

Forgotten Women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women 2015-2016 Snapshots from the eight national roundtables

ENAR's project "Forgotten Women: the Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women" aims to document the disproportionate effect of Islamophobia on Muslim women and develop alliances between the anti-racism and feminist movements in order to better address the intersectional discrimination affecting Muslim women. The research will make recommendations to European and national decision makers to ensure Muslim women are better protected by law and specific policies. National researchers produced a report in the eight countries covered: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. On this basis, roundtables and bilateral advocacy meetings on Islamophobia and gender equality were organised in these countries, with the following objectives:

- discuss the preliminary findings of the national research;
- reach out to national constituencies to enrich the research with additional dialogue and to further disseminate the results;
- discuss the intersections between gender, race, class and religion in these countries;
- foster dialogue and partnerships between different stakeholders on these issues;
- build ownership of the report for it to be used in future national advocacy activities.

Across the eight countries, a total of around 160 representatives of NGOs and other key stakeholders working on gender equality and Islamophobia at local and national levels participated in these unique meetings, including national member organisations of ENAR, the European Women's Lobby, the European Forum of Muslim Women, and the Federation of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations. In closed door, safe environments, Muslim women working to combat islamophobia and activists from women's rights organisations were able to exchange on common struggles and brainstorm on joint solutions.

In parallel to the national roundtables, we held 25 advocacy meetings in the eight countries covered, with equality bodies, national human rights institutes, ministries, researchers, members of parliament and NGOs. Some led to concrete proposals, such as hosting the launch of the report or drafting a resolution by MPs (NL, BE), including the gender perspective in policies (NL) or in future priorities (BE, NL, FR).

4 June 2015 – Rome, Italy

A complete and diverse perspective on perceptions and discrimination of Muslim women in Italy



The roundtable was hosted by the Casa Internazionale Della Donne in Rome. There are approximately 170,000 Muslims in Italy, and more than half are women and girls. The mixed group of participants (grassroots organisations working with migrants, politicians, academics) discussed the outlook of Muslim women communities in Italy. The second generations of migrants with a Muslim background are often considered as second-class citizens. In the Italian public discourse, the "other" is often portrayed as masculine, therefore Muslim women are invisible. They are often

discussed in terms of forced marriage or marriage of convenience. Positive achievements in education or work are not highlighted enough. To respond to inappropriate language used in the media, some participants suggested that the code of conduct on terminology issued by the Association of Journalists was an important step forward.

Participants discussed ways in which Muslim women could react to Islamophobia, which has not been the focus of Muslim women NGOs so far. Likewise, migrant/anti-racism organisations are working on equality in general but not specifically on discrimination against Muslims. Participants suggested to circulate a joint appeal on this issue and to write on multiple discrimination, which is not covered in Italian law or practice.

8 June 2015 – Paris, France

How to build an inclusive feminism and confront our own prejudices?



The creation of an inclusive feminism was at the heart of the discussions during the French roundtable. At the Palais des Femmes in Paris, activists, mainly women, focused on the challenges of working together beyond their own point of views and the obstacles previously encountered. The dialogue between mainstream feminist groups and Muslim women organisations has focused on legal and political measures on wearing religious symbols. The meeting provided a unique trusted space to exchange about mutual prejudice. Time was also dedicated to identifying areas for common work. Opportunities that could help in pursuing this constructive dialogue were shared: the *Fonds pour les Femmes en Méditerranée (FFMED)* organises local meetings between different women living in poor

neighbourhoods to identify their priorities and work towards solutions. *W(e)Talk* is an annual event showcasing the experiences of women from completely different backgrounds and who have overcome obstacles in their careers. *Rêv'elles*, an association for the empowerment of girls with modest backgrounds, organises regular workshops throughout the year (fora, theatre workshops, non-violent communication and conflict management as tools to overcome divisions). It was also proposed to create an inclusive convention of feminists, so as to make it an annual update on common struggles, with workshops on skills to foster cooperation and mutual support between all feminists, regardless of their background or specificities.

“How can I discuss sensitive issues when my partners in defending women’s rights are not aware of this situation?”

11 June 2015 – Berlin, Germany

Establishing the foundation for civil society work on the situation of Muslim women



At the German roundtable more than 20 women from academic, anti-discrimination and legal circles dealt with three main questions: if the legal framework is not enough, what could be the strategies to jointly combat racism and sexism? Is there a tendency of “religionisation” of the debates on Muslim women? How can we raise the issue of multiple discrimination? On the topic of Islamophobia, participants agreed that institutions and NGOs need to do more - the level of underreporting is an emblematic example of the lack of trust in the institutions themselves. It was suggested to integrate spaces for an anti-racism discussion on Islamophobia as well as working on the intersection between feminism and religious debates as Islam is considered anti-feminist. Strategic

litigation and workshops with lawyers would also be necessary to improve the legal framework and its implementation. In the academic field, particular attention should be given to Islamophobia, because even if there are many studies on discrimination and hate speech in general, very few are focused on Islamophobia and women. Working at the theoretical level could help develop new strategies in court cases. In schools, it was proposed to introduce mandatory classes on discrimination and diversity.

17 June 2015 – Copenhagen, Denmark

Towards recognition of Islamophobia

During this roundtable, the recognition of Islamophobia, hate crime reporting and perceptions of Muslim women were tackled. Islamophobia is rarely mentioned in Denmark, one of the reasons being that the word is not accepted and is considered as controversial. Denmark sees itself as a progressive country and dealing with Islamophobia is not seen as a necessity. At the same time, there are different perceptions between a white Muslim and someone with an Arab or Black background. Racial perceptions of Somali women for example are really negative. They are seen as primitive, poor and often represented as victims. Hate crime against Muslim women remains under-reported. There is a lack of trust of communities to report it, or a lack of knowledge of the legislation. Therefore, there is no comprehensive data collection on the issue. Denmark needs Muslim women leaders and role models. However, feminist organisations tend to see Muslim women as fragile (a terminology that is also used by Muslim women) in particular because of the headscarf: this image is often understood as contradictory to a certain idea of feminism. The mindset of 2nd/3rd generations of Muslim women can be more conservative than that of older women regarding the role of men and women.

“How can the plurality of Muslim women’s groups be presented in Europe in a positive manner?”

15 July 2015 – London, United Kingdom

The importance of role models and intersectionality



Participants from feminist and Muslim organisations at the roundtable in London initiated the debate focusing on common themes and grounds: gender equality, presence of misogyny in societies at many levels, female role models. The importance of diverse grassroots role models was particularly highlighted, to have a positive influence on young/future generations. The lack of mentoring and the need for networking between organisations were also stressed. British Muslims for Secular Democracy which organised the roundtable is a

good example. Set up by two women, the organisation tries to represent the generation gap and to challenge stereotypes. As a follow-up of the roundtable, the group agreed to listen to Professor Musq’s lecture (recorded at the Muslim Institute), to link with LGBT, black people and people with disabilities, in order to find common grounds to fight discrimination and also agreed to hold a special event for ENAR’s report launch.

30 November 2015 – Brussels, Belgium

Common struggles and collective mobilisation

Organised by the Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium, the Belgian roundtable saw the participation of a diverse group of around 25 women with legal and academic backgrounds, representatives of feminist and Muslim civil society organisations and trade unions. Despite their differences, the participants discovered through the different working sessions that they were more similar than they thought, through their habits, their role models, their wishes for future generations. From this positive starting point, a constructive discussion took place, even going beyond language barriers (French and Dutch). The participants agreed on the importance of mutual support, sharing information and capacities for the success of future collaborations, in a context where combating stereotypes on Muslims and especially on Muslim women is considered as a priority. In order to optimise resources, participants suggested focusing on existing and successful projects such as *Bruxelloise et voilée* to promote a positive image of women wearing headscarves, and the *IMAN project*, a European project that aims to support capacity building of local organisations in supporting victims and collecting data of islamophobic acts. The idea of creating an “advocacy group” was proposed to strategise common campaigns and use media on symbolic dates (5 March in the Brussels Parliament, week against racism, quinzaine de la femme, etc.).

Photo language game: Feminism is ...

Feminism is: holding one's hand out and trying to find common ground.

A snail: moving slowly but surely beyond gender stereotypes.

The pencil represents education to discover the world, and my personal experience in society. The pencil is also a symbol for personal struggles, educating others, the personal responsibility of being an educator.

Sport : to promote feminism, women must be fit and healthy. To be able to defend themselves, Muslim women must feel good about themselves.



14 December 2015 – Stockholm, Sweden Countering patronising discourses and practices



Out of 16 participants in the Mångkulturellt Centrum in Stockholm, the majority were Muslim women from civil society grassroots organisations but two men also attended and actively participated. Representatives from the Equality Ombudsman and representatives from the Black Feminist Forum (*Svart Feministiskt Forum*) as well as from the Feminist Party (*Feministiskt Initiativ*) were present. The discussion focused on four main topics: the prejudices that lead to patronising behaviours, racial power structures, the lack of meeting places and spaces and the media's tendency to pitch groups against each other. Culture in Sweden is often articulated from a Western worldview, which creates the reproduction of racist discourses when mixed groups collaborate. White privilege was

also mentioned as one of the major barriers to achieving effective equality. Events such as the annual "Muslim family days" could be more widespread and a national campaign could be organised about the headscarf as a means of empowerment, to debunk the myths around it. A seminar for the launch of ENAR's report was mentioned as a great opportunity and a first step for an awareness raising campaign.

16 December 2015 – Utrecht, the Netherlands Creating safe spaces to build long-term cooperation



In Utrecht, the Dutch roundtable was joined by representatives from mainstream women's organisations and many young Muslim women from organisations from across the country. Surprisingly, even when working on the same subject, they had never had in-depth discussions with each other. During one of the workshops, discussions focused on the challenges of working together: the competition between different organisations that work on the same topic, but are focused only on their goals; the

negative impact of short term thinking; limited resources, or funding as a goal in itself. Workshops like this were considered helpful to develop networks and stimulate creative thinking, necessary to differentiate the initiatives. Participants decided to continue this fruitful dialogue, exchanging contact emails and taking advantage of ENAR report's launch and the upcoming granting scheme to cooperate, to produce a video or use organisations' websites to advertise national initiatives.

"Islamophobia is a set of attitudes, implicit behaviours, ideas, feelings that support discrimination practices that should be forbidden by law"