

Religious Discrimination in Workplace

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The secular models are putting strain on religious diversity in the context of the workplace. With religious diversity growing in European societies and the visible expression of religious beliefs and behaviors, tensions have arisen linked to the rise of xenophobia. Religious minorities are discriminated in the workplace, especially Muslim women that wear Islamic veils. Nonetheless, the people pertaining to these religious minorities have agency, and they can overcome this discrimination.

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1. Introduction

Akbar, a Muslim emperor of India from 1556 to 1605, is attributed with great advances in religious tolerance and secularism. This religious tolerance and secularism is especially remarkable if people consider the situation in Europe during that time, and even the situation of Europe and the world nowadays. According to Amartya Sen, Akbar championed tolerance and inter-faith dialogues; Akbar had pluralist ideals and designed a secular legal structure and delimited the principle of neutrality of the state between different religions, including a sort of freedom of religion and belief that ‘no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him’ ([Sen 2012, p. 18](#)). Nowadays, globalization and international migration have made the societies multicultural again, and events such as the 2001 attack against the World Trade Center in New York have fueled new conflicts and worldwide rejection of the visible expression of religious beliefs and behaviors, especially against Muslims.

In this context, it is necessary to recover examples of actions and ideas that can improve the management of religious diversity in the current heterogeneous societies. That is why examples such as Akbar and ideas such as multicultural secularism ([Flecha 2004](#))—which advocates for the equality of differences between religions for a political and societal framework in which all religious beliefs and traditions would be treated equally ([Pulido Rodríguez and de Botton Fernández 2013](#)), and for interreligious dialogue ([Malović and Vujica 2021](#); [Campdepadrós-Cullell et al. 2021](#); [Khalfaoui et al. 2021a](#); [Pulido et al. 2021](#))—are very important. Other scholars, such as André Delbecq, have contributed through their practice, advocacy, and writings to emphasize the value of principles such as hospitality, listening and including the minority voices, or welcoming and honoring others of other faiths or non-faiths ([Williams and Allen 2020](#)).

In Europe, contrary to the United States, one of the ideas that gained most terrain in the management of religious diversity has been the French approach to secularism reflected in the approval of the 2004 prohibitive law

regarding la question du foulard (or Islamic veil), an idea based on the separation between the Church and State generating the exclusion of any legal and political recognition of religion and aiming at the homogenization of those who live in the same territory ([Aubert et al. 2013](#)). The consequences of this secularism in Europe affect all aspects of society, including employment. Muslim women, as diverse as any other cultural or ethnic group, are among the groups that are most discriminated in the workplace, especially if they choose to wear an Islamic veil ([Garcia Yeste et al. 2020](#); [Singh and Babbar 2021](#)).

2. Religion-Based Discrimination in the Workplace

Freedom of religion and belief has been addressed in different laws—most notably, under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the United States or research 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union—with the aim of ensuring it is upheld and finding mechanisms that contribute to its fulfillment. The issue of religious diversity is embedded in the foundations of the European Union, such as the Treaty of Lisbon, research 17, which recognizes the States' setting their own policy with regard to relations with religious and non-religious denominations, by regulating that the Union does not prejudice the status recognized in national law with respect to churches, religious communities, and philosophical and non-denominational organizations in member states, and will maintain an open dialogue ([Roda 2016](#)). Moreover, research 21 includes religion or belief as specific factors in which any discrimination is prohibited. In the specific case of employment, these research materialize in the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 on establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. Thus, with this Directive, the European Union requires Member States to combat discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in employment, occupation, and vocational training ([Vickers 2007](#)).

Labor is one of the areas in which the difficulties in managing religious diversity are salient ([European Commission 2017](#)). Ensuring proper management of religious freedom in the workplace means ensuring that all people should enjoy the right to religious freedom in a respectful and inclusive context. Thus, increasing diversity and improving its management in work contexts becomes an important challenge for many organizations ([Gebert et al. 2014](#)). However, at present, situations of discrimination in the work environment based on religious denomination continue to occur. When talking about discrimination in the workplace, [Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi \(2010, p. 769\)](#) argue that it encompasses “all types of behaviors, decisions or actions involving different or inferior treatment of people on the basis of their race, the color of skin, ethnic origin or any other grounds not related to their occupational merit”. According to the same researchers, discriminatory actions may appear before or during employment, for example, denying members of a specific minority group equal opportunities to obtain employment, and/or after the hiring process; other forms of discrimination include denying members of a specific minority group equal opportunities for promotion, training, payment, dismissal, or termination of the contract ([Forstenlechner and Al-Waqfi 2010](#)).

Nowadays, the management of religious diversity in the workplace has become an issue for debate and has received considerable attention from public opinion and the media. Usually, significant cases of dispute between employers and employees in courts over wearing visible religious symbols in the workplace are present in the

media. There are several reasons why workplace managers may restrict the use of religious symbols. The European Network Against Racism [ENAR \(2015\)](#) names some, such as the intention to create a “neutral workspace”—especially in the public administration—to maintain a uniform policy, or for health and safety reasons ([ENAR 2015](#)). Moreover, managers can justify that wearing religious symbols can create day-to-day difficulties within the work environment, which may not end in dismissal, but can make employees feel limited or rejected in their workplace ([ENAR 2015](#)).

According to a study by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights ([FRA 2017](#)), 31 percent of Muslims that were looking for a job in different countries of the European Union during the 5 years prior to the survey have felt discriminated against due to their religion. Thirteen percent of these people, for their part, state that they have suffered this discrimination during the last year before the survey ([FRA 2017](#)). The same study by the [FRA \(2017\)](#) shows that both men and women who wear traditional or religious clothing in public have suffered more discrimination based on their ethnic or immigrant background during the 12 months prior to the survey (28 percent men and 27 percent women), in relation to those who do not wear this type of clothing (22 percent men and 23 percent women) ([FRA 2017](#)).

Some of these discriminations are linked to religious practices. For example, about 12 percent of Muslims who have worked for the past 5 years say they were not allowed to ask for a day off to celebrate important religious holidays, services, or ceremonies. Similarly, 9 percent say they have tried to prevent them from expressing religious practices or traditions, such as wearing handkerchiefs or turbans. Among other statements by Muslim people who participated in the survey, 7 percent said that they have received jobs below their grade, 5 percent said that they have been denied promotion because of their condition, 2 percent have been dismissed for this issue, and finally, 1 percent state that they have not been able to join a trade union ([FRA 2017](#)).

3. Workplace Discrimination for Using the Islamic Veil

According to previous research, Muslim women wearing the Islamic veil belong to the sector that suffers the most religious discrimination in the world of work ([Garcia Yeste et al. 2020](#); [Halrynjo and Jonker 2016](#); [Ghumman and Ryan 2013](#)). This is often translated into triple discrimination for being a woman, being Muslim, and being an immigrant. The study by the [FRA \(2017\)](#) reports gender differences in the reasons why they suffer discrimination in the workplace, both in the process of job seeking and in the workplace itself. Muslim men report more aspects such as skin color (in the process of job-seeking, 51 percent men and 26 percent women, and in the workplace, 49 percent men and 36 percent women), first and last name (in the process of job-seeking: 50 percent men and 37 percent women, and in the workplace: 36 percent men and 23 percent women), and the accent or way in which they speak the national language of the country (in the workplace: 20 percent, and 9 percent, respectively). While these reasons are relevant for both men and women, clothing is a problem that affects women substantially more in the workplace. Muslim women mention the reason for clothing more than men (in the job search: 35 percent women, and 4 percent men; in the workplace: 22 percent women and 7 percent men) ([FRA 2017](#)).

In this sense, Muslim women may be in a situation of more vulnerability because they often show visible symbols of their religion in their clothing, as is the case with the hijab or the niqab. The same study ([FRA 2017](#)) notes, at the outset, that there are no substantial differences between Muslim women who wear Islamic veil and those who do not, but it also mentions that it may be due to lower exposure to discrimination as a result of a more limited social interaction, such as in the workplace or in the process of job seeking. In this sense, the study points out that Muslim women who wear Islamic veils regularly outside the home have a lower employment rate (29 percent) than those who do not wear one (40 percent) ([FRA 2017](#)).

4. The Role of Religious Associations in Overcoming Workplace Discrimination

The [FRA \(2017\)](#) report considered the role of (not necessarily) religious organizations that could advocate for victims of discrimination. A total of 72 percent of the Muslims who took part in the survey had no information of any organization offering support or advice to victims of discrimination in their European countries of residence. The results vary greatly between different countries. Muslim immigration to Slovenia, for example, has virtually no record of such organizations (98 percent). In contrast, Muslims of Asian descent in Cyprus show less ignorance of these organizations (37 percent). The study also shows that the origin of Muslim immigrants also influences the results. In Belgium, for example, Muslims from North Africa show more knowledge (30 percent) than those from Turkey (21 percent) ([FRA 2017](#)). The report itself points to this high ignorance as one possible cause of the low percentage of complaints throughout the EU ([FRA 2017](#)).

There are several success stories in the management of religious diversity based on the role of various religious organizations, which demonstrate the importance that such organizations can have in combating possible cases of discrimination in or outside the workplace ([Garcia Yeste et al. 2020](#)). Such organizations can be either group around a particular religious community or groups that foster interreligious dialogue. In a case that makes explicit reference to the workplace, Karimi ([Karimi 2018](#)) describes the role of two Muslim women's entrepreneurship networks in France. These networks are born out of discriminatory experiences they suffered in the workplace, which has led them to self-employment through entrepreneurship. According to [Karimi \(2018\)](#), organizations empower their members in three stages: developing their critical awareness and their ability to act, developing their interpersonal awareness in order to act with or in relation to someone, and developing a social consciousness that involves transforming society as a whole. These three levels of action—self, environment, and society—are informed by a critical consciousness that emerges through the reversal and overcoming of stigmatization, as well as the ethical consciousness that redefines one's own central notions of entrepreneurship.

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