



Forgotten women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women in Italy

Key findings

The lack of systematic and complete equality treatment data disaggregated along ethnic/religious lines and the use of different proxies, definitions and categories were an obstacle during the research. The absence of complete archives on religious belonging of the population living in Italy makes it difficult to have precise and certain data on the number of Muslim women in Italy. The available data on religion are an approximate estimation generally based on a very limited sample or on proxy indicators such as religious practices or nationality – assuming that the religious background of the individual corresponds with the prevalent religion in the country of their nationality. The most reliable up to date statistics are Istat (National Institute of Statistics) data elaborated and compiled by IDOS for the national equality body UNAR (National Office of Racial Anti-discrimination), based on countries of origin. These estimates show that about 1.7 million non-Italian Muslim citizens live in Italy. They account for 2.8% of the total Italian population and 33.1% of the total number of foreigners. This estimation has some limits, as it does not include Muslims with Italian citizenship (data not available), but most of the Muslims living in Italy are still first-generation immigrants and second-generation without citizenship. Moreover, cases of discrimination and hate crime remain highly under-reported.

Countries	Share of the Muslim population	Share of women
Morocco	31%	44,10%
Albania	29,50%	47,80%
Egypt	8%	29,50%
Bangladesh	7,50%	28,40%
Tunisia	7,05%	36,50%
Pakistan	6,20%	32,30%
Senegal	5,70%	26,50%

As these numbers show, immigration from Muslims countries is predominantly male.

Situation and discrimination in employment: additional obstacles when a women and a Muslim

Women

With a proportionate male/female achievement in school, and a higher percentage of female graduates (60%), the **country's female employment rate** (46.5%) is not only 12 points below the EU28 average (58.7%) and 20 points below men's (64.8%), but it is also one of the lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The employment rate decreases from 77.8% for single women, to 68.8% for those with a partner without children, and to 54.3% for mothers.

Women are more likely to have part-time contracts (12.2%) than men (5.7%). This percentage surges among mothers, reaching 33.2%, compared with 22% of women with a partner and without children, and 17.1% of single women. Only half of mothers working part-time, however, voluntarily opted for this contract as a way to balance the time between family and work.

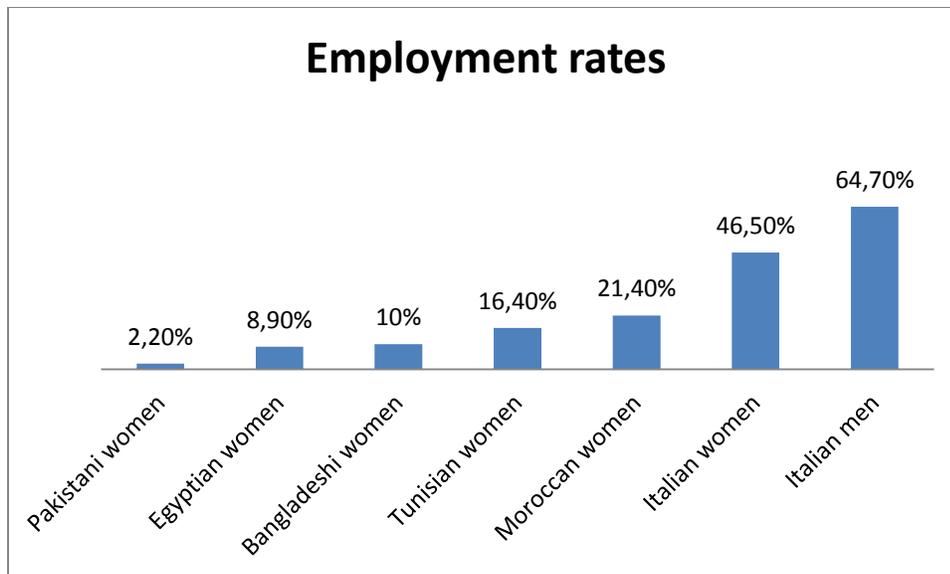
Women's pensions are smaller than men's because they generally receive a lower salary during their working life, and have to interrupt their job due to maternity leaves.

Therefore, women are more likely than men to have an income under the poverty threshold (19.8% of women, and 17% of men). In 2011-12, 140,000 families in the whole country lived in absolute poverty. Half of these families were of single or divorced mothers with dependent children.

Muslim women

Many factors can explain the disadvantages and the difference of treatment that immigrant women workers can face: **imperfect command of Italian language, lack of networks, poor knowledge of institutions, the low-skilled labour demand of the Italian economy, gender inequality in employment, lack of recognition of foreign qualifications**. These disadvantages are reflected in low salaries, few career development opportunities, jobs in the informal labour market, and little correspondence between employment and competences.

The low employment rate of foreign-born women, especially coming from countries with a Muslim majority, can be partially explained by the need to care for their children fulltime due to unavailable or unaffordable childcare. Immigrant women from Muslim-majority countries register the lowest percentage of employment and the highest unemployment and inactivity rates (i.e. those who do not work, nor are looking for a job).



The proportion of Muslim women who migrated to Italy when they were adults is still predominant. The main reason for immigrating was not job opportunities but family reunification.

One of the main signs of labour market inequalities between Italians and foreign-born workers is **a very low correspondence between employment and competences**. Only 24.1% of Moroccan women workers, for example, think their job reflects their level of education and skills. A survey from the LEADER project (Labour and Employment without Ethnic and Religious Discrimination) highlights that women from Africa, who have lived in Italy for less than five years, and are undocumented or with a residence permit of less than a year, perceive the highest gap between skills/competencies and duties at work, in entry level jobs.

While Italians mainly perceive religion as the main factor of discrimination, immigrants believe that discrimination is based on foreign origin. **However, women of immigrant origin believe their religious identity and wearing the headscarf were the main cause of discrimination.** In Italy there are no laws restricting the wearing of veils or any forms of religious clothes in the workplace. However, finding a job that involves contact with customers is particularly difficult for women wearing a headscarf as employers sometimes argue potential economic losses. Nonetheless, rejections have been received for positions such as cleaners, factory workers, chefs and dish-washers, positions without contact with customers. Many employers also deny having any hostility towards Islam or the headscarf and shift the blame on the customers for not being open-minded. For women not wearing a headscarf, discrimination on the ground of religion is usually not apparent, but other grounds, such as ethnicity, might remain.

Some Muslim women end up meeting the request of employers by taking off their headscarf in the workplace. Many interviewees admitted that discouragement about the acceptance of the headscarf sometimes led to self-exclusion from applying for jobs.

According to research, discrimination against Muslim women is difficult to prove and easily escapes official surveys because of the multiple possible causes of discrimination, making the measurement of this type of discrimination particularly difficult.

Violence against women, hate crime and hate speech: Muslim women at the intersection of violence

The law on the collection and use of sensitive data hinders the monitoring of hate crimes as the police do not collect data on the religion and ethnicity of the victims. The type of bias, if recognised and notified by the Criminal Investigation Division, is included in the report but not as disaggregated data. Understanding the dimension of anti-Muslim crime in Italy is not possible, and media monitoring results and interviews only partially manage to make up for the absence of data.

Data collected by the national police and the Minister of Interior are generally not revealed to the public, disaggregated. Although the law contains provisions on aggravating circumstances, police authorities, the public prosecutor and judges do not always take into consideration racial bias. The bias motivation is not classified as an indicator in police databases. A high level of under-reporting also hinders the limited existing efforts to tackle hate crimes. The fact that the Observatory for Security Against Acts of Discrimination operated by the National Police, has never received any claims regarding Muslim women in its four years of activity, is in itself a significant indicator of the extent of under-reporting.

In 2013, Italian police reported 472 hate crime incidents. Almost half of them (226) were anti-religious crimes, including 13 physical assaults, 90 property damage crimes, four cases of vandalism, 39 of threats and 80 other crimes, including three committed online and 77 unspecified. Lunaria, an NGO based in Rome, reported cases of a physical assault against two women involving an attempt to pull off their headscarf, one case of graffiti near a mosque, one case of damage to a mosque by throwing stones, and physical assaults against two Bangladeshi men by a group.

A report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that the North African community in Italy is among the groups with the highest prevalence rate of assault or threat, as well as serious harassment, in Europe.

In 2014, the Italian equality body UNAR recorded a total of 21 cases of ethnic based discrimination with harassment reported by self-identified Muslims, more precisely 5 women and 16 men. In its 2014 study on racism in Italy, Lunaria association also revealed a significant rise in the number of news stories on hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims - from nine cases recorded in 2011 to 78 in 2014.

The headscarf plays a central role in triggering intolerant behaviours that are based on an anti-Muslim bias. The assumption that a woman wearing the headscarf is not Italian thus charged the attacks with prejudices against immigrants.

A report by the National Institute of Statistics on immigrant perceptions of discrimination on grounds of nationality, ethnicity and religion reveals that men are more often verbally abused than women. Moroccans experience the highest level of offences and threats.

Main recommendations

To Italian institutions

- Recognise Islamophobia as a specific form of discrimination to be meaningfully addressed politically.

- Commission nationwide research and analysis on the Muslim population in Italy.
- While safeguarding and ensuring privacy, allow the collection, under informed consent and self-identification, of personal data such as ethnicity and religion, recognising the multiple dimensions of discrimination and hate crimes; and address the issue accordingly.
- Mainstream gender in religious-related policies and issues and vice versa.

To Muslim organisations

- Systematically monitor Islamophobic incidents and discrimination in employment.
- Raise awareness within the Muslim community on rights, anti-discrimination laws and tools to report discrimination and hate crimes.
- Work with authorities, trade unions and private sector employers to raise awareness of the issue of discrimination in employment and meet the employment needs of Muslim women.

To anti-racism and feminist organisations

- Ensure that religion-based discrimination is fully dealt with as a form of discrimination, and look at discrimination against Muslim women as a gender issue as well.

Good practices

“The Muslim woman: beyond prejudices” , an awareness raising initiative by the association *Le Radici dell'olivo* (The roots of the olive tree), organised a 2-day event in Varese where young Muslim women set up a stall where passers-by could stop and find out about Islam and the role of women. Similar initiatives have been implemented by GMI (Young Muslims of Italy) and ADMI (Association of Muslim women of Italy).

LIFE Onlus in Ravenna stands out for its feminist engagement in promoting inclusive attitudes and defending women's rights. LIFE Onlus actively participates in discussions around Islamic feminism, gender roles and rights, in addition to promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue, diversity education and actions against racism and discrimination.

Takoua Ben Mohamed, a young woman of Tunisian origin, draws cartoons to promote inclusive attitudes and expose Islamophobia. She debunks stereotypes on Muslim women drawing episodes of her everyday life and showing the absurdity of some prejudices or people's behaviour towards women who wear the headscarf.

Court cases and relevant legislation

It seems that only one case law in the employment field has been brought to court to date. In 2013, Sara Mahmoud was contacted by an agency to work as an advertising promoter distributing leaflets to potential customers. Considering that Sara's profile, including photos of her, was in the database of the agency who contacted her, they were already aware of the fact that she wears the hijab. When contacting her, one of the agents wrote to her “I would like to hire you because you're very pretty, but are you keen on taking the chador off?” After Sara's explanation of the religious reasons for wearing the hijab and proposing a compromise to match it with a possible uniform, the agency dismissed her saying that customers would not be very flexible. Having the written proof of a rejection, Sara pressed charges against the agency. The judge's sentence did not recognise that the employer discriminated against Sara, as one of the requirements was “fine and voluminous hair” and therefore the rejection was justified as a “business-oriented preference”. Unsatisfied by a superficial sentence that did not take into account multiple discrimination or give any particular interpretation of the anti-discrimination legislation, Sara's

lawyers appealed and the case was sent back for another trial, which has been set for May 2016.

In 2009, the MPs Souad Sbai and Manlio Contento (The People of Freedom party) submitted a bill that would update law 152/1975 (provision for the protection of public order that prohibits the use of helmets or clothes preventing the identification in a public space), introducing an explicit ban on wearing a *burqa* or *niqab*. Two years later, in August 2011, the Constitutional Affairs Committee approved the draft law that would have imposed a fine on anyone wearing the *burqa* or *niqab* in public spaces. The law, however, was never approved by the two chambers.

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This factsheet is based on the findings of research undertaken by Giulia Dessi in Italy in the frame of ENAR's project "Forgotten women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women". The research was conducted between December 2014 and January 2016.

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