



Muslim women and
communities
against gender
Islamophobia in society

MAGIC NATIONAL DISPATCHES

Mapping Muslim Women Voices and Gendered Islamophobia and Stereotypes in Media

A dispatch written by Media Diversity Institute

BELGIUM I

Introduction

The MAGIC (**M**uslim women and communities **A**gainst **G**ender **I**slamophobia in so**C**iety) project aims to prevent gendered islamophobia in the media in Belgium and Spain through different activities, including media monitoring. This report presents the results of the first part of the analysis of the Belgian media, operated by the Media Diversity Institute, and covers the period from May to September 2021. The three Belgian media monitored as part of this project are *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, while the three Spanish media monitored by Al Fanar are *El País*, *La Razón*, and *ABC*.

A specific methodology was developed in the context of the project, aiming to analyse qualitatively and quantitatively how these six media report on Muslim women. It is important to note that only articles written by staff journalists or by the media's editorial

staff were taken into account. All other data related to the criteria for filtering the articles and the systematised data can be found in the methodology documentation.¹

General Findings

Over the five-month period, the searches using the provided guidelines returned 122 articles. The articles were overwhelmingly published in May, June, and July, with only 14 being published in August and September.

The coverage of the monitored themes was much higher in the two covered French-language media than in *Het Laatste Nieuws*. During this monitoring period, *Het Laatste Nieuws* published articles of relevance that were largely taken from francophone Belgian as well as from international media. Following the MAGIC Media Monitoring (MMM) guidelines, only in-house publications were to be included which may explain fewer *Het Laatste Nieuws* articles. Additionally, higher coverage in French-language media may be seen as representative of the way francophone Belgian media covers questions of religious identity, or simply indicative of the editorial directions of the individual media.

Two primary topics covered in the articles

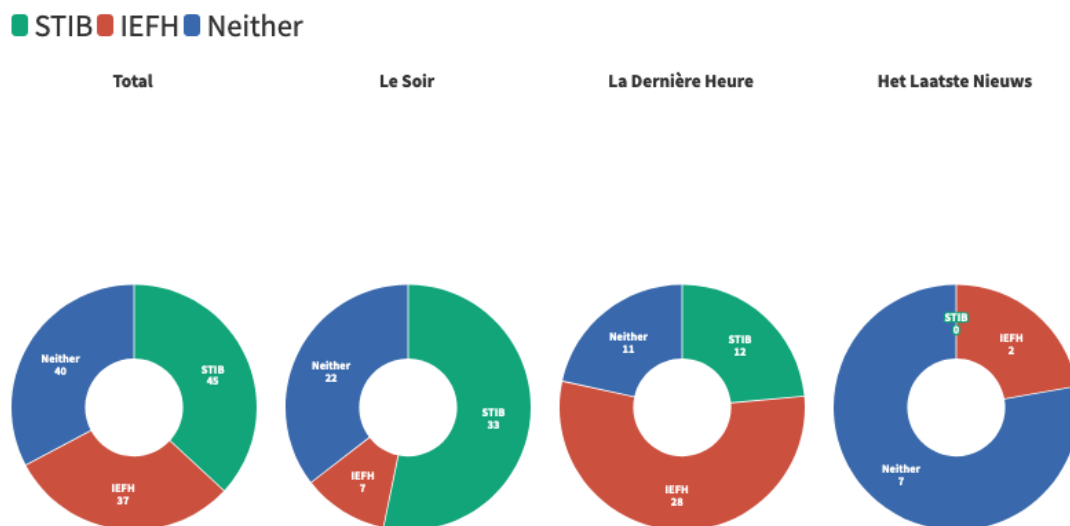
The monitoring period was greatly marked by two primary topics: the case of a woman who was discriminated against in her employment at the STIB because she wore a headscarf and the resulting judicial rulings and political discourse surrounding her

¹ The results of this report were first presented during a national consultation held online on the 24/11/2021, in which the following Belgian experts participated: Julie Pascoet, Sarra Riahi, Saïla Ouald-Chaib, Sarra El Massaoudi, Zainab El Yahyaoui and Fatima Zibouh.

discrimination; and the case of Ms. Ihsane Haouach, who was named the governmental commissioner for the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, a post from which she quickly resigned after a wave of online attacks and political backlash.

A breakdown of the presence or absence of these two topics, as well as the numbers by individual media can be seen below:

Graphic 1: Coverage of STIB Discrimination or IEFH Commissioner Topics



Own production

As we can see, the number of articles covering the Discrimination at the STIB is superior to all other topics. Furthermore, the very fact that articles covering neither the STIB nor the IEFH commissioner cases represent less than a third of the sample responding to search criteria shows the degree to which the discussion of these two topics dominated the discourse surrounding Muslim women in Belgium over the 5-month period.

In analysing the breakdown of these topics across the individual media, we can see that not only did articles from *Le Soir* dominate discussion of the STIB Discrimination case, but that articles discussing that case represent a majority of *Le Soir* articles that meet search criteria during the given period. The same holds for the *La Dernière Heure* coverage, which both majoritarily discussed the IEFH commissioner case and was also the preponderant source for the IEFH commissioner related coverage.

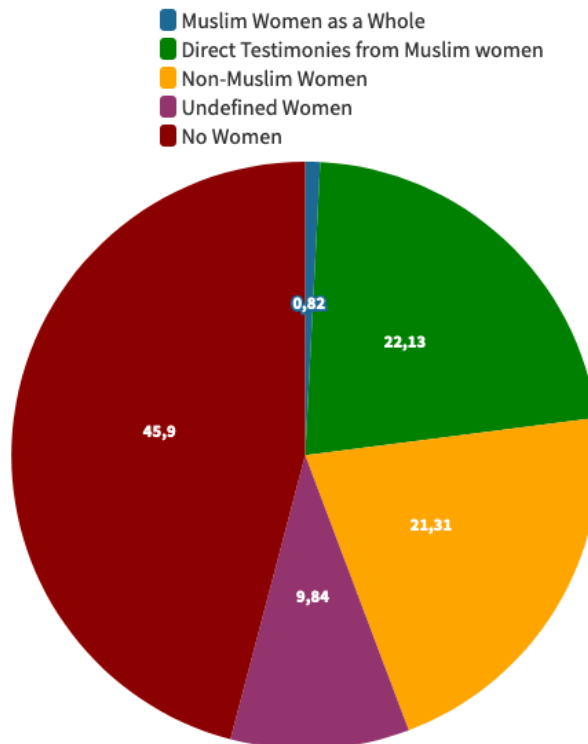
Despite the clear centrality of these topics in their respective media, which could be seen as representative of the editorial stances or perceptions of interest to the readership base of the media, it is the opinion of the monitors that these results are inconclusive: one should be careful not to overinterpret the focus of a media on a particular theme, as it could be the result of a given journalist's beat being particularly active, or the follow-up and discussion generated by an exclusive interview with that particular media. Despite this ambiguity, the prevalence of these two themes has had a huge effect on both the number of results and the trends within them, and should be kept in mind throughout the rest of this analysis.

Off the back of these two topics (fewer) additional articles and opinion pieces were published covering issues around the headscarf more broadly. In *Het Laatste Nieuws* (and occasionally in *La Dernière Heure*), headscarf related topics were discussed at the backdrop off the so-called neutrality principle and other societal issues, namely social and political fragmentation allegedly caused by the headscarf debate (“hoofddoekendebat”).

Female Voices, or a lack thereof

In all these articles which primarily discuss women and their roles in society, female voices are rarely called on for testimony, as can be seen in the graph below.

Graphic 2: Women's Voices collected in the Article

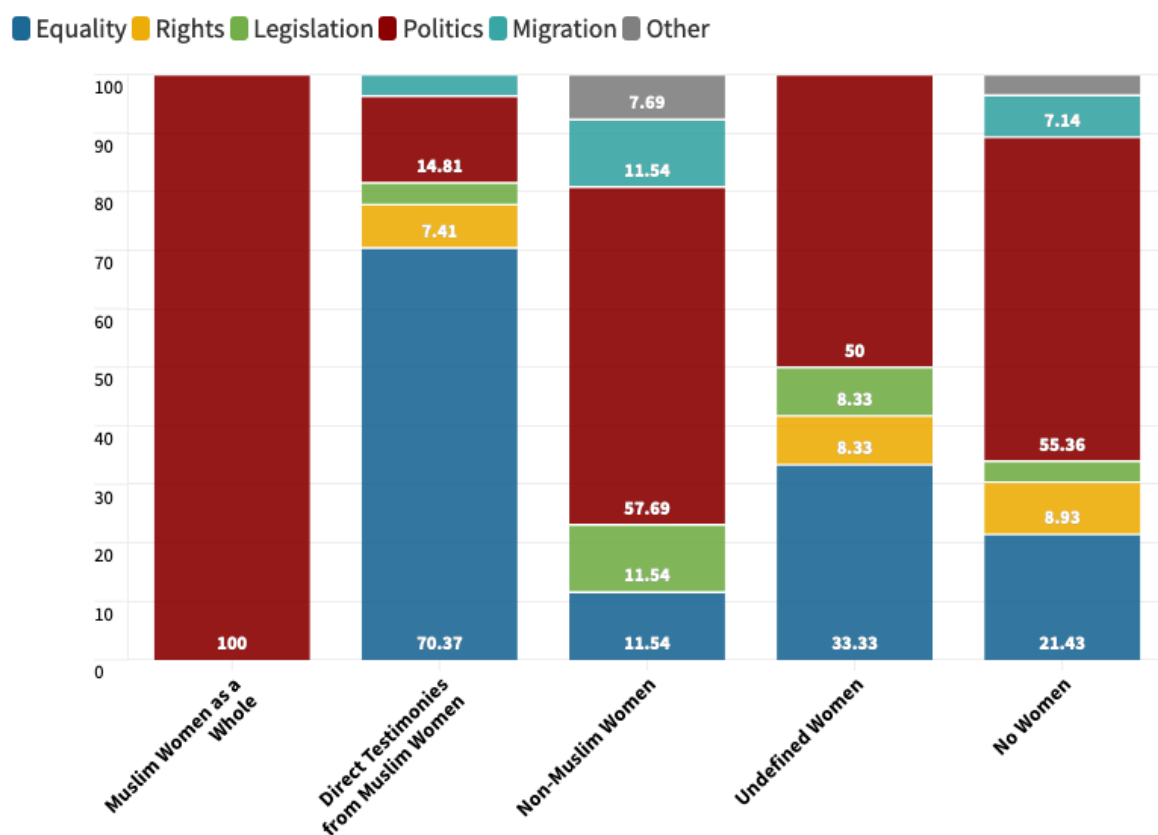


Own production

Not only are few female voices platformed, but only 22.1% of them are clearly identified as Muslim women in the article. Even if we charitably assume that the 9.8% of “Undefined Women” are all Muslim (a gross oversimplification), the total still leaves less than a third of articles monitored discussing Muslim Women which feature the voices of those women.

Additionally, consider the following chart, which cross-references the presence or absence of women's voices with answers to this question: "**Does the text deal with any of these issues?** -Equality (1) -Rights (2) -Legislation (3) -Politics (4) -Migration (5) -Other (6)"

Chart 1: Presence or Absence of Women when dealing with specific issues



Own production

As one can see, articles with Direct Testimonies from Muslim Women are overwhelmingly likely to discuss issues of inequality, much more than all other types of articles.

However, all other categories have Politics as a majority subject, which is incredibly telling of the state of discourse: when Muslim women are the objects of discussion (as opposed to the agents and producers of their own lives and narratives), they are primarily discussed through the lens of politics. Their rights, their lived experience, and the inequalities they suffer are perceived as far less important than the positions of politicians discussing them.

While this might be seen as rather classic of structural political misogyny, the presence of so much political coverage in the Non-Muslim Women category (and, to a lesser degree, Undefined Women) implies an intersection of discriminations, a potential indicator of exactly the gendered islamophobia MAGIC aims to curtail.

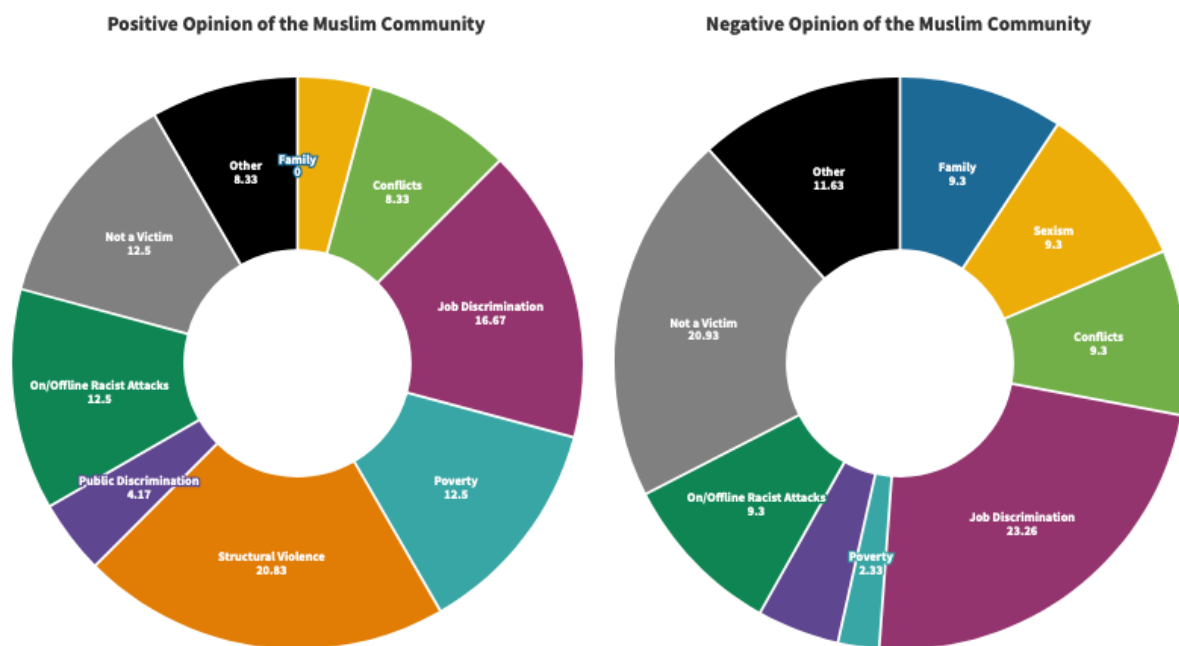
Prevalence of narratives concerning Job Discrimination

Another interesting finding, especially considering the two big themes covered in the data, is the prevalence of narratives concerning Job Discrimination. The overwhelming plurality of articles discuss the women as victims of Job Discrimination (44.3% of the monitored articles), more than all other forms of oppression combined (39.3%), or of articles in which the woman is not presented as a victim (16.4%). While this would immediately seem to be positive - implying that Belgian media is particularly aware of the difficulties Muslim women experience in the workplace - care should be taken not to misinterpret the findings.

By way of example, find below two graphs, each representing these perceptions of women's victimhood within the subsets of articles in which the journalist portrays the Muslim community in a Positive or Negative light, respectively:

Graphic 3: The Woman is portrayed as a Victim of...

- Family
- Sexism
- Conflicts
- Job Discrimination
- Poverty
- Structural Violence
- Public Discrimination
- On/Offline Racist Attacks
- Not a Victim
- Other



Own production

At first glance, we can clearly see the positive and negative perceptions of Muslim communities at play in these graphs: The largest factor in the victimisation of women according to the articles which portray the Muslim communities positively is Structural Violence, closely followed by Job Discrimination, Poverty, and Online/Offline Racist Attacks.

Meanwhile, in the subset of articles in which the opinion of the Muslim citizenship is negative, one can see that over 20% of articles present Muslim women not being victims (and in some articles being presented either as threats to society or as "false victims", over-exaggerating their oppression) and that women are also often portrayed as victims of their family or of sexism. The monitors argue that this representation of sexism is often treated as the sexism of Muslim men towards Muslim women and thus much less as everyday sexism or institutional sexism. This is evident from several articles in which Muslim women are portrayed in a favourable light and seen as victims of sexism, but often only when they "rebelled" against Muslim men presented as "conservative".

Final remarks

To return to the question concerning Job Discrimination, we can see that in a plurality of articles conveying a Negative Opinion of Muslims, the woman is perceived as a victim of Job Discrimination. This is where the limitations of a purely quantitative analysis reveal themselves, as in many of these articles the solution to her Job Discrimination is simple: removal of the headscarf, rather than tackling structural or institutional discrimination.

A large number of the articles the monitors identified during this period posit the woman's wearing of the headscarf as either something imposed on her by the aforementioned "conservative" Muslim men, or an "activist" and "ideological" stance on her part, seen as incompatible with either Belgian values or proper workplace conduct. The monitors further note that this negative portrayal largely arise when the Muslim woman/women in question take on a more visible and public facing role. In other words, when the women in question challenge the political invisibilisation of Muslim women by their public presence, a stronger and more negative media outpour is noted.

MAGIC is a project which aims to prevent gendered Islamophobia in Spain and in Belgium, in particular in media outlets, and to draw lessons useful for other European countries. It is funded by the European Commission, within the framework of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme.

In the span of two years MAGIC will work to map gender islamophobia in Belgian and Spanish newspapers with a twofold objective: to provide Muslim communities' leaders, Muslim women, and CSOs working on diversity with skills and tools to recognise and stand against stereotypes against Muslim women in public narratives and to promote inclusiveness of Muslim voices in the media.

MAGIC will do so not only through training of journalists & capacity enhancement and promoting awareness campaigns but also by fostering knowledge, dialogue, and mutual cooperation among Muslim communities' representatives, Muslim women, and CSOs and media practitioners.

Follow us at <https://magic.iemed.org/>

An information elaborated by Media Diversity Institute.

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