



European Network Against Racism
Réseau européen contre le racisme

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

Key findings

There are no statistical data on the number of Muslim women in Sweden as there is no comprehensive equality data collection disaggregated by ethnicity or religion. During the second half of the 1900s categories of religion, language, race and ethnicity, gradually disappeared from the Swedish population census. The lack of data disaggregated along ethnic/religious lines and the use of different proxies, definitions and categories were an obstacle during the research. The exact amount of persons who identify themselves as Muslims cannot be determined and available figures are based on estimations. The majority of reports and statistical compilations on the size of Muslim population in Sweden are based on identifying various minority groups' background or country of origin. Moreover, cases of discrimination and hate crime remain highly under-reported.

According to a 2010 PEW survey, there were 451 000 people in Sweden with a background from so called 'Muslim' countries. According to the Board of state support for religious communities (Nämnden för Statligt Stöd till Trossamfund, SST) in 2014, 110 000 people were served by Islamic congregations but this only includes people who have agreed to share their personal data.

A significant proportion of residents with a migration background from Africa and Asia come from countries and regions in Asia and Africa where the majority of the population is Muslim (main countries of origin are Iraq, Iran, Syria, Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Afghanistan and Lebanon).

	Native-born		Foreign-born	
Total population	Men	Women	Men	Women
9 838 480	3 833 668	3 821 481	1 038 572	1 053 634

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

Women

In 2015, the general gender pay gap was 13.2%. Approximately **1/3** of the total number of managers in the labour market are women.

The Equality Ombudsman received **250** discrimination complaints on the ground of gender during 2014. Most of the complaints concerned discrimination relating to the labour market. The complaints received by the Equality Ombudsman relating to gender discrimination and employment was mostly regarding pregnancy, disadvantages in relation to parental leave or sexual harassment. The discrimination grounds

are often interconnected and include ethnicity, gender, and are sometimes combined with discrimination on the basis of age.

Ethnicity/migration background

According to a report by the Institute for Evaluation of Labour market and Education Policy, foreign-born residents and citizens have lower salaries than those with Swedish-born parents, even though both groups completed higher education in Sweden. The pay gap varies widely depending on the country of origin. Although foreign-born residents came here as children, several groups of men in this category have 5-10 percentage points lower wages than their native counterparts. This applies in particular to those from Asia, Africa or Latin America.

The 2010 Swedish survey on living conditions shows that the wages of women from Africa and Asia are about 5% below the average wage compared to their counterparts born in the EU15, North America, Oceania and Latin America. Furthermore, women with a foreign background with a higher education do not have higher salaries. Women have a consistently lower return on their education than men with the same background.

Muslim women

The 2006 quantitative study "*Evidence of Ethnic Discrimination in the Swedish Labour Market using Experimental Data*" finds that job seekers with Arabic-sounding names have a 50% lower chance of being called to an interview than other applicants.

In a questionnaire sent to a panel consisting of 1 300 small and medium-sized enterprises, one of the questions asked was "How do you relate to employees wearing clothes with visual religious attributes (such as a headscarf or a turban)?"

- 40% of the respondents thought it was unthinkable that an employee would wear clothes with visual religious attributes
- 32% responded that they prefer not to enable employees to wear clothes with visual religious attributes
- 28% chose not to respond to the question.

A reporter at the newspaper *Aftonbladet* conducted an investigation in 2014 by calling assistance officers in 20 randomly selected municipalities asking whether there was a possibility of not being cared for by staff wearing the headscarf. *Aftonbladet* revealed that in 16 out of 20 municipalities, customers could be 'spared' staff who wear the headscarf.

26 out of 45 of the women interviewed for this report have experienced negative treatment from colleagues. The negative treatments are connected to comments with regard to their headscarf. The encounters are described as micro-aggressions that have become normalised, especially around the lunch table in the workplace. The women describe the encounters as an invasion of their privacy, and report that these encounters have often led to feelings of anxiety.

Muslim women interviewed in decision-making/investigative positions report experiences of customers and clients who demand that they be replaced. The women explain that the customers/clients see them (Muslim women) as less competent than their apparently non-Muslim colleagues. Other recount specific difficulties in accessing employment and strategies to avoid discrimination, such as hiding one part of their identity.

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

Violence against women

The 2014 study *Violence and Health - A population study of women's and men's exposure to violence and the link to health* shows that 14% of women and 5% of men have been subjected to physical violence or threats of physical violence in a current or past relationship, after the age of 18. Additionally, 20% of women and 8% of men reported that they were subjected to repeated and systematic psychological violence by a current or former partner. The study also shows that about 7% of the women and 1% of the men had been subjected to sexual violence by a current or former partner at some point after the age of 18.

Religious hate crimes

In the spring of 2014, the National Board for State Aid to Religious Communities (SST) was commissioned by the Ministry of Employment to map xenophobic acts against religious communities. As a result of the violence and threats directed against religious communities, individuals and groups are said to be hindered in their constitutional right to religious practice. Representatives of Muslim organisations report that islamophobic acts and threats are very common, particularly against women wearing the veil.

The National Crime Prevention Council (BRÅ) stresses that it is difficult to determine the exact amount of women who have been victims of anti-religious hate crimes as the statistics on hate crimes presented by BRÅ are not disaggregated by gender. Nonetheless they refer to the National Safety Survey (Nationella Trygghetsundersökningen – NTU): between the years 2011-2013, 62% of the population who have experienced hate crimes on religious bias were female and 38% were male.

In 2014, figures from the National Crime Prevention Council recorded 281 crimes motivated by anti-Muslim bias, consisting of 60 assaults, 24 cases of vandalism/damage to property and 197 cases of threats. Assault and harassment are therefore the most common types of islamophobic crime, and 18% of the cases occur in a public place.

Muslim women

Researcher Englund's survey of 90 Muslim women (2006) shows that negative and differential treatment occurs on the street and in public places. Insults and verbal abuse were the most common manifestations.

The racist violence Muslim women experience has been addressed in interview studies with both religious organisations and Muslim women. Muslim women report that they believe they are treated less favourably in public places and on the street because they wear the headscarf. The women are perceived as bearers of geopolitical events and as symbols of the negative stereotypes about Muslims as a group. Abuse ranges from insults and unpleasant comments to spitting, trying to pull off the veil, and shoves.

The level of normalisation and vulnerability to attacks is striking in the case of Muslim women. As a result, Muslim women make constant risk assessments in order to avoid harassment. This is partly done by adapting their movements in general and avoiding moving around in specific areas of certain cities. The vulnerability is connected to women wearing the veil, who are easily identifiable as Muslims and therefore become clear targets of racist slurs, violence and discrimination.

What is also confirmed through the stories is that the violence started with the women's choice to wear the veil. Women who are Swedish converts attest to the clear differences in treatment in public places, despite their 'Swedish' background.

A survey on hate crime experiences among young Muslims conducted in 2008, based on 250 people who responded to the survey, shows that over 90% of the respondents had been victims of hate crimes due to their faith, and about 70% of the victims were young women wearing the headscarf or the veil.

10 out of the 45 women interviewed for the report decided to report incidents of verbal and physical assault. For some, incidents of verbal abuse are so many that reporting every incident is too time-consuming. Others have decided not to report because they would rather forget that the incidents occurred. While some say they understand the importance of reporting incidents of abuse, they explain that they just do not get around to actually reporting them to the police, because of lack of time or normalisation of these occurrences.

Court case

A woman sent in an inquiry that she was looking for work at a hotel. At a meeting with the recruiting manager, it was made clear to the woman that she would not be able to get work as a cleaner if she wore the headscarf. The reason given was that the hotel's dress code did not permit 'headgear' for employees who would come in contact with the hotel's guests. The Equality Ombudsman received a complaint from the woman on 8 August 2012. The Equality Ombudsman sued the hotel for indirect discrimination associated with the job applicant's ethnic affiliation to the Labour Court. The Equality Ombudsman requested that the hotel pay SEK 50 000 in compensation for discrimination to the woman.

Media

When the Swedish public service television aired the programme Halal-TV in which three Muslim women, all wearing the headscarf, were hosts, it sparked a national debate, even before the first episode was broadcast. The program aimed to highlight the relationship between the "Swedish identity, cultural values and an increasingly multicultural population". It became evident that three women – who happened to wear the headscarf – could not make a programme on current affairs in Sweden without having to account for other Muslim States' or governments' treatment of women. Many contributions to the debate portrayed Muslim values as opposed to Swedish values on inclusion and democracy.

Discrimination case

In 2002 a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf was asked to host the programme Mosaik on Public Service television (SVT). She accepted this offer. It turned out, however, that the offer was not anchored with management, who said she could become the presenter if she took off her headscarf. The woman declined the offer and was instead offered a position as a reporter at Mosaik. SVT's management argued that the headscarf was in direct conflict with the public service assignment and suggested a lack of impartiality as the public service mandate requires employees to be neutral in terms of both politics and religion. Although the woman did not report the case to the Equality Ombudsman, the Ombudsman was asked to comment. The Ombudsman declared that if the woman was refused the position because she wears a headscarf as an expression of her religion, this could be considered as a violation of the law.

Court case

Halima was attacked by an older man sitting next to her on the bus on her way home. The man asked her to switch her phone off. Then he started raising his voice and said: *"They do not have bags and mobile phones in their countries but here they flash around with it."* Halima first ignored the man when he knocked the phone out of her hand. Halima then stood up and shouted that he was not allowed to touch her. The man pretended that nothing happened. He then gave blows on her stomach, kidneys and ribs. Someone on the bus forced the man off the bus. The man was reported for hate crime, mistreatment, harassment and abuse. In the verdict it was stated that she had been assaulted precisely because of her background. In this case, the man was convicted of assault and the sentence was probation and a fine.

Good practices

Johanna Lihagen, with a background as a prison imam, decided there was a need to share the stories of Muslim women. She created the Instagram account "#Muslimskvinna" (Muslim woman) which today has around 12,500 followers. The aim is to show Muslim women's experiences of discrimination, racist violence as well as general stories relating to what it is like to be a Muslim woman in Sweden.

The Swedish newspaper Expressen ran the series "Hate against the headscarf", during spring 2015, featuring five Muslim women. The women in the series, all wearing the headscarf, share stories of being called "easter crone", "oppressed", "Muslim pussy". They give examples of how they are marked as different: people, completely unknown to them, tell them to "return to where they come from". The women share experiences of being spat in the face and having the headscarf forcefully removed as well as incidents of physical abuse.

During the summer of 2013 a highly publicised hate crime against a heavily pregnant woman sparked a national discussion on increasing hatred and violence against Muslim women. This event gave rise to the acclaimed Hijab Petition (*Hijabuppropet*). The Hijab Petition, started by five Muslim women, was a call for solidarity with Muslim women in general and the assaulted woman in particular. Prominent Swedish politicians, activists and citizens wore the hijab for a day, in support of the right to safety for Muslim women who wear the veil.

Main recommendations

- Identify the extent of the consequences of discrimination in other social sectors such as education and health care. The government should pay attention to Muslim women's situation as victims of discrimination and hate crime by supporting additional research mapping the consequences of Islamophobia on the living conditions of Muslim women;
- Initiate a tailored regional human rights programme aimed at improving knowledge of anti-discrimination and hate crime law amongst Muslim women;
- Provide training on hate crime and anti-discrimination law for mosques and non-governmental organisations that are in contact with Muslim women, in order for them to be able to advise on as well as record and report instances of discrimination and hate crimes.
- Collect disaggregated data on all grounds of discrimination within trade unions in order to better understand the extent and types of discrimination that occur. This monitoring should go hand in hand trade unions taking all necessary steps to combat discrimination of its members.

This factsheet is based on the findings of research undertaken by Maimuna Abdullahi in Sweden 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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