



Values, Equality and Differences in Liberal Democracies. Debates about Female Muslim Headscarves in Europe.

Reporting

Project Information

VEIL

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Final Report Summary - VEIL (Values, Equality and Differences in Liberal Democracies. Debates about Female Muslim Headscarves in Europe)

The VEIL project focused on the public debates, conflicts and regulations concerning head- and body coverings of Muslim women in public institutions assuming that in these debates fundamental values and norms of liberal democracies are not only renegotiated but collective identities re-constructed within the European integration process. Moreover, the research approach of the project expected that the gendered nature of values and norms that widely prevail in liberal democracies in Europe are of crucial importance for exploring the aforementioned premise. VEIL compared policy and media debates as well as head- and body covering regulations in eight European countries, including Austria (University of Vienna), Denmark (Aalborg University), France (University Paris 8), Greece (Panteion University), Germany (Free University Berlin), Turkey (Middle East Technical University), the Netherlands (Free University of Amsterdam) and the United Kingdom (Lancaster University). The European Union, which is engaged in the issue as a polity on its own, was also part of the analysis.

The first aim of the project was to map out the fundamental values and political principles of the main actors in the headscarf debates in the participating countries. The second aim was to explain and compare the differences and similarities in regard to the regulations and policies of Muslim head- and body covering in the countries concerned. The dissemination of the generated knowledge regarding the comparison of differing country solutions across Europe to major social groups, stakeholders and to a general public for enhancing public knowledge as well as public dialogue constituted the third major aim of VEIL. The VEIL project thus raised awareness concerning processes of discrimination by showing how religious values and symbols are being used to legitimise particular political or legal actions and how conflicts are perpetuated through conflictive framing of values and principles.

By carrying out the described steps of the VEIL methodology, the project generated major research findings and contributed to the state-of-the-art for studies on religion and politics, integration, citizenship, social inequalities and especially gender inequality. Up to now, scholars have analysed how European countries have accommodated Islamic religious culture and the regulation and discussion of veiling primarily as national case studies or two-country comparisons. But no systematic comparison of the regulation of Muslim head- and body covering had been undertaken so far. To fill this gap and was one of the major research accomplishments of the VEIL project. Contributing to the mentioned research fields, the project found that there are no clear or unambiguous patterns of institutional settings such as state-church relation, citizenship regime, integration policies and gender regime that could sufficiently explain the regulation and debate of Muslim head- and body covering across the countries. Moreover, what the project results show is that the analysed explanatory factors have to be understood as settings that stay in an interdependent and interactional relation and shape the respective regulation on veiling dependent on the national, historical and political context in which the debate occurs. Thus, the project can provide the following crucial results regarding current social and political developments determining the explanatory factors which interdependently shape the veiling regulations in the respective national context.

The project results show that during the last decade the headscarf debates intensified in all eight countries under study calling for restrictive regulations of Muslim head- and body covering. Thus, more and more countries introduced regulations for wearing Islamic attire which differ greatly in regard to the form of body covering as well as the public sites targeted by the regulation. While the wearing of the headscarf or the hijab by pupils is only restricted in the states which practice a strict version of neutrality or laicism - France and Turkey - the wearing of the hijab has become a highly contested issue for women in public or civil services which are connected to the symbolisation of state authority. Thus, the wearing of the hijab is prohibited for teachers in half of the federal states in Germany as well as for civil servants in some states, Denmark has developed a bill that aims at prohibiting the display of religious and political symbols for judges and in the Netherlands the wearing of the headscarf can be restricted for the civil service. The wearing of the full veil however is restricted in the domain of education in the Netherlands as well as in Denmark. The United Kingdom is the only country where the Association of Judges issued a guideline that allows for full body covering of judges (please see http://www.jsboard.co.uk/downloads/ettb_veil.pdf online) and Austria that has in general no restrictive regulation for any site even allows the wearing of full body covering out of religious reasons during public gatherings which is only prohibited if the full body covering would be worn out of political reasons.

Moreover, having analysed the public debates as well as the regulations concerning veiling of the

moreover, having analysed the public debates as well as the regulations concerning veiling in the respective countries, the project concludes that the agenda setting of the debates is dominated by claims for restrictions of veiling practices. Claims pleading for liberal regulations are rather weak and occur mainly in reaction to the demands that call for restrictions. Comparing the fierceness of the debates with the actual legislations, the project results indicate that there is a rather moderate level of subsequent restrictive regulations of veiling practices and that it is important to analytically differentiate between public veiling debates and veiling regulations.

The project results suggest that regulating religious apparel for Muslim women relates to specific developments regarding the renegotiation of the self-definition of nation-states, in particular at a time when European nation-states are becoming increasingly heterogeneous in their ethnic, religious and cultural makeup. Through the prism of the headscarf debates diverse issues were identified. Issues relating to the integration of minorities, multiculturalism, secularism, gender equality, Islamist politics and European values, for example, were all fields of concern across the eight countries under study. These fields of concern enveloped broader issues of social and economic inequality as well as direct and indirect forms of discrimination and marginalisation for Muslim women living in Europe. Thus, it is important for future policy development not only to focus on ensuring that human rights are supported and maintained but also that equal opportunities, the implementation of broad civil, political as well as social rights are upheld and applied to citizens as well as immigrant and descendant European communities. It is especially important to ensure that women's individual autonomy as well as their civil, social and political rights are defended and sustained. What insights can be drawn from the results of the VEIL project for public administrators and politicians who are concerned with developing policies for democratic, vibrant, diverse and just European societies? In the following discussion, key results of the VEIL project are provided and reveal some of the institutional shortcomings that exist across the eight countries under study in particular in their accommodation of increasingly pluralist European populations.

The goal of these recommendations, which are informed by evidence based research, as well as best practice models from the various EU countries under study, is to direct the policy agenda of the countries under study towards an inclusive framework that provides equal opportunities and rights that enhance citizens, immigrants and descendants agency.

The results of the project indicate the importance of contextualising the historical specificity of specific political configurations, church-state structures, immigration regimes and so on, and the way they shape the national policy directions of the countries under study. Moreover, the following recommendations focus primarily on issues relating to the wearing of the headscarf (hijab) and do not relate to the full face covering.

It was of great importance for the consortium members to continuously present the concept of the project and current research activities as well as preliminary results to the scientific community and to encourage a dialogue between policy makers, women's groups, religious communities, NGOs and teachers. Thus, all consortium members engaged in a variety of dissemination activities throughout the whole duration of the project.

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