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Cultural Integration of Muslim Women in European Cities

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Summary

Muslim women in European cities often have difficulty integrating into society because of a combination of factors, including language problems, cultural differences and media stereotypes

This report provides an overview of the situation in European countries with Muslim minorities, notes some good practices in some member States and shows how local authorities can facilitate the cultural integration of Muslim women.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Members not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress



A. DRAFT RESOLUTION²

1. In Europe today, particularly in those countries where Muslims are in a minority, immigrant Muslim women can face multiple challenges. Many of these have to do with culture, the dominant culture of the country of origin and the dominant culture of the host country, as well as 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 make a substantial difference.

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 categorize 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 whom 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 persons for the transmission of their mother tongue to their children.

5. The low participation of Muslim women 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 and media stereotyping, which can contribute to a sense of being unwelcome and not at home in the host country.

² Preliminary draft resolution approved by the Committee on Culture and Education on 16 March 2010.

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NB: The names of members who took part in the vote are in italics.

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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 the Islamic world, 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. The Islamic world 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 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. offering suitable language courses for the language of the host country;

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

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

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

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

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

g. providing opportunities to meet and exchange with Muslim women role models who have successfully developed their professions and careers;

h. providing help in setting up and running associations;

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

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

k. 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 engage 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 outlook of immigrant communities;

c. encouraging debate of cultural differences and value differences, divergences between traditional cultures and the values of liberal democracies; discuss 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.

B. EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. Introduction

When speaking of "Muslim women", it has first to be recognised that, just as there are many forms of Islam, so too the term "Muslim" is often loosely applied to people from countries where the dominant religion is Islam, irrespective of the beliefs and affiliations of the people concerned. While bearing this in mind, the term "Muslim women" is used in this document as a convenient label to identify a group of immigrants who arguably feature among the least integrated groups in many European societies.

Although the integration of women Muslim immigrants into non-Muslim countries varies considerably according to their social, educational, and cultural backgrounds, on the whole they perform poorly in comparison with other immigrant women, mix less with the population of their new countries³ and are more likely to be marginalised,⁴ suffering high levels of deprivation, unemployment, domestic violence and poverty.

This lack of integration is a cause for concern. Muslim women are losing out on much that society has to offer. The host societies are also losing out from the skills and talents that this group embodies. This situation is not inevitable. Much can be done to improve it. Local authorities are in a unique position to reach out and help Muslim women take their rightful place.

2. The situation of immigrant Muslim women in Europe today

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a number of European countries solved their labour shortages by encouraging immigration. They are still coming to terms with the unforeseen consequences of these population movements, when large numbers of immigrants, instead of returning to their countries of origin, settled and established families, bringing their own cultural traditions with them.

The host countries were often ill-prepared for this abrupt transition to a pluricultural society and unsure how to absorb the new arrivals. In the case of Muslim women immigrants, there are several significant obstacles to integration.

Language and education

Lack of educational qualifications and poor language skills in the host country languages are the biggest barriers to the integration of Muslim women arriving in non-Muslim countries.

³ The International Herald Tribune ("A trap for Muslim women in Europe", 27/06/2003) reported that 96% of Muslim women in Norway marry somebody from their country of origin, and that most of these marriages are arranged.

⁴ Constant, A.L. et al. (2006): Clash of cultures: Muslims and Christians in the Ethnosing Process, IZA discussion paper 2350.

Many women who emigrate to join family members, or in the context of arranged marriages, have little or no previous exposure to the language of their host country. The inability to communicate with those around them and the difficulties in interacting with people in public services encourage many women to depend on other family members, often children, for all contact with the outside world. Poor language skills also have the effect of limiting the exposure of these women to the culture and values of the host community and has the effect of making them almost invisible in the community.

The poor level of education of many Muslim women and girls is not due to Islam: the situation varies from country to country. In India for example, Muslim women tend to be strong advocates of education for their daughters.⁵

Sport

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has recently demonstrated the importance of sport for social and cultural integration.⁶ However, the low participation of Muslim women in many sports deprives them these opportunities for integration. This lack of participation is often attributed to a fear of discrimination and a lack of sensitivity by service providers in relation to their cultural and religious needs.⁷

Inequality

The lack of gender equality within their own communities remains a severe problem for Muslim women. Most Muslim immigrants come from countries where there is severe gender inequality, where women are often discouraged and sometimes actually hindered from pursuing further education and are expected to stay at home.

Inequality is no more an integral part of Islam than it is for other major religions. Since many Muslim countries have been slow to democratise, the value systems which govern social hierarchies tend to still be enshrined in religious terms. However, these countries are now witnessing strong civil movements to improve the position of women as part of a general growth in civil society. As Mahnaz Afkhami president of the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, which has played a role in helping reform family laws in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, points out: "It is not Islam that holds us back. Rather it is the path the history of patriarchy in Muslim-majority societies has taken that limits our freedom."⁸

Islamisation

When Muslims arrive in a country which is predominantly non-Muslim, they naturally continue to show a strong adherence to the cultural identity of their country of origin. If the country is perceived as hostile, there is a tendency for the traditional values to increase in importance and to be seen as an intrinsic aspect of that identity. Immigrants tend to be more religious in their new countries than they were at home.⁹

Muslim communities are, however, faced with a rise in fundamentalism (of which the Taliban is the best-known image in the media), which impose severe restrictions on women's education and freedom. The spread of these ideas and the accompanying radicalisation of segments of the Muslim community is a great cause for concern in the Muslim community, which had hitherto enjoyed a reputation for tolerance. Western societies are experiencing an Islamic fundamentalist counter culture, where a minority of Muslims are attracted to the simplistic world view offered by radical groups.

⁵ Nussbaum, Martha, Interviewed on 5 April 2007 (in *Reset - Dialogues on civilisations*, www.resetdoc.org)

⁶ Recommendation 233 (2008) of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on "Integration through sport"

⁷ Muslim Women's Sports Foundation: *Muslim Women in Sport*, 2010

⁸ 2009 Wilson Centre Conference on Reformist Women Thinkers in the Islamic World, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.item&news_id=540844

⁹ Williams, Raymond B., (1988) *Religions of immigrants from India and Pakistan*

Sara Silvestri has examined in depth how Muslim women see themselves, their attachment to Islam, how they cope with prejudices against Islam.¹⁰ She found that European Muslim women overwhelmingly support the liberal human rights values of their host countries and consider themselves very much as Europeans.

The headscarf debate

While few European Muslims would support forced marriages and honour killings, there is a considerable divergence of views between Muslims and non-Muslims when it comes to the headscarf. Europeans tend to see the wearing of headscarves as a symbol of oppression and inequality. For many Muslim women, on the other hand the hijab is an important "identifier in a non-Muslim space ... it not only signals others her identity as a Muslim, it also gives clues as to how to engage her, what is permissible and what is not".¹¹ This stark difference in perceptions is a striking example of the communication gap between Muslim women and their host communities.

The rise of Islamophobia

In addition to experiencing a stark lack of equality within their own communities, Muslim women also suffer from external pressures. Levels of discrimination and victimisation of Muslims in Europe are disturbingly high, with most incidents going unreported.¹² There has been a sharp rise in hate crime and violence against Muslims since 2001. Muslims are increasingly the victims of Islamophobia, which has replaced anti-semitism as the main preoccupation of racist groups.¹³

The media contribute to the problem with stereotyped reporting. When Muslim women are in the headlines, it is as victims, whether of racist threats, forced marriages, honour killings or controversies about their attire. They suffer from a stereotyped image of a submissive, subjugated, passive gender, at the mercy of their men folk. The reality is more complex and nuanced, but it remains true that Muslim women are on a major fault line when it comes to European culture and society. Are European societies ready, able and willing to accept them or does the marginalisation of this group point to the failure of the European model?

Islam is at the forefront of political debate about the integration of immigrants in Europe. It is often the focus of feelings of alienation, prejudice and misunderstanding. Whether the prevailing culture is Christian or secular, the strong religious affiliation of many Muslims is often misunderstood and resented by the majority, seen as provocative, threatening and intolerant.

A common feature of the current debate is the tendency to portray Islam and Muslims as a huge monolithic and dangerous phenomenon, evoking the spirit of the medieval crusades. The "typical Muslim woman" does not exist. The Turkish communities in Berlin are very different from the Pakistani communities in Bradford or the Moroccan communities in Lille. Many people from these communities do not identify themselves primarily as Muslim. However, one thing they do have in common is that they are all the object of Islamophobia.

On 1 July 2009, Marwa Sherbini, an Egyptian pharmacist, was killed during a court hearing in Dresden, Germany, by a man against whom she had testified after being insulted for wearing an Islamic headscarf. Rather than being an isolated incident, her murder is the latest in a growing trend of violence. In its 2008 annual report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) found that "the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media continued to be one of the main obstacles to their integration in member States. Islamophobia continued to manifest itself through prejudice and stereotypes against Muslims, which in turn lead to acts of discrimination and intolerance against them in everyday life." ECRI points to a new cultural divide: "One of the new faces of racism today is "cultural" racism. According to this notion of racism, cultures are pre-defined entities, largely seen as homogenous, unchangeable and, more importantly, incompatible with each other." ¹⁴

¹⁰ Sara Silvestri (2008) Europe's Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges

¹¹ Saba Ozyurt (2009) Living Islam in non-Muslim spaces

¹² European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey 2009, Data in Focus report: Muslims.

¹³ Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Viewpoint, 22/01/2007 "Muslims are discriminated against in Europe".

¹⁴ Annual report on ECRI's activities covering the period 1 January to 31 December 2008, Council of Europe, 2009

Those who cultivate such attitudes present Islam as a threat to European values, a medieval force that is unable to adapt.¹⁵ They warn of the inevitable development of what Heinz Buschkowsky, Mayor of Berlin Neukölln, has dubbed a "parallel society."¹⁶

3. Towards integration

What form of integration?

What is meant by cultural integration and why is it important? Sociologists use a cluster of factors to measure cultural integration - language, culture, social interaction, migration history and ethnic self-identification.¹⁷ While a strong attachment to one's country of origin does not preclude developing strong attachments to one's host country, a negative score in terms of cultural integration is often mirrored by poverty, problems entering the labour market and other forms of social exclusion.

Cultural integration is not the same as assimilation, it does not involve adopting the host culture uncritically while suppressing one's own, but it does mean acquiring the skills to live in a secular and pluralist society and to interact with people of other cultures. Western societies are moving towards a pluralistic model, where people hold multiple identities which are constantly interacting and cross-fertilizing.¹⁸ While there is often a strongly rooted dominant cultural tradition, it has long been accepted that citizens can fully participate in society while strongly identifying with a culture other than the dominant tradition.

On the other hand, poor cultural integration can lead to the development of parallel communities, which can undermine social cohesion. A lack of identification with the host community is often accompanied by low political and civic participation and a sense of alienation.

Muslim immigrant women need space to explore their new identities, space to share their identities with the majority community, to present themselves as they wish to be seen. They need and desire to be accepted and respected, rather than have their differences presented as an issue, something to be overcome. They need support in setting up their own self-help groups, to look at problems in the cities, drugs, alienation, drop-out, violence and discrimination.

The needs are not the same for first and second generations. Second generation immigrants, if they have been educated in a socially mixed environment, often express a strong attachment to their European identity and the importance of fitting in. On the other hand they may encounter problems negotiating their relationships with their families. Second-generation immigrants often need to understand where they come from. It is therefore important for them to be able to explore their origins, to be able to better integrate the complex and sometimes conflicting elements in their identities.

Because of their cultural background, many Muslim women are more at ease discussing and exploring issues with other women. This is partly because in Muslim societies the public sphere is predominantly occupied by men. It is a common phenomenon that, when men are present, the women will tend not to speak, and allow them to speak on their behalf, partly to ensure that the men do not lose face.

Violence, domestic or otherwise, is a serious problem in marginalised Muslim communities (cf. the gang rapes highlighted by the association "Ni Putes ni Soumises"), sometimes being attributed to the feelings of frustration and hopelessness of Muslim males. Muslim women need to be encouraged to share their experiences of such problems. In the first instance they will usually find it easier to talk to other Muslim women.

Empowerment

For immigrant communities facing multiple disadvantages, cultural empowerment is also needed. Muslim women need to forge their own identities within the European context. These will be multiple identities – some religious, some secular.

¹⁵ See Caldwell, Christopher (2009) "Reflections on the revolution in Europe: immigration, Islam and the West".

¹⁶ Pötzi, Norbert "Life in a parallel society", Spiegel Online, 16 April 2008.

¹⁷ Constant, A.L. et al. (2006), p.3

¹⁸ See the Council of Europe White Paper on intercultural dialogue (2008) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Recommendation 261 (2009) on Intercultural Cities.

A study of Muslim women in Europe has highlighted the importance of the religious factor in their sense of identity, coupled with the tensions generated by pressure from traditional religious authorities within their communities.¹⁹

The association "Ni Putes Ni Soumises" was set up by French Muslim women intent on seeking their own solutions to their problems and making their situation better known.

4. How local authorities can help

Muslim women in European cities need to find their own way. Local authorities can help, can provide a facilitating environment, provide premises and create spaces for women to explore themselves the many issues facing them. They need to be responsive to specific needs of such groups when these are articulated. They can provide advice and support to encourage immigrant women to fight for their rights and to resist pressures from within their own communities.

There is a key role for education here. Second generation migrants, growing up and receiving their education in the host community, can act as an important bridge to the first generation. Authorities should be responsive to the special demands of such groups, such as special facilities and arrangements in swimming pools and other sports facilities.

Local authorities can help women in finding forms of self expression, in fusing and developing their own brands and specialities in areas such as dress, cultural associations, dance and theatre, music and food. Muslim women need space to explore and learn about their own cultures. They are often ignorant of their own past and traditions. They need space for discussion and debating groups, help in setting up their associations which are not controlled by radical elements.

The exploration of the cultures and civilisations of the countries of origin will also enable the host communities to be at ease and familiar with immigrant cultural traditions.

Language classes are an important aspect of such dialogue and integration. Classes in the languages of the countries of origin can help second-generation migrants to explore their identities, while giving opportunities to people from the host communities to engage more with their neighbours.

Because of the specific problems facing Muslim women in European cities, special measures are justified, such as programmes aimed at increasing participation and setting up associations and programmes aimed at empowering women to forge their own identities and programmes aimed at combating Islamophobia.

It is important to engage with Muslim women and girls from an early age by, for example, intervening in schools to make them aware of the issues and conflicting pressures that they face from family, friends and their communities and the prejudices that they are likely to encounter. They need information to help them make informed choices and not be forced into marriages or gender roles against their own wishes. They need to be able to affirm and explore their own complex and multiple identities, to be proud of what they are and be able to communicate it to others, to learn to integrate their own heritage, rather than see it as a threat, to learn to operate within it and to change it from the inside.

It is vital that Muslim women be encouraged to participate in local public life. As the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly has pointed out, "The participation of immigrant women in public life is an important stage in the integration process."²⁰

For local authorities seeking to facilitate the integration of Muslim women, the "Twelve principles of intercultural and interreligious dialogue for local authorities" drawn up by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities as a result of its Conference in Montchanin, France in 2006 provide some practical advice drawn from experience in the field.²¹

¹⁹ Sara Silvestri: op cit.

²⁰ Integration of immigrant women in Europe, Doc.10758, 2005

²¹ Gods in the City, Council of Europe Publishing, 2007.

Good practice

There are encouraging signs in a number of European countries that Muslim women are beginning to stand up and campaign for local issues that concern them.

In Norway, for example, Hatice Elmacioglu and Aisha Ahmed work for including and socializing minority women. Ahmed heads a Pakistani women's organization in Drammen and Elmacioglu is a female representative in the Turkish national association and regularly arranges women's parties in Drammen.

Women may, for example, be drawn into local politics after being active in school boards, where they drew on their own informal networks to contribute more to extra-curricular school activities. Immigrant women from large ethnic communities sometimes have an advantage in this respect since informal networking and extended support groups are more prevalent in their culture than in many Western societies.

A lot of the drive for positive change is coming from the Muslim communities themselves. City authorities are increasingly coming to accept that Muslim communities need their own purpose-built mosques. These new centres can become catalysts for change in their communities. In Duisburg, Germany, the new mosque is actively encouraging women to play a greater role in community life and to "come out of anonymity".²²

Local authorities have a key role in facilitating such progress and ensuring that the lessons learnt from such good practices are applied elsewhere.

Role of the media

It is important for all groups in society to have a positive and affirmative self-image. The media have enormous power in this respect.

Muslim women have to cope with a prevalently negative media image, being constantly exposed to stereotypes, reactionary scaremongering and associations with fanaticism and terrorism. Islam is often presented as a problem, a source of conflict and an obstacle to Western values.

The media have a responsibility to give voice to Muslim women's groups, enabling them to express their pride in being Muslim, to affirm their identities and cultural traditions and to explore Islamic civilisation, heritage and values. It also has a role in raising awareness of the problem of Islamophobia.

Local authorities can also help Muslim women develop their own forms of media. Community radio stations, such as Radio Faza in Nottingham²³ can provide a vital impetus to developing support networks that serve to empower Muslim women.

Employment

A key to the empowerment that will enable successful cultural integration is the economic independence that can be achieved through employment. In addition to its economic advantages, stable employment has many benefits with regard to integration and tolerance, since it brings people of different backgrounds into close contact. A British survey, which found that Muslim women were four times as likely to be unemployed than their Jewish and Christian counterparts, also reported that, contrary to a popular myth, 93% of Muslim women wanted to work and were supported in this by their families.²⁴

Local authorities can support this high motivation to enter the labour market by making use of educational services and cultural events to promote awareness of employment opportunities and public employment services.

²² The Economist "When town hall turns to Mecca", 4 December 2008.

²³ <http://www.radiofaza.org.uk/main/>

²⁴ Young Foundation: Valuing family, valuing work, 2008

5. Conclusion

There is a huge potential for local authorities to devise measures and policies to help new immigrants to adapt and find their place in their host societies

They can use their experience in nurturing and supporting local groups of Muslim women to find their feet and put their gifts, energy and experience to the benefit of the wider community. With the right help, such groups can become catalysts for positive change.

The Congress, in the draft resolution, invites local and regional authorities to take specific measures to facilitate the cultural integration of immigrant Muslim women into their communities, to combat media stereotyping of Muslim women and to assist them to enter the labour market.