

Muslims in Antwerp

Findings and Recommendations

THIS CITY REPORT IS PART OF A SERIES of monitoring reports titled *Muslims in EU Cities* that examine 11 cities in the European Union with significant Muslim populations.

Each report focuses on the following neighbourhoods or boroughs within each city for more in-depth study: Slotervaart, Amsterdam; Borgerhout, Antwerp; Kreuzberg, Berlin; Nørrebro, Copenhagen; Hamburg-Mitte, Hamburg; Evington, Spinney Hills, Stonegate, Leicester; 3rd Arrondissement, Marseille; 18th Arrondissement, Paris; Feijenoord, Rotterdam; Järfvåltet, Stockholm; and Waltham Forest, London.

These reports are a response to major trends regarding the situation of Muslims living in Europe. Whether citizens or migrants, native born or newly-arrived, Muslims are a growing and varied population that presents Europe with the major public policy challenge of ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all in a climate of rapidly expanding diversity.

Background

- Antwerp is one of the most diverse and populated cities in Belgium and counts 169 different nationalities among its citizens. Although there are no official data on religious affiliation, researchers estimate that there are around 500,000 Muslims—out of a total population of 10.6 million—with significant concentrations in major cities. Ethnic minorities with a Muslim background are today a long settled part of the population.
- There are nine districts in Antwerp and the focus of this report is the district of Borgerhout. This study pays particular attention to the neighbourhood of Borgerhout Intra Muros which is known for its ethnic diversity, socio-economic disadvantage, and challenges in the housing, labour, and educational sectors for its residents.
- The analysis presented in this report is based on 200 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 100 Muslim and 100 non-Muslim residents of Borgerhout as well as six focus groups with approximately 50 Muslim residents. Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with local politicians; members of non-governmental organisations; local practitioners

such as teachers and health workers; community representatives; and anti-discrimination and integration experts.

Key Findings By Issue Area

“Belgian people look down upon me regardless of the fact that I grew up here, speak Dutch, and have an education. The problem is not in Borgerhout itself, I think. When you go outside Borgerhout and you say, ‘yes, I’m from Borgerhout,’ people think ‘He’s mixed up with crime or something like that.’ They just look at you and they have prejudices from the start.”

– Focus group participant

Identity, Belonging and Discrimination

- While religion is an important aspect of identity for Muslim respondents, it is not a barrier to identification with Belgium. The majority of Muslim respondents (55 per cent) identified as Belgian; of this group, 63 per cent were born in Belgium.

- While over half of Muslim respondents viewed themselves as Belgian, only a third felt that others viewed them in this way. In contrast, 79 per cent of non-Muslims identified themselves as Belgian while a further 84 per cent indicated that they felt they were seen as Belgian.
- Muslim respondents cited appearance, ethnicity, and inability to speak Dutch fluently as key obstacles to being perceived as Belgian.
- Most Muslim respondents have a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and to the city of Antwerp. The sense of national belonging to Belgium is not as strong: 20 per cent of Muslim respondents do not feel strongly at home in Belgium, compared with 10 per cent of non-Muslim respondents. The findings indicate that the primary reasons Muslims do not feel at home in Antwerp and Belgium are due to experiences and perceptions of racism and discrimination.
- Discrimination was a deeply felt and crucial issue for many Muslim respondents. More than half of both groups felt there was a lot or a fair amount of racial prejudice in Belgium towards Arabs, followed by Muslims. A vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims stated that there was more religious prejudice in Belgium today than five years ago.

Education

“My son had to take a test to measure his proficiency in Dutch because they assumed he could not speak Dutch well. When he came home he was angry. He said: ‘Mamma, what did they do? They wanted to put me in a group of migrants who don’t speak Dutch.’ He was really offended and said I had to go to school to complain to the staff.”

– Focus group participant

- Research indicates that pupils of Moroccan or Turkish background are more likely than other pupils to be held back at the end of primary school; to find themselves in technical and vocational training courses in secondary schools; and that very few are likely to enter higher education.
- A major concern for Muslim respondents was the inability for both female pupils and teachers to wear the headscarf in schools. The Ministry of Education has allowed individual schools to decide whether or not wearing a headscarf in their schools should be prohibited; however, many schools in Antwerp have introduced a ban.
- A number of respondents were deeply concerned about the high rate of social and ethnic segregation in the Antwerp schools. Some districts and

neighbourhoods are more segregated than others and the schools in the city centre have an especially high percentage of migrant and disadvantaged pupils.

CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Antwerp is known for projects and programmes like the Autonomous Municipal Educational Institute (AG Stedelijk Onderwijs), a municipal initiative that seeks to ensure that every inhabitant has equal opportunities for life long learning. This initiative develops and implements campaigns and projects across education networks, supports innovative projects in Antwerp schools, encourages international exchanges, develops career guidance tools, and helps schools to build a safe learning environment.

Employment

“I’m unemployed. They told me I have to take off my headscarf if I want to find a job.”

– Focus group participant

- Although progress has been made in tackling the long-term unemployment of ethnic minorities, the proportion of unemployed Turks and Moroccans remains much higher than that of native Belgians.
- In the Open Society Foundations survey, skin colour, ethnicity, and religion were among the common reasons cited by Muslim respondents for being rejected for a job.
- Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of the Muslims who are or were participating in the labour market said that they had faced discrimination in promotions, compared with 9 per cent of non-Muslims.
- Participants cited the headscarf as a problematic issue for employment in Flanders. It was the perception of focus group discussants that the exclusion of women wearing the headscarf (or other Islamic symbols) has become a general rule in the labour market.

Housing

- Most Muslim (66 per cent) and non-Muslim (73 per cent) respondents liked their neighbourhood and appreciated the well-designed and extensive public transport system. People felt that their areas were dynamic, multi-ethnic, and were attracting residents from affluent native Belgian backgrounds.
- Over 50 per cent of both groups were owner-occupiers. One third of the non-Muslim and only 13 per cent of the Muslim sample were living in rented accommodation. While these figures are not representative of the Muslim communities, discrimination in the rental housing sector is a problem in Borgerhout, where respondents were

worried about the difficulties they encountered when looking for rental accommodation.

CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The city of Antwerp has made considerable investment in the local housing market. Affordable houses in specific neighbourhoods with a high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged families and individuals are increasingly scarce. Through cooperation with private investors the city aims to build 1,000 new houses each year.

Health

- The majority of both Muslim (79 per cent) and non-Muslim (86 per cent) respondents were fairly or very satisfied with the healthcare services in Antwerp.
- There is an emerging concern for the needs of elderly Muslim patients and the delivery of appropriate services. The survey indicated that most Muslim respondents over the age of 60 experienced difficulties when seeking information on health issues. Barriers in understanding and speaking Dutch created obstacles in their ability to communicate with doctors and nurses.

CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

In 2007, a small project called Tuppercare was set up by the city of Antwerp. The project aims to train volunteers to become social advisers on issues relating to education, housing, and healthcare. The volunteers provide immigrant and disadvantaged native communities with information in Dutch, or in their native language to help prevent health or other social problems.

Policing and Security

“I don’t mind an identity check, this is normal. [But] then you give the police your identity card and they say: ‘Yes, you are up to something.’ That isn’t police work, that’s just showing ‘I’m the boss here. I can take you away whenever I want to.’”

– Focus group participant

- Trust in the police was relatively high among Muslims and non-Muslims; however, a significant number of Muslims (40 per cent) and non-Muslims (26 per cent) had a low level of trust in the police.
- Young Belgians of migrant background pointed to discriminatory behaviour from the police as well as experiences of random identity checks as factors for the low degree of trust in the police. Focus group discussions suggest that identity checks are viewed as a normal part of life by young Muslims.

- Among Muslim and non-Muslim respondents who had contact with the police in the past year, over 60 per cent from both groups were satisfied. Of the 33 per cent that were dissatisfied, their reasons included lack of sufficient action by the police when reporting a crime and offensive and unprofessional behaviour from certain officers.

Participation and Citizenship

“Look at city policymakers and the way they interact with representatives from the migrant community. There is no room for them. With the previous mayor, you could pick up the phone and you were invited and anything could be discussed. There was real openness.”

– Focus group participant

- While there are a lot of Muslim and minority organisations in Antwerp, civic participation of Muslims does not seem to be as visible as other groups. There is a paucity of specific data on the social participation patterns of Muslims.
- Levels of trust in the federal government were lower than for Parliament among both groups. Here, however, Muslims indicated greater trust in the federal government over Parliament (46 per cent had a lot or some trust) compared with non-Muslims (32 per cent). Only a third of both respondents felt they could influence national decisions.
- Non-Muslims (71 per cent) were significantly more likely than Muslims (40 per cent) to have a lot or some trust in the local council, reflecting a lack of effective engagement and participation between local government and Muslim communities.
- Despite the large number of migrant organisations in Antwerp (around 180), the report findings indicate that effective cooperation and engagement between these groups and the city council is fragmented.

CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

New Belgian organisations that want to influence city policy, such as the Arab European League (AEL), and political parties such as the Muslim Democratic Party and MOSLIM (MUSLIM) have emerged due to frustration with community leadership. The ban on the headscarf in public city functions led to the creation of Baas Over Eigen Hoofd (Boss of My Own Head), a group that challenges the ban through dialogue with city officials and by organising events to combat the stereotypes about Muslim women wearing headscarves.

Media

“Every newspaper you open: Islam, Islam, Islam. It’s always about Islam. You have to take matters into your own hands and the only way is to publicise articles to try and keep the discussion open in the media, and to organise debates. It all boils down to this.”

– Focus group participant

- Media coverage about Muslims and minorities was viewed as negative and exaggerated. Respondents felt that unbalanced reporting on ethnic minorities and Muslims was detrimental to improving relations between different groups in Belgium as well as the self-image of media users and consumers.
- Most of the Muslim respondents relied on Flemish mainstream media outlets for their information. However, there was a clearly expressed desire for more programmes and media stories about ethnic diversity and Islam that did not rely on stereotypes and negative images of Muslims and minorities.

CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The umbrella organisation **Minderhedenforum (Minorities Forum)** created a website devoted to minorities in the media. The site collects research and data that analyse the relationship between media and minorities.

Key Recommendations

- The federal, regional, and local governments in Belgium should recognise that discrimination remains a critical barrier to full and equal participation in society. Leadership from all echelons of government is necessary to combat it. Efforts to challenge discrimination should include explicit language in official policies that supports the robust monitoring of all forms of discrimination, and raises awareness of anti-discrimination legislation and the types of mechanisms available for victims to lodge complaints and seek redress.
- A review of the prohibition on the headscarf in schools and its impact on students, teachers, and schools should be conducted in close cooperation and consultation with Muslim parents, pupils, and community leaders. This should be in accordance

with the legal system in Flanders that permits schools to establish specific rules on when and where the wearing of the headscarf is allowed.

- Discrimination in the labour market should be tackled more aggressively. Various government agencies—federal, regional, and city policymakers—and organisations (mosques and migrant organisations, among others) must be involved in this process.
- The City Integration Service, City Housing Service, and relevant anti-discrimination bodies should ensure that accurate figures on the numbers of people experiencing discrimination in housing and the form that this discrimination takes are collected with a view to developing measures to tackle this issue.
- The City of Antwerp police should develop clear regulations and standards for initiating stop and searches, and the conduct of officers during these stops. These standards should stress that ethnicity, religion, and other superficial personal characteristics do not provide a sound basis for stop and searches.
- There is an increase in the number of young and well-educated Belgians with a Muslim background who are actively demonstrating their civic engagement in Antwerp. The city of Antwerp and its relevant departments are urged to create or broaden platforms which incorporate the views of such people alongside existing interlocutors from various communities.

For more information

To obtain more information about these findings and the At Home in Europe Project, contact:

Klaus Dik Nielsen, Advocacy Officer, At Home in Europe Project, Open Society Foundations

Work: +44 (0) 207 031 1714

Mobile: +44 (0) 791 769 5286

Email: klaus.nielsen@osf-eu.org

www.soros.org/initiatives/home

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