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Multiple discrimination against Muslim women in Europe: for equal opportunities

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

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Summary

In Council of Europe member States where Islam is not the religion of the majority of the population, Muslim women face multiple discrimination as women, as part of a religious minority and sometimes for being of immigrant origin. They are often victims of stereotyping, since their religious beliefs are seen as the only defining element of their identity.

It is time to take a new approach since many Muslim women want to be actors of change and empowerment. Rather than being isolated, stigmatised or forced into a stereotype, Muslim women should be encouraged in their quest for equal opportunities in society. Positive measures should be introduced to make it possible for Muslim women to be protagonists of their own empowerment. Investing in education, encouraging networking and the participation in civil and public life, as well as accompanying them in their professional development are key actions in order to raise Muslim's women awareness of their rights and help them realise their full potential.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 12327](#), Reference 3706 of 4 October 2010, modified on 8 October 2010 and 7 October 2011.

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A. Draft resolution²

1. In the Council of Europe member States where Islam is not the religion of the majority of the population, Muslim women are often victims of stereotyping, since their religious beliefs are seen as the only defining element of their identity. The media contribute to this phenomenon by reporting on Muslim women mainly as victims of so-called “honour crimes” and in relation to their clothing. All too often, political debate and legislative action concerning Muslim women is concentrated on the issues of the headscarf, and even more the integral veil, instead of focusing on non-discrimination and equal opportunities.
2. This approach does not reflect the complex reality of Muslim women in Europe, many of whom want to be actors of change and empowerment, and does not respond to the needs of present-day multicultural societies. Rather than being isolated, stigmatised or forced into a stereotype, Muslim women should be encouraged in their quest for equal opportunities in society and provided with better instruments to play an active role in all aspects of life.
3. To this end, a set of measures to combat discrimination, including multiple discrimination, in access to health care, education and employment should be introduced. Likewise, violence against women and domestic violence – including in forms which disproportionately affect women and girls from a Muslim background – should be tackled through an appropriate legal and policy framework, as well as through far-reaching awareness-raising activities.
4. At the same time, positive measures should be introduced to make it possible for Muslim women to be protagonists of their own empowerment. Investing in education, encouraging networking and participation in civil and public life, as well as accompanying them in their professional development are key actions in order to raise Muslim’s women awareness of their rights and help them realise their full potential.
5. Recalling its [Resolution 1743 \(2010\)](#) and [Recommendation 1927 \(2010\)](#) “Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe”, and its [Recommendation 1975 \(2011\)](#) “Living together in 21st-century Europe: follow-up to the report of the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe”, the Parliamentary Assembly reiterates that Council of Europe member States will not abide by the fundamental values enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 4) unless they protect human rights without discriminating on any grounds, including gender and religion.
6. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:
 - 6.1. with regard to combating discrimination:
 - 6.1.1. introduce an effective legal framework to combat all forms of direct and indirect discrimination, on any grounds, and establish – if they have not already done so – a national body to monitor the content and implementation of anti-discrimination legislation, to advise the legislative and executive authorities and to provide aid and assistance to victims;
 - 6.1.2. take measures to ensure that “multiple discrimination” is included as a notion in their legislative framework;
 - 6.1.3. systematically condemn racist acts, discriminatory treatment, racist speech in public discourse and the stigmatisation of any religious community;
 - 6.1.4. sign, ratify and implement without delay Protocol No. 12 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 177);
 - 6.1.5. protect Muslim women’s freedom to choose their clothing, imposing restrictions only where necessary in a democratic society, for security purposes or when required for the exercise of a function or for a vocational training, and ensuring that those who force women to wear a particular item of clothing are sanctioned in a dissuasive, effective and proportional manner;
 - 6.1.6. encourage the media to reflect Europe’s diversity in the selection of journalists, reporters and presenters;
 - 6.1.7. encourage the media not to limit the portrayal of Muslim women to aspects relating to their religious beliefs and their being victims of violence, by giving more media coverage to examples of integration, engagement and their calls for equality;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 4 June 2012.

6.2. with regard to integration policies and the promotion of respect:

6.2.1. promote mutual respect among all people, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, through education – in particular citizenship and human rights education – and with the organisation of awareness-raising campaigns highlighting the benefits of diversity, and in particular:

6.2.1.1. support the implementation of Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education;

6.2.1.2. promote the use of the “Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education” published by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Council of Europe;

6.2.2. promote Muslim women’s active empowerment, by establishing incentives for Muslim women’s active engagement in society, encouraging the development of Muslim women’s organisations, facilitating the creation of networks and giving visibility to women who have managed to reconcile their Muslim religious faith with their European identity;

6.2.3. step up efforts and allocate sufficient financial resources for the implementation of integration policies at the local level with a comprehensive strategy including awareness-raising activities and specific training for law enforcement officials, mayors and public administration staff members;

6.2.4. ensure that all girls, including Muslim girls, have access to all levels of education;

6.2.5. set up special scholarships and programmes to encourage girls and women to pursue vocational and university education and ensure that information about them is widely available;

6.2.6. impose effective, proportional and dissuasive sanctions for cases of discrimination in access to employment and in the workplace;

6.2.7. encourage political parties to reflect Europe’s diversity in the choice of their candidates for elections

6.3. with regard to combating violence against women:

6.3.1. sign and ratify, for those that have not yet done so, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210);

6.3.2. condemn any reference to honour as a justification for violent acts;

6.3.3. ensure the protection of women in Europe from violence, regardless of their religion, cultural background or nationality, or regular or irregular migrant status;

6.4. with regard to access to health:

6.4.1. make information on maternal care and reproductive health available in the languages of the population concerned;

6.4.2. ensure, whenever possible, the presence of interpreters in health facilities providing emergency and maternal health care;

6.4.3. provide training on cultural diversity for health professionals.

7. The Assembly calls on Muslim religious leaders to:

7.1. publicly condemn violence against women, domestic violence and so-called “honour crimes”;

7.2. issue public statements explaining that the practice of female genital mutilation is not a requirement of the Muslim faith.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Kyriakidou, rapporteur

1. Origin and background of the report

1. The origin of this report is a motion for a resolution on “Muslim women in Europe: for equal opportunities” tabled by Ms Memecan and others on 2 July 2010 (Doc. 12327). This motion was tabled just a few days after the adoption by the Parliamentary Assembly of [Resolution 1743 \(2010\)](#) “Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia”, which includes several paragraphs on the situation of Muslim women, and [Recommendation 1927 \(2010\)](#). A motion entitled “Burqua – Is action needed?”³ was also taken into account by the Committee on Culture, Science and Education in the preparation of its report on “Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia”.

2. Aims of the report

2. Resolution 1743 (2010) reflects the main features of the political debate on Muslim women in Europe, as emerged in recent years. However, this debate has been rather limited in scope, as it has tended to focus on Muslim women as victims: victims of discrimination based on their gender, in their family, communities and society; victims of discrimination based on their religion, or due to Islamophobia; victims of gender-based violence, such as so-called “honour crimes”, forced marriages, marital rape, female genital mutilation; and as victims of oppressive traditions, such as the obligation to wear the headscarf or the integral veil.

3. Without disputing that Muslim women are all too often victims, I would like to take another perspective: Muslim women as actors of change and empowerment. In this report, I have tried to explore the issue of the emancipation of Muslim women and to highlight their efforts to achieve gender equality and equal opportunities in European societies, in relation to men but also to non-Muslim women, along the lines of the original motion.

4. European Muslim women’s positive efforts and achievements all too often go unnoticed and unacknowledged. And yet, as highlighted in the report *Living Together* by the Group of Eminent Persons and, even more, in the opinion by Ms Kovács,⁴ Muslim women are in a privileged position to act as a bridge between their communities and other groups in European societies, and have a key role to play in bringing up young generations who are capable of reconciling their Muslim faith with European fundamental values. They realise that they cannot allow barriers and inequalities to continue into the next generation.⁵

5. The present report is based on the findings of desk research and on the results of events organised by the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which became the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination in January 2012 following the reform of the Parliamentary Assembly:

- an exchange of views with Mr Marco Perolini, Researcher on discrimination at Amnesty International, at the meeting of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination in Strasbourg on 26 April 2012;
- a hearing on so-called “honour crimes”, with Ms Jacqueline Thibault, President of the Foundation “Surgir” (Switzerland), Ms Hannana Siddiqui, Policy and Research officer at the NGO Southall Black Sisters (United Kingdom) and Ms Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele, Head of Division at the Justice and Human Dignity Directorate of the Council of Europe (organised in the context of the meeting of the Parliamentary Network women free from violence, on 25 January 2012);
- a hearing on the French law on the prohibition to conceal the face in public space and its implementation, with Mr Julien Le Gars, Deputy Director for public liberties, Ministry of the Interior, Ms Nathalie Tournyol du Clos, Head of the Department of Women’s rights and gender equality, Ministry of solidarity and social cohesion, and Mr Didier Joubert, Chief of the public order centre at the office of the General Director of the National Police (France), held at the meeting of the committee in December 2011;
- a hearing with the participation of Dr Sara Silvestri, London City University and Cambridge University (United Kingdom) and Mr Stephanos Stavros, Executive Secretary of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) held during the meeting of the committee on 4 October 2011;

3. [Doc. 12159](#).

4. [Doc. 12640](#).

5. Female British Muslims are at last finding their voice, *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/apr/28/female-british-muslims-voice/print, 28 April 2012.

- a hearing with the participation of Ms Andrea Murray, Director of Policy in the Strategy Directorate of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, United Kingdom, and Ms Noura Jaballah, President of the European Forum of Muslim Women (Brussels).

6. Ms Mirjana Ferić-Vac was first appointed rapporteur and conducted preparatory work on this report. I was appointed rapporteur after her departure from the Assembly in January 2012 and continued developing the report with a similar approach, exploring the emancipation of Muslim women in European countries in which Islam is not the religion of the majority of the population.

3. A portrait of Europe's Muslim women

7. Europe's Muslims belong to a variety of religious traditions and have distinct backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, nationality and links to different countries. As highlighted by Ms Noura Jaballah, Muslim women do not represent a monolithic block.⁶ They are diverse in their approach to religion and cultural traditions, and in their social and economic backgrounds. Most Muslim women in Europe claim their European citizenship as a determining factor of their identity.

8. Islam is the religion professed by the majority of the population in Albania, Azerbaijan and Turkey; in other Balkan States, as well as in the Caucasus, there are autochthonous Muslim communities which are sometimes considerably large. Here, Muslim women are not discriminated against because they belong to a religious minority, but on the ground of their gender. In all the other Council of Europe member States, the Muslim population is mostly of immigrant descent, from North Africa, Turkey and Asia. Only a small proportion of them hold the citizenship of the country where they reside; the others are long-term residents, second-generation immigrants who have been unable to acquire nationality, or they have recently migrated to the host country. There is also a small percentage of converts.

9. In the present report, I have decided to address the situation of Muslim women in European countries where Islam is not the religion of the majority, and where they may be facing multiple discrimination as women, as part of a religious minority and for being of immigrant origin. I decided to limit the geographic scope of the report in this way not because the situation of Muslim women in countries where the majority religion is Islam is not important, but because I wish to focus specifically on the problem of multiple discrimination, and to highlight the positive role that women can play in fostering social cohesion in multicultural societies.

10. An increasing number of immigrants in Council of Europe member States are women. In fact, the phenomenon of the feminisation of migration has reached such a level that women currently represent more than 52% of the immigration flow to Europe.⁷ Most of them have migrated in their own right, in search of employment; others have joined their husbands through procedures for family reunification, or in a small number of cases have moved in the context of arranged or forced marriages. According to Ms Jaballah, these women are often portrayed in the media as two stereotyped groups: one group of Muslim women not integrated into European reality and wearing the integral veil, and another group of non-religious Muslim women. This representation does not reflect the reality.

11. The number of conversions to Islam amongst Europeans is thought to be rising, although there are no official figures.⁸ In the United Kingdom, most of the converts appear to be women.⁹

12. In general, official data on the exact size and composition of the Muslim population in Europe do not exist, because the great majority of Council of Europe member States do not collect information on religion during census operations.¹⁰ Depending on the estimates, it ranges between 40 and 60 million people. Some research states that in 2010, Muslims represented 7.5% of the population in France, 6% in Belgium, 5.5% in

6. Hearing held in preparation of the report during the meeting of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men on 9 September 2011 in Paris.

7. www.observateurocde.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/2092/Mondialisation,_migrations_et_f_E9minisation_.html.

8. A recent report by Kevin Brice (Swansea University) on behalf of Faith Matters indicates that between 2001 and 2010 the number of British converts rose from 60 000 to 100 000: <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>.

9. Ibid.

10. The United Kingdom recently changed this practice: the 2001 census included information about the residents' religious affiliation.

the Netherlands, 5.7% in Switzerland, 5% in Germany and 4.6% in the United Kingdom.¹¹ Even if exact figures on the current size of the Muslim population do not exist, what is clear is that it is going to rise, according to projections, by one third by 2030.¹²

4. Creating the conditions for Muslim women to develop their full potential

4.1. Addressing multiple discrimination

13. So far, policy makers and legislators have focused on collective target groups – such as migrants, minorities or women – disregarding differences within each group and overlooking the problems of individuals who find themselves at the intersection of different discrimination grounds. As a result, in most Council of Europe member States, “multiple discrimination” is not a legal notion, a ground which can be raised in a court of law or which is tackled by appropriate policy measures.

14. Muslim women, however, are a flagrant example of a group that faces multiple discrimination, for instance on grounds such as legal status, ethnic origin, race, religion, religious clothing, and so on.

15. ECRI acknowledged already in 2000 that Muslim women were often victims of multiple discrimination on grounds of gender and religion and recommended that the governments of member States “pay particular attention to the situation of Muslim women, who may suffer both from discrimination against women in general and from discrimination against Muslims”.¹³ ECRI’s latest annual report includes a section on multiple discrimination and mentions that “Muslim women are, for example, subject to prejudice not only because of their religion but also because of their gender and, quite often, their migration background. Many of their difficulties in finding employment or housing are linked to their choice to wear a headscarf. ECRI has noted that multiple discrimination is rarely monitored”.¹⁴

16. I believe that ECRI should look into the possibility of issuing a specific policy recommendation on multiple discrimination in so far as it affects Muslim women in Europe, and include this dimension in its country reports. With this report, I also wish to call for the recognition of “multiple discrimination” as a legal notion that could be translated into the national legal frameworks.

4.2. Health

17. According to the information provided by Ms Murray based on the analysis of the 2010 census, Muslim women in the United Kingdom report overall the highest levels of “not good health” and one quarter of Muslim women have a limiting long-term illness.¹⁵

18. While information on access to health care can be disaggregated by religion in the United Kingdom, it is more difficult to gather such data in other Council of Europe member States. With this consideration in mind, the Soros Foundation carried out a study in 11 European cities, in which it concluded that: “If gender, religion and country of birth are taken into account, then Muslim women born in Europe (17%) are the group most likely to feel that hospitals and health clinics do too little to respect different religious customs.”¹⁶

11. The Future of Global Muslim Population, Projections for 2010-2030: Europe, 2011, Pew Research Center’s forum on Religion and Public life, also quoted in the Amnesty International report “Choice and Prejudice: Discrimination against Muslims in Europe”.

12. www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,14799979,00.html.

13. ECRI, Policy recommendation No. 5 on Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, 2000, www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/GPR/EN/Recommendation_N5/Recommendation_5_en.asp.

14. ECRI Annual report, Activities from 1 January to 31 December 2011, released on 3 May 2012, p. 12, www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/Annual_Reports/Annual%20report%202011.pdf.

15. Hearing held during the meeting of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men on 9 September 2011 in Paris.

16. Muslims in Europe: A Report on 11 EU Cities (Amsterdam and Rotterdam, Antwerp, Berlin and Hamburg, Copenhagen, Leicester and Waltham Forest–London, Marseilles and Paris, and Stockholm), Open Society Foundations, December 2009, www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/muslims-europe-20091215/a-muslims-europe-20110214.pdf.

19. Indeed, hospitals and other health care facilities are not equipped to accommodate the needs of women who, for cultural reasons, may experience acute discomfort and embarrassment due to the lack of privacy and the limited number of female staff. At the same time, health professionals are not generally trained to deal tactfully and respectfully with patients from a diversified background. This problem of lack of knowledge is also increased by the poor presence of minorities amongst the staff.

20. Language is also a barrier to receiving adequate health care: interpreters are not systematically present and leaflets are not necessarily produced in several languages. Muslim women, in particular when elderly, may find it difficult to communicate and depend on their relatives to arrange an appointment and talk to the doctor. In my opinion, the lack of information available in an understandable language could be tackled through recourse to "on call translators", who could be called by hospitals when an emergency arises; explanatory brochures should also be produced in several languages.

21. A particular area which is often neglected and in which there is large scope for improvement is maternal health: I was shocked to read in a report of the non-governmental organisation *The Maternity Alliance* that, in the United Kingdom, Muslim women are twice as likely as non-Muslim women to die during pregnancy or just after having given birth.¹⁷

22. Finally, as mentioned in the Soros study,¹⁸ discrimination may also affect Muslims working in health care. This study presented the case of a Muslim nurse wearing a headscarf who reported how she received negative treatment from patients, not allowing her to go into the room. This nurse was supported by the staff of the hospital where she worked, and the patient was asked to look for health care elsewhere.

4.3. Education and work

23. At European level, there are no comparable statistics regarding Muslim women's access to education, education level, access to the job market, employment and entrepreneurship. Muslim women in Europe share with other women problems such as pursuing careers in male-oriented environments, finding adequate childcare and seeking to balance professional and personal life.¹⁹

24. Some Council of Europe member States and the European Union have conducted specific research and data collection in the area of employment, using either migrant women or women from minorities as reference groups. This research indicates the following facts:²⁰

- the unemployment rate of women from these groups is higher than men's;
- there is a pay gap between immigrants and the native population and, within the immigrant group, between women and men;
- even when migrant women are employed, the quality of their employment tends to be poor (temporary or insecure contracts), leaving them socially and economically vulnerable.

25. Sociological research conducted in France by the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality (HALDE) shows that, for girls with an immigrant background, the feeling of exclusion starts in primary school when, irrespective of their school results, their name, their skin colour, their address indicate a social origin which draws attention.²¹

26. The feeling of exclusion increases when they are teenagers because, for cultural or economic reasons (or both), they often cannot frequent the same social venues as their school-mates. Parents sometimes ask that their daughters do not take part in sports, sex education and field trips, thus excluding them from important segments of school life.²² I am convinced that integration starts at school and that more importance could be given to the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights in and through education. Respect for

17. The Maternity Alliance, *Experiences of maternity services: Muslim Women's Perspectives* (November 2004).

18. *Ibid.*

19. Presentation by Dr Sara Silvestri at the hearing organised during the meeting of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Strasbourg on 4 October 2011.

20. *Migrants, minorities and employment, Exclusion and discrimination in the 27 Member States of the European Union*, 2009.

21. HALDE, *La discrimination multicritère à l'encontre des femmes immigrées ou issues de l'immigration sur le marché du travail*, 2011, <http://halde.defenseurdesdroits.fr/La-discrimination-multicritere-a-l,14848.html>.

22. *Muslim Women Behind Wall of Silence in Germany*, Sylvia Poggioli, 21 January 2008, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17819775.

human dignity of all needs to be promoted from a very early age, and the benefits of the diversity of cultures need to be highlighted in all educational programmes and activities. Teachers have a key role to play in promoting respect.²³ Differences between students can enrich the quality of education.

27. Later on, the search for a traineeship or a first job is also fraught with difficulties, as physical appearance, ethnic origin and gender are often important elements in the selection procedure. As a result, young women with an immigrant background are led to look for jobs which are below their qualifications, often relying on a network of acquaintances and family from the same background. In the United Kingdom, young Muslims are more likely to experience periods outside education or employment than Christians or those with no religion according to the findings of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.²⁴

28. Education is the key to empowerment and a passport for the emancipation of Muslim women. A generation of European young Muslim women is now claiming the same rights as other students, while adhering to Islamic values. In some Council of Europe member States, Muslim women form the majority of students in Islamic studies courses.²⁵

29. In the United Kingdom, research shows that 68% of Muslim women are currently inactive in the labour market and only 29% are in employment.²⁶ Despite high levels of education, unemployment of British Muslim women remains high. “Some of the barriers which affect British Muslim women affect all women, such as gender discrimination, inflexibility, and lack of childcare. But British Muslim women also face additional challenges, including discrimination based on clothing and faith.”²⁷ According to Amnesty International, “Muslims who decide to wear forms of dress associated with Islam are discriminated against at the workplace”.²⁸ Private employers in Belgium, France, the Netherlands or Switzerland have claimed that customers could feel uncomfortable with an employee wearing the headscarf.²⁹

30. This exclusion continues at adult age and can materialise in unemployment. Muslim women have in general a lower rate of employment and appear to have the lowest rate of employment in the United Kingdom, with half of the second-generation British Muslim women (born in Britain) being inactive, compared to only 17% of second-generation Hindu women. According to Ms Murray, “Muslim women in Britain face considerable challenges in enjoying equal opportunities, particularly at a time of shrinking public spending and economic crisis”.³⁰

31. At a time of economic crisis, the integration of visible minorities into the labour market may face increased challenges. In the 11 cities covered by the study “Muslims in Europe”, Muslim women born in Europe identified religion (21%) as the basis for discrimination when looking for employment more frequently than ethnicity (12%).³¹ In France, the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality (HALDE) received 259 complaints on the ground of religion or belief in 2009.³² Amnesty International was informed that most of these

23. Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education, Council of Europe, OSCE/ODIHR, UNESCO, 2011, www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/edc/Source/Pdf/Downloads/English_guidelines_intolerance_against_muslims.pdf.

24. Hearing held at the meeting of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Paris on 9 September 2011.

25. Muslim Women in Europe Claim Rights and Keep Faith, Marlise Simons, 29 December 2005, The New York Times, www.nytimes.com/2005/12/29/international/europe/29women.html?pagewanted=all.

26. Young Foundation and London Development Agency 2008. Valuing Family Valuing Work: British Muslim Women and the Labour Market, www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/Final_Valuing_Family_Valuing_Work_Oct_08_0.pdf.

27. Ibid.

28. Amnesty International, Choice and prejudice: Discrimination against Muslims in Europe, report released on 24 April 2012, presented by Mr Marco Perolini at an exchange of views with the members of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination on 26 April 2012 in Strasbourg, www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR01/001/2012/en/85bd6054-5273-4765-9385-59e58078678e/eur010012012en.pdf.

29. Interviews of private employers conducted by Amnesty International in preparation of their study “Choice and prejudice: Discrimination against Muslims in Europe”.

30. Hearing held during the meeting of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Paris on 9 September 2011.

31. Muslims in Europe: A Report on 11 EU Cities (Amsterdam and Rotterdam, Antwerp, Berlin and Hamburg, Copenhagen, Leicester and Waltham Forest–London, Marseilles and Paris, and Stockholm), Open Society Foundations, December 2009, p. 125, www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/muslims-europe-20091215/a-muslims-europe-20110214.pdf.

32. 2010 Annual report of the HALDE, p. 21, www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/114000234/index.shtml.

complaints involved Muslims, and that 57% of the complaints on religious discrimination were filed by women. Amnesty International is concerned that in France, “employers are still excluding Muslims from employment on the basis of stereotypes and prejudices, and that this impacts disproportionately on Muslim women”.³³

32. Addressing discrimination in access to employment and in the workplace is essential for the provision of equal opportunities. According to the Soros Foundation, Muslims in Europe are in general three times more likely to be unemployed than non-Muslims.³⁴ “Some of this disadvantage can be explained by human capital, but other factors include a lack of social networks, knowledge and understanding of the labour market and language fluency. There is also evidence to suggest that some Muslims face both an ethnic and religious penalty. Discrimination on the grounds of religion is particularly a concern for women who wear the veil and the headscarf.”³⁵ I wish to encourage more research to be carried out on discrimination on the ground of religion at the workplace.

33. Several organisations accompany women in their quest for autonomy and economic empowerment, with the organisation of training sessions on leadership and support to women entrepreneurs. With my report, I wish to encourage such initiatives and to call for their development, as one of the keys for empowerment of Muslim women.

4.4. Success stories

34. The example of women of Muslim background who have reached high profile political positions in government, parliament or local authorities without rejecting their religious identity is evidence that success stories are possible. Examples include Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, Minister for Women’s Rights and spokesperson of the French Government, MEP and former Minister of Justice Rachida Dati, former French Secretary of State for Human Rights Rama Yade, former French Secretary of State for Urban Affairs Fadela Amara, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Co-Chairperson of the British Conservative Party and Minister without Portfolio, Baroness Pola Manzila Uddin in the House of Lords (United Kingdom), the Italian member of parliament Souad Sbai, and Aygül Özkan, Minister of Social Affairs, Women, Family Health and Integration in the State of Lower Saxony, Germany. It is important to publicise these examples, to reassure the public opinion that integration is possible and to encourage young Muslim women to have confidence in themselves and in undertaking challenging careers.

35. Muslim women’s participation in political life remains nevertheless rather low; the first three Muslim women members of parliament took their seats in 2010 in the United Kingdom. The Muslim Women’s Network for the United Kingdom identified multiple barriers for the involvement of Muslim women in civil and political life, such as rigid patriarchal structures and attitudes of the communities and decision-makers.³⁶

36. Another important dimension where Muslim women have increasingly asserted themselves is the media. Some of these women include: Sara Joseph, a convert and first woman to become the editor of a British Muslim magazine (*Trends*), and founder and editor of the Muslim lifestyle monthly *Emel*; the editor of the Muslim magazine *Q News*, *Fareena Alam*; and another British convert, the controversial journalist Yvonne Ridley.³⁷

37. The European visual media is not yet representative of the diversity of the European population. Prejudice still exists and there are only a few examples of women presenters being openly of one religion or the other. Considering that visual media is the main channel for information and for breaking stereotypes, broadcasters have an important responsibility when portraying members of a religious community. In general, the portrayal of both Muslim women and men is rather negative. I wish to encourage further research to be conducted on media coverage and public perception of Muslim women in Council of Europe member States where Islam is not the main religion.

33. Amnesty International, Choice and prejudice: Discrimination against Muslims in Europe, p. 45, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR01/001/2012/en/85bd6054-5273-4765-9385-59e58078678e/eur010012012en.pdf>.

34. Muslims in Europe: A Report on 11 EU Cities (Amsterdam and Rotterdam, Antwerp, Berlin and Hamburg, Copenhagen, Leicester and Waltham Forest–London, Marseilles and Paris, and Stockholm), Open Society Foundations, December 2009, p. 115, www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/muslims-europe-20091215/a-muslims-europe-20110214.pdf.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

36. Report “Women from Muslim Communities, Political and Civic Engagement in the United Kingdom”, March 2011, www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/crer/mwp/events/report_to_geo_february-march_2011_v2.pdf.

37. Sara Silvestri, Europe’s Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges, King Baudouin Foundation, 2008.

38. The Muslim Women Power List project in 2009, a project of the United Kingdom Equality and Human Rights Commission, challenged stereotypes about Muslim women and paid tribute to those who are on the way to, or have already reached, the top in their career in business, civil service, arts, media or the public sector.³⁸ The Equality and Human Rights Commission runs the project in co-operation with *The Guardian* and *Emel* magazine, in order to provide inspiration and raise awareness of the fact that the persistence of stereotypes was not allowing the development of the civil and political participation of Muslim women or their economic empowerment. I see actions of this type that challenge stereotypes as a first step towards providing equal opportunities for Muslim women.

4.5. Networking

39. There is an increasing number of Muslim women who are actively engaged in European societies and political life, as entrepreneurs, parliamentarians and professionals. At the same time, a number of private and public initiatives have been set up to promote the visibility of these role models, mentorship and networking. These networks help to make the role of Muslim women evolve within their communities.

40. An interesting example is CEDAR (Connecting European Dynamic Achievers & Role Models), a network of Muslim professionals covering 10 European countries that seeks to generate a culture of success and leadership amongst Europe's Muslim communities.³⁹

41. The European Muslim women of influence list is one of the CEDAR projects. It praises the efforts of Muslim women and shows them as inspirational figures and positive role models.⁴⁰ The Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, the German journalist Hilal Sezgin, and the British human rights lawyer Shaheed Fatima were, among others, on the 2010 List. The next list will be released in 2013.

42. The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) presents itself as "a global programme, a social network and a grassroots social justice movement led by Muslim women".⁴¹ Launched in 2006, WISE aims at improving the position of Muslim women throughout the world and encourages them to fully participate in their communities.

43. The Muslim Women's Network UK⁴² also supports Muslim women's efforts. Its former Executive Director, Shaista Gohir, stressed that "the Muslim female identity may have been reduced to an article of clothing, but inspirational Muslim women are continuously challenging the stereotypes which exist about them. The fact that Muslim women are advancing women's rights and fighting to be heard by policy makers and their communities while striking a balance between family and work despite facing numerous barriers is clearly a testament to the great capacity Muslim women have".⁴³

44. Finally, I wish to mention the Fatima Women's Network, which works on improving the ability of Muslim women's groups to network and work on policy development.⁴⁴ In the United Kingdom, there is also a State-run initiative: the British Government created the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group so as to give Muslim women more space in British society.

5. The Islamic feminist movement

45. Although completely neglected by mainstream media, there exists a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. Islamic feminism aims to achieve the full equality of all Muslims, irrespective of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality and social justice, on the basis of the Koran and its teachings.

38. Information provided by Ms Murray in preparation for the hearing held in Paris on 9 September 2011. The Muslim women power list: www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/muslim-women-power-list/.

39. www.thecedarnetwork.com.

40. www.cedar-emwi.com.

41. WISE website, www.wisemuslimwomen.org/about/.

42. www.mwnuk.co.uk/.

43. Empowering Muslim Women: Case Studies, Communities and Local Government, United Kingdom, 2008, www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/669801.pdf. Ms Shaista Gohir was Executive Director until July 2011.

44. Ibid., p. 25, and www.fatima-network.com.

46. Advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply rooted principles of equality in religion and encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching towards the creation of a more equal and just society. The first Islamic Feminist conference took place in Barcelona in 2005 and the fourth in Madrid in 2010.⁴⁵ It was launched by Ndeye Andújar, Editor-in-Chief of the reference site webislam.com, which aims at enhancing the public perception of the Muslim community in Spain, and co-founder of the Catalan Islamic Board.

47. Amongst the main areas of campaign of the Islamic feminist movement are:

- *personal law*: especially as regards marriage, polygamy, divorce, custody of children, maintenance and marital property as based on Sharia Law. Some Muslim feminist groups, such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, have called for women-friendly and non-discriminatory reforms in these aspects of law, based on the Koran; other Muslim feminist groups, on the other hand, argue that there is no possibility to reform and that they should be rejected altogether;
- *sexual orientation*: while there is debate over the interpretation of the passages of the Koran which seem to outlaw homosexuality, some Muslim scholars and campaigning groups argue in support of a liberal interpretation, despite resistance from the mainstream Muslim community;
- *dress code*: there are mixed opinions in this area. Islam requires both men and women to dress modestly; this concept is known as *hijab* and is flexible enough to cover different behaviours and garments. Some feminists have openly taken position in support of the ban of the integral veil in public places, with the argument that the integral veil is not a religious requirement and that it is a sign of subjugation of women; other Islamic feminists defend the wearing of the integral veil when it is a free choice of the woman concerned, and maintain that prohibition further increases Muslim women's alienation in society;
- *equality in religious practice and prayer*: in most mosques, women are required to pray in a separate area from men. Islamic feminists have begun to protest this, particularly in North America, advocating for women to be allowed to pray beside men without a partition, as they do in Mecca. In addition, according to traditional schools of Islam, a woman cannot lead a mixed-gender congregation in prayer; in Europe and North America, however, in recent years there have been numerous cases of women doing so. In 2010, Ms Raheel Raza was the first Muslim-born woman to lead a mixed-gender British congregation through prayer.

48. Women were at the forefront of the revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and many other countries, which were led by a quest for freedom and dignity. In the past year, we have all witnessed the fight of many women in the Arab world to have equal opportunities, be it to have access to education, to work outside the house or to drive a car. There is a tangible call for equal rights coming from Muslim women, in Europe and the world, in the respect of their religious faith. This call should not be underestimated or neglected, but on the contrary supported. I believe that our Assembly can encourage and assist Muslim women in their claims for equality and for the promotion and protection of their rights, while ensuring respect for their religious beliefs. Muslim faith and empowerment of women can be reconciled.⁴⁶

6. The debate on the integral veil

49. There is no statistical information on how many women wear the integral veil in Europe, or how many wear a headscarf. As for the former group, it does not include more than a few hundred women, at least in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Similarly, there is no data on how many of them wear it out of their own choice, as opposed to being forced to do so. In France, the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Cohesion estimates that about 1 900 Muslim women wear the integral veil.⁴⁷

45. <http://feminismeislamic.org/home/>.

46. The Assembly addressed this issue in its [Resolution 1873 \(2012\)](#) "Equality between women and men: a condition for the success of the Arab Spring". During the April 2012 part-session, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination and the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a joint hearing on "Women in the Arab Spring", with the participation of a number of women who were protagonists in the protest movements in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, as well as the Minister of Solidarity, Family, Women and Social Development of Morocco Ms Bassima Hakkaoui, and the Deputy Speaker of the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia, Ms Meherzia Labidi Maïza.

47. Information provided by Ms Tournyol du Clos during the hearing organised on 8 December 2011 in Paris.

50. Although a marginal phenomenon, wearing the integral veil is often perceived as the symbol of both “a diversity” and as a sign of women’s subordination to men. It is not uncommon to hear the view that the integral veil is not compatible with European values⁴⁸ and that it is “disturbing”. Unfortunately, there have been also a number of cases in which women wearing the integral veil in public spaces have been physically attacked by other women, sometimes relying on an erroneous interpretation of the relevant law.

51. In the last two or three years, authorities of Council of Europe member States, at national or local level, have increasingly taken steps to regulate the wearing of the headscarf and, especially, the integral veil. Justifications for the banning of the integral veil include protecting the dignity of women and equality between women and men, ensuring public security and preserving social interaction.⁴⁹ The French Act prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space has fed debates throughout the Council of Europe region. Based on the need to ensure respect of public order, it stresses the importance of finding a peaceful way of living together to ensure harmonious co-existence.⁵⁰ The French Constitutional Council declared that concealing one’s face in public places may represent a danger for public security, not allowing an easy identification of the person. It also highlighted the gender equality dimension of the issue, with women concealing their faces being in a situation of exclusion and inferiority.⁵¹ According to a study conducted by Amnesty International, one third of Swiss people think that the headscarf is humiliating for women.⁵²

52. In France, sanctions are foreseen in two cases: if a person conceals his or her face and when a person forces another one to do it by means of threat, violence or abuse of authority or power. A fine of €150 and an internship on citizenship are foreseen in the first case, the second case is classed as a crime, which can be punished with up to one year’s imprisonment and a fine of up to €30 000 with a double sanction if the victim is below 18. According to the information provided by Mr Joubert, as at 8 December 2011, 220 violations of this law had been reported. While I understand the importance of ensuring a peaceful social existence, I also wish to avoid further stigmatising women choosing to wear the integral veil. I am convinced that efforts for the promotion of the rights of all women, regardless of their religious beliefs, have to prevent their further isolation from mainstream society. Women activists who attack Muslim women wearing the veil are in fact in contradiction with their own principles.

53. The issue of the integral veil has completely dominated the political debate as far as Muslim women are concerned and the focus remains narrow and rather simplistic. I believe that the exposure of women wearing the headscarf or the integral veil to an increased risk of discrimination also has to be taken into consideration and studied in depth, so as to recommend measures to prevent this from occurring⁵³. As stressed in [Resolution 1743 \(2010\)](#) “Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe”, “a general prohibition of the integral veil in public spaces may pressure Muslim women to stay at home and confine them to contacts with other women. Muslim women could be further excluded if they were to leave educational institutions and stay away from public places”.

7. So-called “honour crimes”, forced marriages and female genital mutilation

54. In addition to the debate on the integral veil, the media tend to report on the situation of Muslim women in Europe when so-called “honour crimes”, forced marriages or female genital mutilation occur. The Assembly drew attention on the occurrence of crimes in the name of honour in Europe in its [Resolutions 1681 \(2009\)](#) and [1327 \(2003\)](#), both condemning all forms of violence against women and girls in the name of traditional codes of honour and highlighting that “no tradition or culture can invoke any kind of honour to violate women’s fundamental rights”.⁵⁴

48. See Elizabeth Badinter, www.liberation.fr/societe/0101589842-interdire-le-voile-integral-au-nom-de-la-dignite-de-la-personne.

49. Equality Law in Practice, A Question of Faith: Religion and Belief in Europe, Equinet Report, December 2011, p. 40, www.equineteurope.org/religion_and_belief_report__merged__1.pdf.

50. Intervention by Mr Le Gars at the hearing on 8 December 2011 in Paris.

51. Ibid.

52. Exchange of views with Mr Marco Perolini, Amnesty International researcher on discrimination, at the Committee meeting on 26 April 2012 in Strasbourg.

53. This was very much the approach developed by the former Council of Europe Commissioner on Human Rights, Mr Thomas Hammarberg.

54. [Assembly Resolution 1681](#) (2009).

55. According to the Swiss Foundation *Surgir*, the number of so-called “honour crimes” is increasing in Europe, mostly in the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland.⁵⁵ As an example, 88 cases of so-called “honour crimes” were registered in Germany from 1996 to 2007.⁵⁶ In Belgium, the federal police unofficially identified 17 honour crimes or attempted honour crimes between 2004 and 2008.⁵⁷ In France, about 10 cases have been reported since 1993, and in the United Kingdom about 12 cases are reported every year. Only the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have adopted so far a full legal framework including prevention, witness protection, training of police officers and the creation of special units within the police.⁵⁸ In Turkey, a commission of inquiry on honour crimes, set up in 2006, recorded 332 cases between 2006 and 2010.⁵⁹

56. So-called “honour crimes” are linked to a patriarchal mentality and may affect women from different religious backgrounds. Although most of these crimes take place within the Muslim community, it would be erroneous to portray them as being associated with Islamic religious precepts or practice, as unfortunately is often the case in the media.⁶⁰

57. The Assembly condemned in 2005 the practice of forced marriages in its [Resolution 1468 \(2005\)](#) and its [Recommendation 1723 \(2005\)](#) on forced marriages and child marriages, expressing its concern about the serious and recurrent violations of human rights and the rights of the child which are constituted by forced marriages and child marriages. The resolution made clear that forced marriage can in no way be justified.

58. According to the European Parliament, around 500 000 women have been subjected to female genital mutilation in Europe and 180 000 women and girls are at risk of being subjected to this practice.⁶¹ I wish to stress that female genital mutilation is not prescribed by any religion.⁶² It occurs predominantly among Muslims, but also among Christians, Jews and animists.⁶³ The Assembly condemned female genital mutilation already in 2001 in its [Resolution 1247 \(2001\)](#).

59. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210), which was opened for signature in May 2011 in Istanbul, asks parties to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women, including forced marriages and female genital mutilation. So-called “honour” or traditions cannot be presented as a justification for any kind of crime (Article 42 of the convention) or as a mitigating factor in the context of judicial proceedings. I hope that all member States of the Council of Europe, if they have not yet done so, will sign, ratify and implement this innovative and groundbreaking instrument for the protection of the rights of all women.

60. I would like to add that it would be most beneficial for Muslim women in Europe if prevention and awareness-raising activities in the area of violence against women could be implemented by involving Muslim religious leaders.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

61. In Council of Europe member States where Islam is not the religion of the majority of the population, Muslim women are often victims of multiple discrimination, because of their gender and because of their religion. In addition, they are victims of stereotyping, as their religious beliefs are often seen as the only defining element of their identity. Similarly, in many countries, the political debate about European Muslim women has

55. Foundation Surgir, “Combating honour crimes in Europe”, 2011 www.surgir.ch/userfiles/file/surgir-brochure-honor-crimes-en.pdf.

56. Information collected by the Association Papatya, presented in the report of the Foundation Surgir “Combating honour crimes in Europe”.

57. Ibid.

58. “Les crimes d’honneur, une réalité européenne”, Benoit Vitkine, *Le Monde*, 15 Novembre 2011.

59. Report by the Foundation Surgir, “Combating honour crimes in Europe”.

60. Hearing on so-called honour crimes, Meeting of the Parliamentary Network Women free from violence, Strasbourg, 25 January 2012.

61. European Parliament resolution of 24 March 2009 on combating female genital mutilation in the EU, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P6-TA-2009-161.

62. Intervention by Ms Fatiha Saidi, meeting of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Paris, 20 March 2012.

63. Briefing information on female genital mutilation provided by the Secretariat of Amnesty International.

focused on the issue of the integral veil and its compatibility with human rights values, and the media only mentions them as victims of so-called “honour crimes” and female genital mutilation, which does not help to reflect the true situation of Muslim women in Europe.

62. I believe that it is time to add a new perspective. Europe’s Muslim women are often victims of discrimination, stereotyping and sometimes violence – whether by state officials or private individuals. But they are also actors of change and empowerment. Rather than being isolated and stigmatised for their gender and religious beliefs, they should be encouraged in their quest for equal opportunities in society and provided with better instruments to achieve this objective. This is not only necessary for their own well-being and fulfilment but also for the cohesion of European multicultural societies.

63. Members of parliament should use their political leadership to challenge negative stereotyping of Muslim women throughout Europe and to highlight the positive contribution that Muslim women make to our societies.

64. Legislators should also support Muslim women in their quest for empowerment, stepping up policies to facilitate their access to basic integration and participation tools, such as education, vocational training and employment.

65. In this process, civil society groups, Muslim religious leaders and women’s associations can play an essential role. These actors should not be put aside, as this would risk deepening the separation between different groups. At the same time, however, public authorities should become exemplary in reflecting the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious composition of European societies.

66. In the current time of financial and economic crisis, while racism, xenophobia and other forms of extremism are on the rise, Council of Europe member States should consider investing in the integration, protection and empowerment of Muslim women as a matter of priority. Diversity in Europe is a reality that cannot be changed. If we want it to be an element of cohesion and not of division, we have to win the hearts and minds of Muslim women. The first steps in this process are to take them seriously as interlocutors, stop politicising the issue of the integral veil and listen to their real demands.