



# DEBUNKING MYTHS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, MUSLIM WOMEN, FEMINISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE



europaean  
network  
against  
racism



**This leaflet is part of a unique cooperation between the feminist and anti-racism movements in Europe on the project “Forgotten Women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women”. Given the continued debates and misconceptions around both Muslim women and feminism and their societal impact, the European Network Against Racism is debunking some of the more common stereotypes about feminism and Muslim women in Europe in order to promote a shared understanding of equal treatment in a diverse society.**

This document focuses on Muslim women in Europe in order to better address the intersectional discrimination affecting Muslim women (gender, religion, race and class). It also looks at myths on feminists in general, which needs to be debunked, including in the anti-racism movement.

We believe that addressing these myths jointly will reinforce mutual trust and hope this will contribute to promoting more coalitions against those trying to pit groups against each other.

The stigmatisation of feminism and of people who identify as feminists is an example of the patriarchal social system (the patriarchy) trying to control and define concepts that threaten their privileged place in society. Reinforcing a negative connotation of the term “feminist” has a detrimental effect; it contributes to the misunderstanding of the movement, creates divisions (instead of unifying to achieve common goals) and makes individuals wary of calling themselves feminists. In its most basic sense, feminism is defined as the belief that women and men should be treated equally in a society.

Muslim women are no different than any other women: they face the same barriers and oppression. But these can be compounded by additional factors such as religion, nationality and/or ethnicity. As a result of Islamophobia, a specific form of racism that refers to acts of violence and discrimination against Muslims or those perceived as such, Muslim women are depicted in collective consciousness as oppressed or dangerous, submissive and complicit in the violence they endure. They are the subjects of studies and fantasies but never the narrators of their own story. These myths are deeply rooted in society, including in the feminist movement, and impact these women’s daily lives.

# Myths and truths on Muslim women

## Myth #1

**Muslim women are oppressed and submissive**

**Muslim women, just as any other women, can be oppressed by the patriarchy. In fact, many Muslim women in Europe are empowered and leading active lives.**

Muslim women in Europe have to face the patriarchy both within and outside their communities – so why focus only on the first? To say there is an Islamic specificity regarding sexism, or that Muslim women are more oppressed than other women, is groundless. Just as any other religious, social or political frame, Islam can be used by men to impose a system of power that will preserve their privileges. Muslim women's emancipation should not be used as a smoke screen to divert attention from the overall patriarchal system that oppresses every woman and whose emancipation is far from being a given.

Many Muslim women in Europe feel empowered to play active roles in their societies. Unfortunately, not only are these role models rarely made visible, but obstacles preventing access to typical paths of emancipation, such as employment or education, are increasing.

## Myth #2

**Muslim women are conservative**

**Muslim women are as diverse as women in general and as the rest of society. They are not a monolithic bloc.**

They can be highly educated or not, be from the working, middle or upper class, have a variety of life experiences, be socialist, centrist or liberal, etc. Ultimately, as in any other set of ideologies and values, they will have different interpretations of Islam, and have conservative views as much as liberal ones.

Most religions are lagging behind in ensuring an equal expression of men and women. But one cannot assume that Muslim women are "backward" because they value a lifestyle articulated around religious values and practices. This also implies that the only path to "modernity" would mean turning one's back on religious practice and spirituality. In fact, voices bringing a woman's perspective on religion are getting more attention and offering alternative narratives both within and outside their communities.

# Myth #3

## Muslim women are forced to wear the headscarf

**Although some Muslim women are forced to wear the headscarf or other religious clothes, others choose to wear the headscarf.**

One can't systematically dismiss free choice just because one assumes that this choice is an internalisation of patriarchy. We can question how patriarchy made it possible for the headscarf to become a symbol of modesty for women, but we could equally question a lot of decisions made by women. The issue of choice is also important for feminists as each woman's agency and right to choose, but we also must see that choice happens within an overall system of patriarchy which oppresses women.

The pressure in Europe on Muslim women to unveil to "free" themselves is grounded in colonial roots and amounts to telling a woman her body is not hers and needs external approval to be "accepted" in public. At the end of the day, this alienates all women. Forcing women to wear the headscarf is just as violent as forcing them to remove it. In both cases, it ignores women's right to self-determination and only substitutes one form of alienation

by another. Whatever one may think about the headscarf's meaning, in no circumstances should it justify exclusion, discrimination and hate crime against a woman who wears the headscarf. Muslim women should be able to enjoy equal access to education, employment and goods and services regardless of how they dress. Preventing them from doing so in areas enabling emancipation, fulfilment and independence is actually counter-productive.

The headscarf here refers to a piece of clothing that Muslim women wear that covers the hair and head but leaves the face uncovered. The most common Arabic term used to describe it is 'hijab'. This is also the most common type of head covering worn by Muslim women in Europe.

# Myth #4

## Muslim women are uneducated and dependent

**Muslim women in Europe are enrolled in the school system just as anyone else and are in fact outperforming boys in schools and universities in some countries.**

In the United Kingdom, more young Muslim women have been gaining degrees at British universities than Muslim men, even though they have been under-represented for decades. So much for being uneducated.

The truth is uglier. Once on the job market, many Muslim women face intersectional discrimination, preventing them from accessing jobs in line with their actual skills and diplomas. Likewise, discrimination in education can result in Muslim women choosing a specific field of study by anticipating and thus internalising the discrimination process – for example choosing to study nursing when they can become a surgeon. In this case, it is racism and discrimination that prevent some Muslim women from being independent of someone else's income.

Some NGOs do impressive work to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes on Muslim women. [Al Nisa](#) for instance, in the Netherlands, shows that Muslim women in the Netherlands are strong and emancipated, and they are stepping to the fore more boldly than ever. They work in national politics ([Wassila Hachchi](#)), are the face of national media ([Naeeda Aurangzeb](#)), and hold prominent positions in the legal field ([Famile Arslan](#)). Using the Twitter hashtags #TraditionallySubmissive and #CanYouHearUsNow, Muslim women from different backgrounds in the United Kingdom and the United States went viral showcasing their achievements and success.

# Myth #5

## Muslim women employees wearing the headscarf cannot be neutral

**Wearing the headscarf or any specific religious garment doesn't have any effect on the ability of a woman to perform her tasks in a neutral way.**

Neutrality should be required for the tasks you perform as an employee, not for the clothes you wear.

Trying to remove unwanted visible differences in areas of society is not neutral. It is grounded in racial discrimination.

A recent decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union allows companies to prohibit religious signs in order to pursue a policy of neutrality under certain conditions. However, a rule which bans religious clothing is not neutral: it is biased against employees who hold a religious belief expressed through what they wear. In addition, whether or not you wear a headscarf, the way you dress says something about you.

Workplaces in Europe should be the reflection of an increasingly diverse Europe and not only open to those who fit white secular norms.

# Myth #6

## Muslim women are subject to domestic violence

**Sadly, many women in Europe experience domestic violence, including Muslim women.**

Almost 1 in 2 (42%) of all women in Europe have experienced a form of physical violence by a partner (current and/or previous) since the age of 15.2 Violence against women happens everywhere in society (from the upper to the working classes, by the educated and non-educated, majority and minorities...). Muslim men are no more violent than any other men. Pointing fingers at men from minorities and wrongly inferring that Muslim men are inherently violent only shuts down any criticism of a systemic and structural patriarchy in our societies and silences non-Muslim victims' experiences of violence.

The truth is that Muslim women are also the main targets of islamophobic crimes, especially if they wear a headscarf. Verbal and physical assaults combine sexist and racist insults or gestures. In most cases, the perpetrator is a man who doesn't know the victim. Spikes in attacks against Muslim women occur after terrorist attacks, grounded in a couple of decades of public narratives dehumanising, demonising and delegitimising the presence of these women in the public sphere.

---

2 European Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence against women: an EU-wide survey Main results, 2014.

# *Myths and truths on feminism*

## Myth #1

**Feminists are trying to be men.**  
**Variation: Women are trying to “take the place” of men**

**Women are in fact taking their rightful place in society, where they should be able to participate fully in all spheres and without discrimination.**

Wanting to participate in the realm of public life that has for so long been blocked to women has nothing to do with striving to be male. Feminists want to see the dismantlement of the systemic discrimination and subjugation that kept most women uneducated and at home for many thousands of years. Feminists want women to participate fully in society as women and on equal terms with men.

## Myth#2

**How women dress says something about their competences and/or femininity**

**One’s appearance does not determine one’s skills or worth.**

To think that a woman wearing a suit or other clothing article associated with masculinity would make her more competent or worthy of respect is ridiculous. It is just as ridiculous to think that a woman wearing lipstick and high heels would be any less competent and worthy of respect. Ultimately, a woman choosing – by and for her own self – what she likes to wear and the image she wishes to project is her choice alone and should be respected as such. There is also no single way of being feminine or definition of what “feminine” means.



## Myth #3

### Feminists are “man-haters” or “misandrists”

**Feminists do not hate men, the “enemy is prejudice”.<sup>1</sup>**

Many disagree with those men who try to enforce patriarchal systems and those who would like to see women stripped of all agency and relegated to subservience.

Feminist men and women alike hate sexist and misogynist behaviours, not men.

---

<sup>1</sup> From “I’m not a feminist, but...” by Gaby Hinsliff. Featured in Fem 21- the 21st Century Feminist, European

## Myth #4

### Women and feminists are hysterical

**This language is meant to belittle women and their concerns and paint them as irrational based on their anatomy.**

Often women are told to “calm down” when speaking their mind. This is dismissive and is basically another way of saying “shut up”.

Looking at the etymology of the word hysterical can give some perspective. Hysteria derives from the Latin hystericus (meaning “of the womb”) and was considered a dysfunction that made women neurotic and drove them to insanity. It was said that it was not their fault and this “condition” was blamed on their anatomy. It is the reproductive organs – not the frustration of being forced to live life as a second-class, often invisible person – that drove women mad.

# Myth #5

**Women turn to feminism because they are: ugly, cannot find a partner, unloved, lesbian, etc.**

**Women turn to feminism because they are angry at injustice, fed up with having to justify taking their rightful place alongside men in society, and know that nothing will change unless they speak up.**

This argument is a last resort, cheap-shot used to attack feminists when the attackers have no more ammunition (because the facts have disarmed them of their other faulty stereotypes). Basically what this myth says is that you, the feminist, are the problem – not the oppressive patriarchal system that you are challenging. Turning to personal attacks on one's appearance, sexual orientation or marital status is small-minded, contemptible, irrelevant, and shows clearly the fear that perpetuates such a myth.

# Myth #6

**There is no longer any need for feminism, equality has been achieved**

**In fact, it is thanks to centuries of feminist struggle that women now have the right to vote, own property, and make their own sexual and reproductive health choices in many parts of the world. However, there is still work to be done.**

Feminists across Europe (and across the globe) are currently facing a backlash against women's rights. There is a resurgence of traditional conservative values and religious fundamentalism that would like to see women's rights rolled back. Inequality and misogyny still hurt women, despite the progress made so far. While marital rape has finally been criminalised in the EU, the fact remains that in the EU [one in three women](#) has experienced some form of physical and/or sexual assault since the age of 15. And while we see a few women holding high political posts such as President and Prime Minister, the truth is that in Europe, on average, women's representation in national parliaments is less than 30%.

In fact, in Europe progress on gender equality has stagnated in the past decade, with official [statistics from the European Institute for Gender Equality](#) showing that women are only 53% of the way towards full equality with men. Why the lack of progress?

# Myth #7

## **There is only one kind of feminism; feminism is monolithic**

**Just as women are diverse and face different forms of oppression, so the path to emancipation can't be the same for all women.**

The understanding of intersectionality – recognising that multiple grounds of discrimination and oppression shape very different realities and that all have to be taken into account to fully liberate women – has grown out of the feminist movement over the past decades. Minorities' liberation movements dealing with race and class have opened discussions on the limitations of a mainstream feminism which has sometimes ignored the realities of racism faced by minority women. Similarly feminists have encouraged anti-racism and civil rights struggles to open up to the multiple discrimination faced by minority women, including in their own movements. Dialogue between mainstream feminist organisations and minority-led feminist organisations must be encouraged to include all experiences of womanhood and open a path to emancipation to every single woman.



**European Network Against Racism aisbl**

67 Rue Ducale, B-1000 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 229 35 70

Email: [info@enar-eu.org](mailto:info@enar-eu.org)

Web: [www.enar-eu.org](http://www.enar-eu.org)

f /ENAREurope

🐦 @ENAREurope



The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) stands against racism and discrimination and advocates equality, solidarity and well-being for all in Europe. We connect local and national anti-racism NGOs throughout Europe and act as an interface between our member organisations and the European institutions. We voice the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities in European and national policy debates.

Published in December 2016 with the support of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union and the Open Society Foundations.



The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of ENAR and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission or the Open Society Foundations.