

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: GERMANY (2 OF 2)

'Neo-Muslims?' The social engagement of young Muslim women

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. In Germany, our research focussed on young women who were actively practising Muslims and were engaged in various voluntary social or political activities in their religious communities, schools and youth organisations. They were actively against Islamophobia, and well as being in favour of being positively identified as Muslims, political dialogue, and the support of young people or refugees.

This policy brief is concerned with the individual and institutional discrimination and stigmatisation the young women who choose to wear the headscarf experience, and how this influences their engagement in society. It focuses on addressing and engaging the young women with their specific experiences and concerns with social institutions and processes.

The policy recommendations are directed towards all actors working with young people (schools, public and private youth organisations, migrant organisations, youth policy makers) and those seeking to increase young people's social engagement. Furthermore, it is aimed towards policy makers involved in diversity, integration and social cohesion.

The aim of the recommendations is to acknowledge and encourage diverse youths' agency, their multi-faceted identities, and their multi-dimensional spheres of belonging.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Inter-culturally sensitive and non-stigmatising approaches of teachers and other school staff towards young women with hijab should be encouraged.**

Respondents report experiencing changes of behaviour of some teachers towards them after they started wearing the headscarf in school. While they reported that they felt accepted and supported by many of their teachers, almost all of them also experienced unsettling reactions from others. Reactions to their appearance with headscarf included being ignored by teachers, being confronted in front of the class on their motives, derogatory comments on their headscarf, and “over anxious” (from the respondents’ perspective) reactions where it was suspected that the young women had been victim of coercion. While the respondents stressed that it was important that coercion to wear a headscarf should not be tolerated, they also stressed that the donning of the headscarf should not entail the generalised assumption that this had been a result of coercion.

Banu reports that after she started wearing the headscarf, her previously good grades in school declined. Formerly, she had been the best pupil in her class in a certain subject and then dropped to mediocrity. She requested a performance review, upon which the teacher in question paid more attention to her and confirmed that she was actually performing above average and gave her the best mark in class. While she was happy her grades were revised, she was irritated that it was only after her protest that her marks improved. The mediocre marks she got for the period after putting on the headscarf and before the performance review nevertheless decreased her average.

While for some of the outside world the headscarf appears to be a “sudden change”, the decision to wear it often constitutes the result of a thought and development process of the young woman. Starting to wear the headscarf can be an assertion of agency, a positive affirmation of identity and does not contradict educational aspirations and self-assertion.

Approaches of teaching staff who take a positive attitude towards the young woman, and encourage her in her individual aspirations, identity formation and expression of agency independent of the choice to wear a headscarf, should be supported.

- **Encourage diverse images of women who wear the hijab**

Women wearing the Muslim headscarf often feel reduced to the headscarf, and the ensuing assumptions and stigmatisations. A uniform request of all interviewees is that “we are not all the same”. The desire to be regarded as an individual goes hand in hand with the wish that the multifaceted aspects of their identity should not be disregarded because of their choice to wear a headscarf. Others had confronted them with various assumptions, expectations and ascriptions due to their dress. From an intersectional perspective, the women were subject to specific ascriptions and stigma because they are female *and* Muslims. The assumptions and stigmatisations are diverse and create the basis for discriminations in many spheres of life: from (potential) employers, public authorities’ staff, in public spaces, in interactions with strangers or in their own communities. As headscarf-wearing Muslim women, traditional lifestyles and family models are often attributed to them, and they are subject to many presumptions concerning their thoughts, views, ideas and behaviour. Not conforming to those expectations, e.g. by not marrying or pursuing a career, can cause irritation and conflicts.

The women interviewed report many examples of stereotyped assumptions they are confronted with and how generalized judgements are passed onto them due to their choice of dress.

Outside the Jobcentre, sometimes I have to pass through or pass by, I hear it all there: 'No surprise to see her here'... The thing is I work there and I'm not one of those who receives benefits. (Mara)

I also noticed that with young men from my Arab environment [...] that the men view me differently now [with the headscarf]. That I'm somehow this woman who doesn't say boo to a goose, the 'typical' Muslim woman – the idea that very many men have – who doesn't have an opinion in life, nods her head and says 'yes' – and I can't be doing with that. That's not what I wanted to achieve. That's just not me. (Madiha)

Many people still don't understand that you can be a free person and wear a headscarf. [...] I'm absolutely not doing anything wrong. I'm not depriving anyone of their liberty. So why do people want to take my liberty away from me? (Melek)

Awareness raising campaigns targeting both the general public and specific groups could widen and enrich the perceptions of women with headscarves. For example, specific campaigns targeting employers to reduce discrimination due to the hijab can be implemented on a larger scale. Multi-dimensional media portrayals that present Islam and Muslims in a positive and/or in everyday contexts should be intensified as an effort to counteract existing negative coverage of Islam and Muslims in association deviance, terrorism or other problematic contexts.

➤ **Increase employment opportunities for women with headscarves in public positions and institutions**

In Germany, Muslim women who want to pursue a career in law or in teaching face uncertainty whether they will be allowed and accepted with the headscarf. While in some Federal states teachers are allowed to wear a headscarf, in others they are not. Discussion about whether to allow or ban the headscarf for teachers has been ongoing since 1999; the issue continues to be discussed at the federal state level and many decisions have been delegated to schools in individual cases. The Muslim headscarf is forbidden for judges, public prosecutors and police officers because it is regarded as a religious symbol which contradicts the secular neutrality of the state. Some of the young women interviewed gave up their wishes to become teachers due to the insecurity of whether they would be allowed to teach with the headscarf. Visibility of women with headscarves in public positions such as in the police could increase the acceptance of the headscarf by the general public, and potentially the acceptance of the police by minorities who are discriminated against. It could also encourage diverse images of Muslim women.

All of the respondents were aware that wearing a headscarf made it more difficult to enter into a profession. The fear of rejection on grounds of the headscarf goes hand in hand with the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not the headscarf is the reason for not being offered an interview. The fear is based on existing restrictions to public state positions as well as experiences: Several respondents had stories of these experiences to tell: when applying for a part-time or holiday job or training course they were rejected on the grounds of the hijab or where offered the job on the condition of taking it off. Taking it off was a very questionable option: As Banu describes, *'there's also an identification process behind the headscarf. [...] when I know I am only accepted and respected because I've taken it off, then for me it also means they don't really respect me'*.

The employment of women with headscarves in public positions should be encouraged and the restrictions on state positions reconsidered.

➤ **Social Engagement Activities should explicitly address diverse youth (e.g. young Muslim Women)**

Many second generation youths pursue concrete professional aspirations and want to shape society – like the young Muslim women represented in this case study. Youth of migrant and minority backgrounds are under-represented in many fields of social engagement, although they are over-represented in some, such as activities for refugees. From the interviews, we can see that the young women are often active in fields which are connected to their experience, e.g. in the context of the mosque or in activities against Islamophobia. Specific actions to include them in other fields of social engagement, and including their concerns in those fields can help to increase their representation and involvement in spheres of social engagement in which they are under-represented.

Why and how did the young respondents become active? On a practical level, specific factors have made the respondents become active: For example, because of the person who asked them to get involved - a teacher, friend or a friends' parent. This was often embedded in an institution they visited, for example their school, mosque or group where they were already active. Teachers and youth workers who addressed individual young people were motivators and multipliers.

Efforts to include young people in social engagement activities should take a diversity-oriented approach. This implies, for example, to open up for the concerns of diverse youth, encourage them to actively shape the agendas and contribute their subjectivities, address and invite them personally to participate and support an inclusive environment in the groups.

➤ **Stigmatised and minority youth should be encouraged to be their own agenda setters**

Young people who belong to stigmatised groups can experience feeling reduced to this part of their identity. Being regarded primarily as a member of a certain group and being seen as a representative of that group – with the other parts of their identities being ignored - can discourage them from finding and following their own paths and enacting other parts of their identities. Many headscarf-wearing women interviewed in this study often found themselves in the position to of having to explain and justify their faith, feeling like “representatives of Islam”. Feeling reduced to their religious identity can restrict them in unfolding their full potentials.

All actors working with young people should encourage them to pursue their interests, wishes and aspirations. While acknowledging the existence of stigma and discrimination, and offering room to dealing with the experience, stigmatised youth should be supported to transcend the position of victims. Youth in general, and stigmatised and minority youth in particular should be encouraged to act and be their own agenda-setters.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on participant observation at 16 events of five different organisations and 15 in-depth interviews with young Muslim women. The interviewees are voluntarily engaged in various different fields, including the five organisations visited or other religious, social or political groups, either founded by the youth themselves or organised by local organisations and institutions. The interviewees were 18-35 years old, with the majority aged 18-22.

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FURTHER READING	"Young Muslim Women. 'Neo-Muslims'? Social engagement of devout young female Muslims" www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/research-impact/