

# THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN MEDIA

How to prevent Islamophobic  
stereotypes and prejudices

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*Get the Trolls Out!* partner ENORB created this resource for media outlets to develop nuanced, informed and inclusive approaches to representing religious minorities.



# MOST COMMON INCIDENTS

- #1 Choice of inaccurate, generic or out-of-context visuals to illustrate the news
- #2 Biased representation of Muslim women
- #3 Lack of questioning of stigmatising statements
- #4 Tokenisation or the dynamics of “Good Muslims and Bad Muslims”

## REFERENCES

- MISINFORMATION THROUGH VISUALS <https://getthetrollsout.org/articles/misinformation-through-visuals>
- Debunking myths on women’s rights, Muslim women, feminism and Islamophobia in Europe (2017) [https://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/debunkingmyths\\_lr\\_final.pdf](https://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/debunkingmyths_lr_final.pdf)
- The Hijab And Secularism In France And Belgium: is stigmatizing discourse more accepted when it comes from native informants? <https://getthetrollsout.org/articles/the-hijab-and-secularism-in-france-and-belgium>

# THE IMPACT OF STIGMATISING NARRATIVES

- #1** Inaccurate and generic visuals, especially those related to already stigmatised minorities, can strengthen prejudices and stereotypes.
- #2** The one-sided view of Muslim women as submissive and oppressed individuals or as activists following a hidden political agenda, deprives them of their agency.
- #3** Reporting racist news and statements without giving any explanations nor questioning them fuels hate speech and strengthens stereotypes against minorities and their mistrust towards media.
- #4** Tokenisation categorises Muslims according to subjective values and beliefs. The “Good Muslims” are those who refuse visible or religious symbols, such as the hijab, and support State neutrality and gender equality; while “the Bad ones” are those who wear religious attire, which are perceived to be in opposition to the above-mentioned principles.

# WHAT TO DO TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE

- #1** Enlarge and diversify the images in archives and raise awareness among editors about adding captions.
- #2** Avoid generalisations, recognising Muslim women's choices and their willingness to achieve the same rights as their fellow citizens.
- #3** Question stigmatising statements by pointing out when they convey inaccurate and stereotyped images. Challenge journalists to provide evidence to justify these kinds of claims, etc.
- #4** Avoid the categorisation of minorities as well as of opinions based on personal beliefs; foster knowledge about diversity; give voice to stakeholders.

# MOST COMMON INCIDENTS

## #1 Out-of-context and off-topic images

Out-of-context and off-topic visuals convey stereotypical and discriminatory messages.

**Le Belgique est l'un des pays les plus hostiles au port du voile: 28% des Belges y sont opposés**

MAÏLI BERNAERTS Publié le mercredi 16 octobre 2019 à 11h15 - Mis à jour le mercredi 16 octobre 2019 à 11h16



**La Turquie ouvre ses frontières: la Grèce annonce avoir bloqué l'entrée de 10.000 migrants en 24 heures**

Europe

afp

Publié le 01-03-20 à 09h32 - Mis à jour le 01-03-20 à 13h57



For instance, consider these two images above: the first shows a “veiled woman” wearing a niqab, except that the veil and the niqab are very different garments, which reveals a certain degree of ignorance and misinformation. The second one shows a group of violent migrants to illustrate an article which does not mention any episodes of violence or tensions involving migrants. The above-mentioned images depict a reality that does not reflect the coverage of events reported by journalists. It happens very often that newspapers choose out-of-context images or pictures related to other events to illustrate the news, but this negligent attitude can mislead the reader. It usually occurs when images come from archives which are not sufficiently diverse and inclusive in their portrayal of the population.

## #2 Biased representation of Muslim women

Media often convey the following different clichés concerning Muslim women:

1. Muslim women are oppressed and submissive individuals; they do not have any right or capacity to choose.

2. Muslim women are obliged to wear the veil and the hijab, which serve as tools to silence them, while also strengthening the visibility of political Islam.
3. Muslim employees wearing the veil cannot be neutral.
4. The ban on hijab is not a form of discrimination and those who consider it as such are not really victims of these discriminations and exclusions.
5. Muslim women are disproportionately subject to domestic violence.

**These stereotypes can be spread directly through biased declarations or articles, but also indirectly, by reporting news concerning the aforementioned clichés without explaining nor challenging them.**

### **#3 Lack of questioning of stigmatising statements**

Dog Whistle Politics consists in the use of a coded language to express political messages, which seem to mean something for the general population but which have, at the same time, a further different or more specific meaning for a targeted audience. For example, when the Belgian Minister Pieter de Crem refers to “our norms and values” when talking about recent riots in Anderlecht, he is targeting the racialised populations of underprivileged neighbourhoods, addressing mostly to racialised people, perceived as such by popular districts, thus creating a gap between the “we”, to which the politician belongs, to and the “they”, encompassing the racialised population, and other minority groups to which these people belong to. This sentence may seem harmless, but the already racialised people, who are constantly considered as “othered” and discriminated against, can perceive it as a form of violence.

### **#4 Tokenisation or the dynamics of “Good Muslims and Bad Muslims”**

Tokenising Muslim people, the process through which Muslim groups are politicised and placed into categories, is not a new phenomenon, but it has become increasingly common. Muslims’ religious beliefs, along with their social and political opinions, are often categorised as acceptable or not. Some people set the threshold on what constitutes a “Good or Bad Muslim” based on subjective values and beliefs. Native informants, individuals or racialised groups, who claim to belong to Muslim culture or faith, are often interviewed and instrumentalised to lend credibility to racist stances.

# THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPING NARRATIVES

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## **#1 Out-of-context and off-topic images**

Generic, decontextualized and anonymised images can convey false and distorted information, especially when the news deal with already stigmatised minorities, and they can reinforce prejudices and stereotypes. Not only do these images build stereotypes but, in so doing, they also legitimise them by making them acquire the status of conventional visual icons to illustrate journalistic topics such as “immigration” or “Muslim women”. Since public perception of minorities is largely based on clichés, it is important to be aware of the power images have in shaping reality and influencing the way it is perceived by readers. Even if the choice of inaccurate images might only be due to an oversight, its implications can be very serious and dangerous. Often these articles and images trigger a great deal of hate speech, and even incitement to murder, towards migrants on the social networks where they are shared.

## **#2 Biased representation of Muslim women**

A one-sided view of Muslim women as oppressed and submissive individuals or as activists following a hidden political agenda conveys a misinformed vision about the diversity of this group. This process of homogenisation deprives women of their agency, of being engaged with the social structures and achieving full inclusion in societies, including finding a place in the labour market and through education. In Europe, the pressure exerted on Muslim women to unveil as a sign of freedom has colonial roots. This stereotypical view pervades media coverage, resulting in statements which delegitimise their professionalism and which are likely to raise concern among readers, since journalists report them without providing any evidence. All this contributes to outline the biased representation of Muslim women’s participation in Belgian society.

### #3 Lack of questioning of stigmatising statements

Journalists and media are often accused of hate speech but, in most cases, they are “only” liable for reporting other people’s statements without giving any explanations or counter-arguments. Comments below this kind of articles on social network show the way these statements are perceived by people, who have anti-migrants and anti-Muslim opinions. In these comments, some people ask for the withdrawal of public aid, others claim that “this kind of cultures and religions are so different from ours, therefore they are incompatible with the Belgian culture”. Although it is important to cover this kind of event, if these narratives are not deconstructed, they have a strong echo especially in a wider context of stigmatised minorities. This situation has even worsened during the pandemic due to the various hate messages targeting religious minorities.

### #4 Tokenisation or the dynamics of “Good Muslims and Bad Muslims”

In our societies, faced with structural and systemic racism, journalists must confront civil society and collective consciences, denouncing racist policies. Giving the green light to individuals or groups supporting mainstream points of view means leaving minorities to defend themselves. Having public debate being shaped by values instead of laws allows those in power to freely determine who is “with us or against us”. Therefore, minority groups must pledge their allegiance and prove their belonging instead of holding a critical stance towards legislators. These voices overwhelm the legitimate ones within minority groups and spread inaccurate messages, within which those who stand up for their fundamental rights are considered subversive elements.



# WHAT TO DO TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE

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## **#1 Out-of-context and off-topic images**

The power of images enhances the impact and the readability of the news, conveying specific contents and symbols by suggestion. Their emotional potential makes them more prone to be interpreted according to confirmation bias. Moreover, the lack of captions hinders the communication of vital information about who does what, when, where and why. If editors took care to add a caption under all the photos they publish, this would not only avoid problems of interpretation on behalf of readers, but it would ensure a more careful and relevant choice of image. This is why enlarging and diversifying the images of archives and raising awareness among editors to add captions are two key elements to help journalists choosing their visual material, thus avoiding misinformation through visuals. If media portray the minorities faithfully and consistently, recognising their diversity, they can play their part in promoting tolerance towards diversity and finally social inclusion.

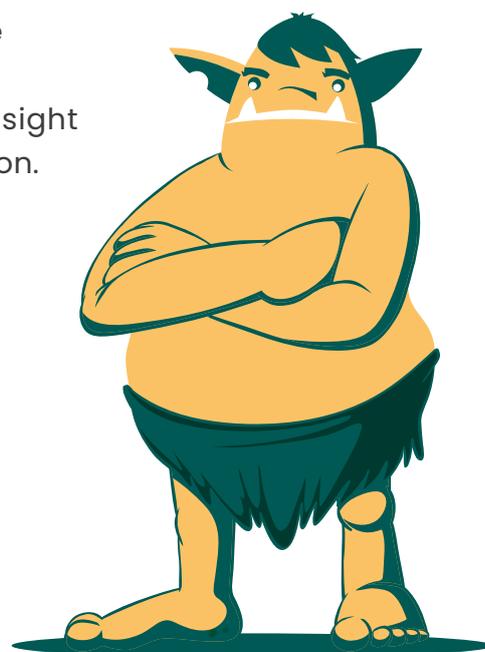
## **#2 Biased representation of Muslim women**

### **Media and journalists have to:**

- Recognise that discrimination disproportionately affects certain minorities, and acknowledge their status as victims, while not placing the burden of proof on those who are discriminated against. Muslim women should benefit from having equal access to education, work, goods and services regardless of what they wear and of stereotyped perceptions.
- Call for free choice and support struggles for rights. Muslim women claim the right to wear the hijab as a spiritual and religious symbol. Their free choice cannot be systematically denied because Western public opinion sees it as a form of internalization of patriarchy.
- Recognise diversity within minorities and avoid homogenizations. Narrowing Muslim women down to their garments minimizes their various dimensions and contributions.

### #3 Lack of questioning of stigmatising statements

Journalists have the responsibility to challenge hate speech and show its negative impact on people, including dog whistling. It is of foremost importance that they critically question these subtle forms of discrimination, which might not be detected at first sight by casual readers, thus preventing their normalisation. In particular, journalists have to analyse the remarks of stakeholders and assess their intentions and consequences. They should take the context in which these statements are released into consideration and also the social status and the reputation of the speaker. For instance, a politician who is able to manipulate the audience should be questioned and challenged. If not, unfounded or controversial claims can create a negative climate, disrespecting the rights of already vulnerable and marginalised groups.



### #4 Tokenization or the dynamics of “Good Muslims Bad Muslims”

In this time of growing tension, it is crucial that this type of discourse, which influences and even shapes the media narrative, is considered for what it really is: divisive, stigmatising and inaccurate.

#### **Media should shed light to the dangerous reality minorities have to face and:**

- challenge cultural prejudices and simplistic narratives caused by misinformation and which reinforce stereotypes;
- raise awareness about possible stereotypes (racist and others), showing that prejudices and distorted ideas can be hidden anywhere;
- give the floor to stakeholders, do not pretend to speak for them or report their stories and struggles through the western-biased eye;
- establish contacts among minority communities and take the time to interview and invite them to debates; build diverse newsroom in order to be representative of the population they cover.

## **GET THE TROLLS OUT! PROJECT**

Working with partners across Europe, *Get the Trolls Out!* counters anti-religious hate speech through exposing individuals and organisations, finding and debunking dangerous narratives in the media, and teaching young people how to spot and respond to online trolls. Partner to the Belgique Francophone, The European Network on Religion and Belief is a network of associations committed to the fight against discrimination, while advocating mutual understanding in religious matters.

