



European Forum of Muslim Women Work, Experiences and Practices in combating Islamophobia

First of all I would like to thank organizers for arranging this important event and for inviting us to be a part of it. I am here to present the work and experiences of European Forum of Muslim women related to Islamophobia.

During last two days we have heard very interesting presentations and perspectives but also some worrying facts from European Islamophobia report which unfortunately confirms our experiences from the ground.

I would also like to thank all the speakers and participants for taking part in the work against Islamophobia. We believe that every contribution in this area is important and that we should use all our energies and capacities.

In that sense we could say that significance and potential of EFOMW in this work lies in our member organisations (which are active at grass root level), in their relationships within the society (in different European countries) and their experiences of problems that Islamophobia causes for people in everyday life. We can for example use our network to organize research in the field, collect data and more, and be the platform through which Muslim women can speak for them selves.

ABOUT US:

European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW) has been created at the beginning of 2006 to enhance coordination of Muslim female associations across the Europe. It works within the European Union for the consolidation of bonds and the exchange of experiences between the various members in order to fight against Islamophobia and discrimination, and support the involvement and empowerment of Muslim women in the society.

Since 2003, women's run organizations from different European countries participated in working meetings and exchange. After three years of coordination and cooperation an urgent request was felt to stand as an interlocutor with the European authorities and civil society. EFOMW was born.

Our member organisations, from 13 European countries, are grassroots organisations and are active in different fields of work in their communities, such as education, social work, human rights etc.

Forum primarily serves as a union of Muslim women's NGO's and works to:

- Support the participation of Muslim women in society as proactive citizens
- Represent and defend their rights and interests within Europe

Forum is based in Brussels to take advantage of proximity to the EU institutions.

It serves as a bridge between various stakeholders in the community and offers Muslim women a voice on social and political issues, empowers them to claim their legal rights and encourages Muslim women to fully participate and contribute to a better social construction of Europe.

The Forum is committed to make a change on the mentality and the condition of Muslim woman and puts a great effort to change the negative common impressions that imprison the Muslim woman within a pejorative framework.

EFOMW organizes conferences, seminars and congresses; issues publications and feeds the media with important information regarding Muslim women in Europe; and initiate and participate in social and political debates.

The objectives of our actions are two-fold:

- The promotion of women's rights within the Muslim community and the mainstream society.
- Building a dialogue with society in the fight against racism and discrimination to deconstruct prejudices and to allay the fears and tensions.

The actions of the Forum are divided into three main areas:

- 1) The training of leaders and spokesmen of the member associations
- 2) The partnership and coordination with organizations of civil society, intellectuals and politicians.
- 3) The Research by establishing CERIF (Islamic Studies and Research Centre on Women Issues) in 2009.

The purpose of these actions is to achieve more peaceful coexistence of different groups in our society, based on shared core values and respect for cultural and religious diversity.

We are members of larger networks such as: European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Social Platform, The Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE) and we cooperate/are in dialogue with number of organisations and institutions in our work, such as Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO), Amnesty International, European Year of Citizens Alliance (EYCA) 2013, EU-TR Civil Network for Women in Politics, OSCE / ODIHR, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, European Commission, European Parliament etc., as well as the local and national authorities in various European countries where our member organisations engage.

OUR WORK:

In recent decades we have in different ways experienced a gradual downplaying of civil rights, liberties and equality of European Muslim women. The testimonies and data from across Europe show an alarming increase of Islamophobia, and in particular its disproportionate effect on Muslim women. Still, we lack a strategy that corresponds to the seriousness of this issue.

Forum is not primarily defined as an advocacy or a Human rights organisation but this situation has led us to put more efforts on work in this area.

Some of our recent and current actions/steps taken in that direction:

- Roundtable seminar 2015 ‘What are the main issues, challenges and opportunities facing Muslim women in Europe?’ which resulted in the public hearing ‘Women Against Islamophobia’ at the EU parliament in march 2016.¹

Both events were organised with intention to shed light on the growing Islamophobia in Europe and its devastating impact, particularly on Muslim women.

Events brought together politicians, human rights activists and academic experts to discuss not only what consequences Islamophobia has on the social, political and economic lives of Muslim women, but also to stress the need for immediate action to guarantee European Muslim women full equality.

- Cooperation with ENAR in the project: 'Forgotten women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Women' with recently published report ²
- Participation as civil society representative (invited to speak at the panel on the specific issues faced by Muslim Women in Europe in terms of Islamophobia) in events:
 - Colloquium on Fundamental Rights: 'Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe', October 2015 (European Commission) ³
 - Round table on 'Combating Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe', February 2016 (EU parliament/ ARDI)
 - Launch of the EU High Level Group on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and other forms of intolerance, Jun 2016 (European Commission)
- Forum is also a part of coalition of organisations working to fight Islamophobia, having dialog with MEP's and EU Commission's coordinator for islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred.
- Running project 'Women against islamophobia' sponsored by Open Society Foundations. It is capacity building project and aims to strengthen EFOMW's and its member organisations capacity in efforts to combat Islamophobia. It includes building advocacy strategies, raising awareness, building coalitions with other CSO, etc., as well as to join Brussels based advocacy initiatives to demand equality of Muslim women in Europe within the EU policy framework.

CHALLENGES:

Although we are working against Islamophobia in general, our work is more focused on how Islamophobia affects women.

In that sense we recognise some specific challenges that need to be tackled on local, national and EU level. For example:

- An alarming increase of Islamophobia, and in particular its disproportionate effect on Muslim women. Muslim women are more exposed to violence, hate crime and hate speech with Islamophobic motives than Muslim men.
(We need data collection)
- Denial of Islamophobia
(Need to politically recognise it and recognise it as a form of racism)
- Media; Misinterpretation, prejudice and stereotyping spread by media but also some politicians about Muslim women also contributes to creating a fertile ground for discriminatory practices and violence on the ground. Islamophobic speech has moved from the far right into the mainstream.
(Need of changing narratives)

The recent examples of spread of public discourse against Muslim women are French ministers (M. Valls ⁴, L.Rossignol ⁵) that held distressful comments on the headscarf. Such discourses not only negate the freedom of belief and of conscience of these women, but they also infantilize these women and alienate them from the mainstream. The UK Prime Minister (D. Cameron ⁶) as well had some inappropriate comments on Muslim women. These speeches, fuelled with similar comments / portrayals of Muslim women in the media, contribute to normalizing discriminations against Muslim women.

- Exclusion from the public debate and in some countries from different spheres of social life. Structural discrimination in areas of housing, employment, education etc. (EU to push member states to implement the existing laws to protect ethnic and religious minorities)

In France again, a survey showed that 79% of Women think Hijab is a problem to *Vivre Ensemble*. This discrimination is transposed to the employment sector. Muslim women in Europe still face structural discrimination in the job market. These women are denied access to economic empowerment and independence and are further alienated from the mainstream society.

Challenges are the internalization of discrimination and issues of avoidance. Muslim Women may feel like they should not even pursue higher education or apply for certain jobs due to the fear that they will be rejected anyways. This is dangerous for a healthy democracy, as all citizens must feel like they have equal chances and opportunities.

- Multiple discrimination of Muslim women. Muslim women suffer from the same inequalities all women experience but these are compounded by additional factors, including perceived or real ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class, etc. (Need of including an intersectional approach in combating Islamophobia when it comes to Muslim women)

OUR APPROACH:

Empowering

- To build capacity of EFOMW's member organisations to advocate against Islamophobia, facilitate dialogue at different levels and contribute to a better coexistence in European societies, based on shared core values.

Rising awareness

- To inform European authorities to better understand the reality of Muslim women in Europe, their aspirations and the difficulties they encounter in the context of equal opportunities.
- To raise awareness of human and civil rights in the civil society / among individuals (educating communities) and to push law enforcement authorities

Cooperating

- To build meaningful partnerships with other adequate organisations and stand against discrimination based on religion, colour, race or any other kind of discrimination especially against Muslim women.

CONCLUSION:

Islamophobia is not a Muslim problem, it is European society problem and it needs to be tackled as such. With this we mean that not only Muslims and Muslim organisations should fight against it, but wider society must be aware of benefits in the combating it and in working for rights of all its citizens.

We need collective action with mixture of varied measures in order to counter it effectively.

Quoting European Agency for Fundamental Rights:

”The fight against discrimination, racism, xenophobia and related intolerance, as well as efforts to respect and protect fundamental rights must be an ongoing effort in the face of new challenges. This effort requires political will, efficient operational coordination and sharing of expertise and experience among all those involved, from EU bodies, through national, regional and local authorities, law enforcement agencies, the criminal justice system, educational authorities, statutory human rights and equality bodies, to service providers and civil society organisations.”⁷

It is important to Encourage Muslim CSO’s, groups and individuals to take the initiative and act proactively in local communities, to step forward toward others and to develop self-awareness that they are an integral part of the society, with equal rights and responsibilities. To involve different types of NGO’s, to encourage and empower projects with others, to learn from each other’s and break fears and prejudices.

Positive thing is that Muslim women group are now taking things in their own hands and moving forward, and that we see opportunities for join collaborations between different groups of civil society in work against discrimination.

Combating Islamophobia requires collective action and we hope to collaborate with all of you: politicians, academics, activists, NGO's and individuals in this struggle.

Thank you.

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1. More information at: <http://www.efomw.eu/>
 2. Report available at: http://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/20095_forgottenwomenpublication_v5_1_.pdf
 3. <http://ec.europa.eu/justice/events/colloquium-fundamental-rights-2015/>
 4. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/13/french-pm-ban-islamic-headscarves-universities-manuel-valls>
 5. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/french-minister-shocks-muslim-veil-slavery-comment-160330193124341.html>
 6. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/18/muslim-women-to-be-taught-english-in-20m-plan-to-beat-backward-attitudes>
 7. European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA); Promoting respect and diversity - Combating intolerance and hate (Contribution to the Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights), p.12; available at: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2015-paper-colloquium_en-0.pdf