

MEET – MORE EQUAL EUROPE TOGETHER

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION FROM THE CRACIS (COMMITTEE OF ACTIONS AND REFLECTION AGAINST GENDER-BASED ISLAMOPHOBIA) TO BRUSSELS AUTHORITIES

Context : In the context of the European project *MEET - More Equal Europe Together (2019-2021)*, aimed at preventing islamophobia against Muslim girls and women (or perceived as such), **POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ-PLS** brought together key actors in the fight against discrimination and the promotion of a more inclusive society, especially towards Muslim girls and women. Within this framework, the Committee for reflection and action against gender-based islamophobia (CRACIS, in French, for Comité d'Action et de Réflexion Contre l'Islamophobie Sexiste) was set up, bringing together experts from different backgrounds (Collective Kahina, Collective Against Islamophobia in Belgium (CCIB), EVEIL, Unia and the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men). This Committee has been charged with reflecting on and collecting data on gender-based Islamophobia and submitting to the competent Belgian authorities a list of recommendations aimed at preventing gender-based Islamophobia, including concrete courses of action.

INTRODUCTION

Denial of access to different services (housing, shopping, leisure, sports, etc.) and to the labour market; discrimination, aggression (e.g. headscarf tearing)... People who are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim face many acts of violence and discrimination throughout Europe¹. Its capital, Brussels, with its 1.2 million inhabitants² of some 184 different nationalities, is no exception. Among those confronted with Islamophobia, girls and women are particularly affected: for the year 2019, the Collective Against Islamophobia in Belgium (CCIB) counted an over-representation of women and girls at almost 90% of those reporting Islamophobic acts³. A worrying fact, according to the CCIB, is that the sectors in which Muslim women and girls suffer the most discrimination are also the three key sectors for women's emancipation: employment, education and leisure.

In the Brussels Region there are a multitude of communities, including Muslim communities. However, these communities are stigmatised and locked into stereotypes that are strongly rooted in the mentalities, and often internalised by the people who are subject to them.

One of the reasons for this is the biased portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media and social networks. Western media coverage of international events portrays a negative view, with a lot of confusion between fundamentalism and the Muslim religion. Misappreciation and misinformation combine to feed prejudices against Muslim people, especially girls and women, namely because of the visibility given to their religious beliefs when they wear the headscarf. Indeed, Muslim men do not wear any "conspicuous sign" of religious affiliation, except for the beard, which is difficult to distinguish from a profane beard, which shows that the neutrality of an appearance is not always impartial⁴.

Muslim girls and women are disproportionately affected by what is known as "intersectionality of discrimination", which is discrimination on multiple grounds that interact and multiply tenfold. Origin, religious affiliation and gender intersect, and Muslim girls and women find themselves particularly vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The headscarf and the meaning people give to it are often at the root of stereotypes and prejudices that lead to discrimination (e.g. alleged submission, alleged dependence on the husband, alleged desire to have many children, etc.)⁵.

Political action is needed to combat Islamophobia against girls and women by addressing its root causes and taking concrete action for the inclusion of all.

¹In a 2017 survey, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed that 17% of Muslim respondents said they had experienced discrimination in the last 5 years; https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-minorities-survey-muslims-selected-findings_fr.pdf. As regards Belgium, Unia counted 951 reports based on religious beliefs for the year 2019. In more than 86% of the cases, Islam was targeted; Unia, 2019 report "Contributing to a more equal society for all": <https://www.unia.be/fr/publications-et-statistiques/publications/rapport-annuel-2019>

²IBSA, chiffres-clé de 2019 : <http://ibsa.brussels/chiffres/chiffres-cles-de-la-region>

³CCIB, rapport d'activités 2019 : https://ccib-ctib.be/wp-content/uploads/CCIB_PUBLIC_PDF_RapportActivitesCCIB/CCIB_Rapport2019_Juin2020.pdf

⁴Opinion of a collective gathering Muslim women citizens : <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/citoyennes-feministes-et-musulmanes-57dabba635704b54e6c338cc>

⁵Results from CRACIS' work. See also abroad : Van der Valk, Islamophobie aux Pays-Bas, Amsterdam University, Amsterdam, 2012, p.19 (rapport disponible en néerlandais aussi sous le titre Islamofobie en Discriminatie)

This list of recommendations for action takes up the avenues identified by CRACIS, on the basis of exchanges and the respective expertise of its members. It is built around themes in which it has become a priority to adopt concrete actions to prevent and fight against gender-based Islamophobia.

These themes are as follows :

1. Monitoring
2. Better regulation
3. Education
4. Employment
5. Awareness-raising
6. Media
7. Collaboration

MONITORING

Banalization, internalisation of discrimination, lack of confidence in or even fear of institutions, the reasons that prevent victims of discrimination from reporting them vary. However, in order to be able to act effectively against a phenomenon, it is essential to understand it; and in order to understand it, it is necessary to set up an effective data collection and monitoring system.

With regard to monitoring, the following actions should be implemented by the competent authorities and services:

- To coordinate and centralise data collection in Brussels and to increase transparency about this data:
 - *To encourage and support projects such as the one on improving equality data collection (IEDCB led by UNIA).*
 - *To coordinate the data collection relating to reporting between the 6 Brussels police zones.*
- To reform the recording system for reports made to the police to include the ground of discrimination “Islamophobia” and to allow the intersectional dimension of certain discriminations to be taken into account;
- To develop statistical tools to measure the phenomenon of Islamophobia as such (and no longer through the category of discrimination based on religious belief or origin) and to take into account the intersectional dimension of the phenomenon of gender-based Islamophobia;
- To encourage victims or witnesses of discrimination or violence to report by ensuring that adequate support is provided for victims who are more emotionally affected than witnesses:
 - *To invest in the dissemination of existing tools to the most relevant actors (in particular, coaching initiatives to enable people filing a complaint);*
 - *To create and disseminate complementary tools (e.g. a practical sheet clearly and concisely indicating where Islamophobic violence/discrimination can be reported; a report sheet dedicated to victims and adapted to their particular vulnerability at the time of reporting).*

- To establish an effective data processing system:
 - *This requires allocating the necessary resources to the different actors involved in the data processing process. NB: **Data collection is a necessary first step in the data processing process. It cannot be the only one.***

BETTER REGULATION

There is set regulations aimed at combating discrimination. This should be used as a basis for working towards more equality in practice and not just theoretical equality without concrete implementation.

In terms of regulation, the following actions should be implemented by the competent authorities and services:

- To coordinate/centralize databases for greater consistency and transparency of data;
- To encourage the effective implementation of anti-discrimination laws;
- To promote the effective implementation of the 2014 anti-sexism law :
 - *To harmonise the practices of the different communes in terms of sanctions for sexist acts;*
 - *To evaluate the anti-sexism law of 2014 ;*
 - *To allocate the necessary financial and human resources to carry out these actions.*

To include these items on the agenda of relevant inter-ministerial conferences, such as the Inter-ministerial Commission on Women's Rights.

EDUCATION

From the work of CRACIS and the consultations carried out in this context, one alarming finding emerges: the education system in the Brussels Region, far from favouring inclusion, is perceived as reinforcing existing stereotypes by adopting a European-centred teaching approach, particularly through history and religion classes.

In this respect, the following courses of action should be considered by the competent authorities:

- To integrate Islamophobia and its gender dimension into the *curriculum* of citizenship classes ;
- To encourage, or even making mandatory, the integration of Islamophobia and its gender dimension in diversity courses for future teachers.

EMPLOYMENT

Employment is one of the sectors with the highest number of cases of discrimination based on religious beliefs (96 cases recorded by Unia in 2019) or gender (332 cases recorded by the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men in 2019). In this area it is above all recommended to :

- Include gender-based Islamophobia in diversity training for managers and HR ;
- Train employers' and workers' unions on this issue ;
- Raise awareness on this issue in companies through the Actiris diversity department ;
- Disseminate e-div, a virtual tool to have a better management of diversity in companies and to become familiar with the regulations in force.

AWARENESS RAISING

As it has been pointed out, lack of knowledge and understanding of others, of their culture, feeds the stereotypes and prejudices that arise from it. Raising the awareness of all components of Brussels society (citizens, leaders, public and private services, etc.) is essential to effectively combat Islamophobia against Muslim girls and women.

In this regard, the following courses of action should be considered by the competent authorities:

- To improve information on issues related to islamophobia, including issues related to girls and women :
 - *To conduct participatory action research on the theme of islamophobia towards Muslim girls and women ;*
 - *To widely disseminate the results of this action-research;*
 - *To gather all existing documentation on the subject directly on the website of Unia, an independent public institution that combats discrimination and promotes equal opportunities in Belgium.*
- To organize federative educational events around issues related to Muslim cultures ;
- To promote collaborative training tools, for example, from UNIA or CCIB ;
- To integrate the issue of islamophobia towards Muslim girls and women into existing relevant training courses :
 - *To train police officers in diversity courses ;*
 - *To ensure the participation of a maximum number of people in these trainings, in particular by reinforcing incentives for the police's officers ;*
 - *To allocate the necessary financial and human resources to ensure the sustainability of these trainings.*

MEDIA

An important role is played by the media (press, online, social networks) in the dissemination of islamophobic ideas. There is an urgent need for action at this level. To do so, it is recommended to:

- Raise the awareness of the media about the issue of islamophobia towards girls and women and their role in amplifying this phenomenon :
 - *Encourage initiatives such as the week against islamophobia organized by the CCIB (Semaine Bruxelloise d'Actions contre la Haine et l'Islamophobie) with the theme "Islamophobia in the media end press" ;*
 - *Draw on the results of such initiatives to identify good practices and/or new ideas of actions for the media.*
- Involve the media in sensitizing the general public to the issue of islamophobia against girls and women by emphasizing their potential for peacemaking;
- Draw on the various actions and initiatives undertaken in other areas related to the promotion of equality and inclusion in which the media are involved.

COLLABORATION

Concerning the issues related to Equal Opportunities, a transversal competence in Brussels-Capital Region, the stakes related to the fight against islamophobia against Muslim girls and women require collaboration between all the stakeholders.

In terms of collaboration, the following possible actions should be considered:

- To collaborate with those concerned when measures relating to islamophobia, especially towards girls and women, are being considered and/or taken ;
- Among public authorities, to adopt a global and coordinated approach to the problem:
 - *To encourage collaborative work within inter-ministerial commissions ;*
- With the associative field/grassroots associations (militant, conviction-based, feminist, cultural, etc.) : support civil society projects aimed at preventing islamophobia and/or sexism:
 - *To encourage partnerships between different sectors ;*
To allocate the financial and human resources necessary to carry out civil society projects aimed at preventing islamophobia and/or sexism.