

Hearing on Islamophobia in Europe, 11 April 2019 Strasbourg

Council of Europe, No Hate Parliamentary Alliance

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

EFOMW's presentation on Gendered Islamophobia in Europe:

Dear Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

On behalf of EFOMW it is an honour to present to you today at No Hate Parliamentary Alliance meeting, I would like to highlight today the issue of gendered Islamophobia, specifically its impact on the lives of EU citizens who are Muslim and women.

Few words about EFOMW

- EFOMW is the only human rights advocacy organisation run by women for women to present our own voices in Europe
- From 2006 our aim is protecting European Muslim women's fundamental rights, capacity building and empowerment of women's organisations across Europe
- The issue of the intersecting discrimination faced by Muslim women emerged as a critical issue of concern for our member organisations and our work.

Context

- Today, it is vital to discuss Islamophobia at the intersection of gender equality and violence against women and contribute to the debate on fundamental rights and equality of all.
- We observe a growing number of European countries with laws and policies that directly and indirectly restrict Muslim women's choice of clothing and subsequently their access to opportunity and rights.
- Restrictions on religious dress are often justified within the framework of neutrality that applies to people of all faiths, but in reality they mainly affect Muslim women.
- Muslim women's dress has been essentialised to notions of ethnicity and religion and private reasons for wearing the veil have become public property regardless whether their's is a personal, religious or political choice.
- Yet, the contentions around Muslim women's dress objectify them and "otherizes them as oppressed". Fear of Muslims have also led some governments to adopt policies banning the headscarf in public domains, leading to 'demonizing' the headscarf.

- The denial of Muslim women's rights is taking place in the context of rising anti-Muslim attitudes and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe – a problem that disproportionately affects women who can easily be identified as Muslim by wearing a veil.
- Gendered Islamophobia, is expressed in a complex mix of direct acts of violence, discrimination, social exclusion, media prejudice, structural sexism, and for those from an ethnic minority background, racism.

- Muslims overall, including those born in Europe, are imagined as uncivilized, misogynist and incompatible with Western values. But in addition, the 'war against terror' ideology pathologies Muslim women as voiceless and subordinate.
- The recent 'refugee crisis' triggered further resentments against Muslims resulting in thousands of assaults, attacks, hate crimes and hate speech incidents, e.g. Germany recorded 1,413 attacks on refugees in 2017
- So we observe that religious identity is easily racialized and Islamophobia, as a new form of racism. Race becomes a proxy of religion where Muslims are reduced to one dimension of their identity.
- Opinion polls in a number of European countries show that Muslim women wearing a headscarf are increasingly viewed as stereotypes from being oppressed or threatening. E.g. an opinion poll in Sweden found that 64.4% of Swedes believe that Muslim women are oppressed

Evidence

- **As EFOMW, we highlight the disproportionate impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women, their access to opportunities and rights and expression of gender inequality** because of prejudice and stereotypes.
- We witness a violation of Muslim women's fundamental rights, with discrimination on the basis of both their religion and gender. Muslim women bears the burden of the intersectional discrimination
- Feminists, politicians and the media frequently advocate against women's oppression by criticising the headscarf and in doing so, silence Muslim women, deny them their right to choose what they wear and to practice their faith. They speak for Muslim women rather than with Muslim women, creating social pressures on Muslim women from political discourse and media coverage.
- Muslim women wearing the hijab are central in the anti-Muslim hatred and at the disadvantaged position to socially and economically participate in public life due to fear of being attacked or their firm commitments to the freedom of choice of a dress code.
- The rising number of violent attacks on Muslim women who wear a headscarf, as well as their experience of discrimination at work and other spheres of life; labour market, education, access to services, media, political and institutional level, public spaces, including leisure and transportation.
 - o Some reports, e.g. House of Commons (Women & Equality Committee) report on Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK, say that Muslim women are the most marginalised group in the employment sector, experiencing the so called triple penalty, discrimination based on gender, religion and ethnicity.
 - o Research by the Pew Institute found that a ban on teachers wearing the headscarf in parts of Germany led Muslim women to abandon their careers. This in effect leads to Muslim women losing not only their jobs or vocations but their independence and financial security
 - o In France, some studies showed that only 1 percent of female applicants for jobs with a Muslim name and photo received a reply from employers, compared to 70 percent response rate to French sounding names (El Jahidi, 2018).

- A third of Muslim students in the UK have experienced abuse or hate crime in further and higher education, 79 percent of them thought it was motivated by prejudice against their religious identity

Therefore, EFOMW recognises that the multiple discrimination of Muslim women is often an overlooked issue of gender inequality debates. Also, discrimination against Muslim women is a tolerated and institutionalised violation of human rights

- The denial of Muslim women's rights is most evident in restrictions on their freedom to dress according to religious beliefs.
 - 18 of 45 countries in Europe (40%) had at least one law or policy limiting women's ability to wear religious attire in 2012-2013 (Human Rights Watch).
 - Europe stands out as the region with the most reports of women being harassed for wearing religious attire, with incidents recorded in 21 out of 45 countries in 2012- 2013 (Pew Research Center)
 - In the Netherlands, a study found that 90% of the victims of the Islamophobic hate crimes reported were women.
 - In France almost 100% of the victims of physical aggression in cases of Islamophobia were women (the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, CCIF)

Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women

- When I travel to Poland – I feel it worst at the airports, as soon as I came up near the first security screening before crossing security gate for metal detection, I am already granted a special sticker for an additional control
- Islamophobia has multiple and compounded effects on Muslim women;
 - Stigmatising and stereotyping denies them a voice, ignores the diversity among them, amalgamates all Muslim women into one group and fuels the kind of hatred that leads to harassment
 - Institutional discourses and media narrative that stigmatises and "otherize" Muslim women presenting them as either enemy from within or submissive and lacking agency have a trickle down effect and direct impact on these women's lives
 - First, it denies their right to wear religious clothing and the consequences of this breach on their freedom of thought, conscience and religion
 - Secondly, Structural barriers to employment and housing create further intersectional social inequalities and powerlessness that inhibit social mobility. Often triggering health consequences, poorer cognitive functioning, health behaviours, mental and physical health (Rosenthal, 2016)
 - Daily stressors stemming from identity-based discrimination impact on women at the individual, interpersonal and structural levels, affecting their health & well-being.
- Conversely, evidence suggests that reducing structural oppression, inequality and stigma improves the well-being of people belonging to stigmatised social groups.

EFOMW recognises discrimination against Muslim women as an expression of gender inequality and gender-based violence

- The framing of Muslim women and their religious clothing as antagonistic to European societies has been encouraging hate speech.
 - o Consequently, visibly Muslim women are subjected to verbal abuse – both in person and through the media – and violent physical assault.
 - o A significant majority of Islamophobic violence is expressed in an act or an attempt of pulling a headscarf (hijab).
 - o Yet, a man tearing off a woman's headscarf in public is as much a form of gender-based violence as a politician telling her she cannot wear it.
- EFOMW **and other groups**, such as ENAR, have been advocating for addressing Islamophobia and SGBV as one single issue.
- We should consider Islamophobia as a form of SGBV because it has a gendered nature, involves gender power relations and gender norms.
- Hatred against Muslims is frequently expressed in hatred against Muslim women; **hating Muslim women for being Muslim becomes an act of SGBV at the intersection of religion, gender and identity.**
- Treating anti-Muslim hatred in isolation from SGBV downgrades the dimension of violence suffered and makes gender hatred invisible. It normalizes the violence against women by not naming it.
- Yet, the Islamophobic phenomenon of violence against women and girls is hardly discussed in the international and national fora for Elimination of Violence Against Women.
- Hate crime against women motivated by Islamophobia deserves to be recognised as discrimination based on gender and religion
- Preventing and combating violence against women is one of the priorities of the committee. We wish the theme of gendered Islamophobia in intersection with VAW could be investigated by the Parliamentary Network "Women Free from Violence".

Conclusions

- The EFOMW is deeply concerned that the proclaimed gender equality by European institutions is endangered by ever rampant discrimination based on gender and religious beliefs.
- A cohesive, democratic and peaceful Europe has to be one that takes a firm position against any form of religious intolerance and gender inequality.
- EFOMW welcomes the initiative of the Council of Europe's No Hate Parliamentary Assembly and urges to recognise the gendered aspect of Islamophobia and take firm steps in raising awareness among its member states about the need to tackle the stigma and discrimination faced by Muslim women.
- This urgently requires a recognition of the intersectionality of discrimination they face, based on both religion and gender.
- The stigmatisation and exclusion of Muslim women will continue to reinforce social divisions, increase isolation and create further tensions in a Europe that desperately needs better social participation and engagement from all segments of society.

- A continent that prides itself on the rule of law being above all cannot continue to witness the open violation of the fundamental rights of a section of its population.
- A pluralistic Europe needs to extend the principles of freedom and equality to all its people, regardless of their faith, gender or any other aspect of their identity.
- We need change in policy and political willingness to address the cost of discrimination that Muslim women suffer which is at present borne by all Europe in socio-economic dimensions.

Recommendations:

To protect the fundamental rights of all EU citizens we recommend:

- ➔ National authorities and Fundamental rights Agency should facilitate the collection and monitoring of disaggregated data on gender, ethnicity and religion in studies of multiple discrimination and victimisation surveys.
- ➔ Encourage and initiate studies and reports that monitor intersectional discriminations
- ➔ EU and national institutions should perform impact assessment of national laws restricting religious clothing since the first French legislation of 2004.
- ➔ Hold member states accountable for the Islamophobic crime against Muslim women and incitement to hatred against Muslim women.
- ➔ Member states should adopt national strategies to combat Islamophobia covering, among others, discrimination in employment.

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