muslim women enter the labour market. However, many barriers remain. Muslim women, victims of negative stereotypes that portray them as passive and relying on social benefits, often have difficulties persuading government agencies and banks to give them loans and grants for business initiatives.

5. Role of Media

22. Both education and media can have a very positive impact on mutual understanding, respect for diversity and individual dignity, helping to build better community relations. However, the impact of the media has been often a negative one, reinforcing the stereotypes of Muslim women by narrowly focusing debates on the issues of the headscarf and the integral veil, forced marriages, polygamy and so-called “honour crimes”, seeking sensationalism and as a result creating anxiety among the non-Muslim European public.

3. Open Society Foundations (2011), *Living together: projects promoting inclusion in 11 EU cities*: www.soros.org/sites/default/files/living-together-inclusion-11-eu-cities-20120125.pdf.

6. Conclusion

23. In the current context of economic crisis, the impact of prolonged austerity in our countries is likely to place increasing strain on inter-faith and inter-ethnic relations. Government cuts may additionally jeopardise the financing of positive measures that are needed to help Muslim women fully integrate in society.

24. For this reason, members of parliament have an important role to play to keep those policies high on the political agenda and also in the debates on budgetary expenditure.

25. To complement national efforts, the Council of Europe should intensify its co-operation with the European Union, UNESCO and other organisations, including international non-governmental organisations, to assist member States with policy guidance, dissemination of lessons learned from pilot projects and through exchange of good practice to collectively ensure that positive measures for the empowerment and better integration of Muslim women are not only discussed and developed but also implemented across Europe.