

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 318 (2010)¹ Cultural integration of Muslim women in European cities

1. In Europe today, particularly in those countries where Muslims are in a minority, immigrant Muslim women can face multiple challenges. Many of these are to do with culture, the dominant culture of the country of origin and the dominant culture of the host country, as well as with differences of cultural sensitivities among different groups in each society. Muslim women often suffer from double cultural disaffiliation, disconnected from their culture of origin and unable to identify with the dominant culture of the host country. Their lack of integration is an area where local authorities can play an important role.

2. Muslim women are not a homogenous group: their social, educational and cultural backgrounds, family and occupational situations differ significantly and determine to a large extent their integration and relationship with the host community. The label “Muslim”, used here to categorise a group of immigrants, needs to be qualified. In practice these women are individuals with individual needs and circumstances and need to be treated as such. In many cases they will prefer to identify themselves in relation to family, country of origin or occupation rather than any religious affiliation.

3. The cultural difficulties facing many Muslim women who have recently emigrated to Europe are of several types: they have to negotiate the restrictions of their traditional cultural backgrounds and come to terms with increasing divergences of outlook that their children may acquire through being educated in the host country. Many of them come from countries, regions or communities which do not have the same traditions of gender equality as their host countries and communities. This can result in a relatively high degree of isolation, emotional insecurity and social exclusion. Muslim women are also more at risk of unemployment and domestic violence.

4. Language and education are key elements in the integration process. Prejudice and suspicion thrive on ignorance. Women are often isolated by their poor command of the language of the host country. At the same time they are the key people for the transmission of their mother tongue to their children.

5. The low participation of Muslim girls in many sports deprives them of activities which present important opportunities for integration.

6. These obstacles to integration are exacerbated by the recent growth of Islamophobia, xenophobia, political extremism and media stereotyping, along with restrictive and discriminatory visa regimes and language requirements

which can contribute among Muslim women to a sense of being unwelcome and not at home in the host country.

7. The failure of European societies to understand the complexity of the circumstances of this important and vulnerable group within their midst is a loss for these societies as a whole. Not only are they failing to benefit from the experience, skills and creative potential of the people concerned, but the presence of a large group who are somehow perceived as being outside of the host culture can have serious adverse effects on the host communities, who are in danger of retreating into a fortress mentality.

8. This situation is not inevitable; it can be addressed. Intelligent measures and policies can go a long way to helping new waves of immigrants to adapt and find their place in the host societies, as previous immigrants have done.

9. There needs to be an emphasis on dialogue rather than assimilation. Host communities have much to learn about the heritage and diversity of Islam, which is too often obscured by the rhetoric of Islamisation and Islamophobia.

10. There should also be an emphasis on empowering and enabling rather than proscribing. Given the right opportunities, immigrant Muslim women will ensure their own development and find their own place in the host communities.

11. Islam has an enormous wealth of cultural diversity and heritage which can provide material for many shared cultural activities in host communities.

12. Since it is the local arena where most activities which facilitate integration are organised, local authorities are strategically positioned to help.

13. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe therefore invites local and regional authorities to encourage, stimulate and promote specific measures to facilitate the integration of immigrant Muslim women into their communities, notably by:

a. providing opportunities for immigrant Muslim women to meet with local and regional authorities in order to collect information and express their needs and wishes;

b. offering suitable language courses for the language of the host country, preferably in the host country;

c. offering targeted crèche services and mother-tongue language support for young children;

d. raising the awareness of municipal employees about integration issues specific to Muslim women;

e. raising awareness among public service employees and the majority population so as to prevent unlawful, discriminatory requests that Muslim women wearing head scarves either remove them or refrain from entering public places;

f. providing special reception services for recent immigrants, providing information on cultural differences and giving advice and information on public services;

g. providing opportunities to meet and mix with women from the host community;

h. creating spaces where Muslim women can meet other women, communicate with them and discuss issues of common interest, such as differences in culture, child-rearing, marriage traditions and domestic violence;

i. providing opportunities to meet and for exchange with Muslim women role models who have been successful in their professional development;

j. providing help in setting up and running associations;

k. taking measures to promote full participation of Muslim women in sporting activities, such as educational campaigns and ensuring more women-only activities;

l. providing opportunities to affirm and explore their cultural identities, through cultural and educational activities and associations, by celebrating the various cultural agendas of countries of origin and by affirming the cultural heritage of these ethnic groups – through performing arts, exploration of cultural heritage, and through popular culture and arts;

m. providing special services for elderly immigrants, such as contact centres and special cultural activities.

14. The Congress asks local and regional authorities to take measures to combat media stereotyping of Muslim women, such as by:

a. using their own media and engaging with other local media to project realistic and in-depth features of local groups and populations and thus develop confidence and contacts within the communities concerned;

b. promoting awareness of the diversity and differences in the origins and attitudes of immigrant communities;

c. encouraging debate on cultural differences and value differences, divergences between traditional cultures and the values of liberal democracies and also encouraging the discussion of pluralism and tolerance in relation to religion, politics and personal values.

15. Bearing in mind that one of the keys to successful integration is through finding gainful employment, local authorities are asked to make use of educational services and local events to promote awareness of employment opportunities and public employment services.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 28 October 2010, 3rd Sitting (see Document [CG\(19\)12](#), explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: A. Koopmanschap, Netherlands (L, SOC).