

## **Gender equality and cultural diversity: the Belgian-Flemish case**

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### **1. Introduction**

Concurrent with what appears to be a trans-European and even global trend, in Belgium, gender-specific topics have recently come to the attention of the media or in politics within the context of debates on multicultural society and integration of new immigrants and minorities. In our former paper, we have pointed to analyses of the complexity of the Belgian federal state and the many dimensions of Belgian diversity in which gender diversity seems to be relatively absent or is given a place at the margin of the so-called ‘problem of diversity/unity’. In this paper we shall provide an overview of the relationship between gender equality and cultural diversity by delineating at which levels and pertaining to which issues of public interest and policy domains this tenuous relationship has been articulated in Belgium.

The federal context does not allow for a univocal and comparative picture of the Flemish or the Walloon and/or Belgian way of dealing with certain issues. Although immigration policies and the separation between church and state and the relationship between religions and world-views are federal and constitutional matters, policies regarding the integration of minorities and immigrants are regionalized. The result is that multicultural or integration policies in Flanders and Wallonia are understood in very divergent ways.<sup>1</sup> Whereas in Flanders ethnic-cultural minority policies or target group policies and the compulsory citizenisation trajectory have been clearly inspired by the Dutch example, the philosophy towards newcomers in Wallonia is geared towards social integration and

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<sup>1</sup> This is firstly noticeable in the difference in terminology. Although in Flanders there is an ongoing discussion on the desirability of this terminology, the notion ‘allochtones’ is commonly employed, as appears from the name of the government supported umbrella organisation, the ‘Support Centre for Allochtonous Girls and Women’ (‘Steunpunt Allochtone Meisjes en Vrouwen’). This does not take away the fact that some individual women (and men) feel ‘allochtonised’ by this approach and do not wish to identify as allochtonous, but regard it as a stigmatising category. This viewpoint is felt stronger in the French-speaking and predominantly socialist region, where socio-economic and class position are employed as a primary frame of reference. The term is then rightly problematised in the case of the second and third generation: how long does one remain allochtonous? In Wallonia and Brussels the term ‘immigrant’ is more common and ‘allochtonous’ is perceived as stereotyping. The term migrant however, is also wrongly applied to Belgians from foreign origins who can in fact be marked as neither ‘immigrants’ nor ‘allochtonous’. (Commissie Interculturele Dialoog, 2004, pp. 41)

combating social exclusion, thus more closely aligned with the French republican model. This dichotomised representation is nonetheless a strong simplification of much more complex historical and social realities, as is illustrated by the special case of Brussels and the different historical fractures such as those between freethinkers and Catholics, that next to the linguistic-communitarian and ideological fractures, still influence the Belgian context and the institutional space in which claims to the full integration of newcomers and new citizens must be translated. Next to this complex constellation of internal political and social fractures the Belgian-Flemish multicultural context is also characterised by receptivity to external and sometimes contradictory influences from the neighbouring countries such as France and the Netherlands. This provides quite a unique framework in which the gender dimension next to, or better put, through which many other dimensions of diversity, - be it gradually - is manifesting itself in an unavoidably ambiguous manner.

The tension between gender equality and cultural diversity in Belgium was first brought to the political agenda during the so-called headscarf debate that developed in the beginning of 2004 following the law against religious signs in France. Similar to France, it was more than a debate on the Belgian secular state and the interpretation of the neutrality principle in relation to the freedom of religion, as the equality between women and men was a central feature of this public discussion. Until this point the gender dimension had been largely absent in the otherwise rather sharp and political controversy surrounding multicultural society and the accommodation of Islam. The headscarf debate can therefore be seen as symptomatic for the way the debate on the tension between feminism and multiculturalism or gender equality and cultural diversity trickled and was selectively and rhetorically translated into different societal contexts and policy practices.

Following the headscarf debate in Belgium 'colonial feminist' arguments on the incompatibility between feminism and multiculturalism were appropriated in order to underline the thesis of the 'failure of multiculturalism'. This however has also led to a mobilisation of allochtonous women's organisations<sup>2</sup> and Muslim women who reacted indignant on the rhetorical exploitation of feminism and women's emancipation in the context of a racist assimilationist agenda and the manner in which the whole debate largely took place 'over their heads'. White' women's organisations were approached to take a stand and/or developed initiatives regarding the interculturalisation process of their organisations.

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<sup>2</sup> Personally we prefer the term used in the Netherlands abbreviated as 'zmv-women', that stands for black, migrant and refugee women ('zwarte, migranten- en vluchtelingenvrouwen'). However, in order to avoid confusion, in this paper we also apply the term 'allochtonous women' because this is commonly used in the (Flemish-Belgian) debate.

On the political level, next to policy proposals following the French example, initiatives were taken in view of improving intercultural and inter-ideological dialogue, and the discussion on the content of the neutrality principle and the Belgian secular state<sup>3</sup> was launched. Whilst it did not lead to a similar ban of ‘ostentatious religious symbols’ in public schools and offices, the so-called Belgian headscarf controversy clearly revitalised the debate on the neutrality of the Belgian state. Finally, gender equality policies for women and men have explicitly attended to ‘diversity’ although this is conceptualised differently at the regional and federal level.

Following the polarisation regarding Muslim minorities in which the so-called oppression of Muslim women has been a main focus, the issue of forced and bogus marriages was put on the agenda in late 2004. A law has been proposed making bogus marriages punishable by taking away Belgian nationality for those that have become Belgian through marriage.

However, other issues in the conflict between gender equality and cultural diversity that have received vast public and political attention in other European countries such as “honour related violence” have received relatively little public attention.

## **2. The Belgian headscarf controversy: a debate on gender equality or on *laïcité*?**

Similar to other European countries, throughout the late eighties and nineties most often at the local level there had been various discussions and law cases on the wearing of headscarves at public schools, or for example on passport photos. However, the more recent controversies that have brought the topic of gender equality and culture diversity to the forefront of media and political debate in Belgium, followed the extensive reporting on the findings of the French parliamentary commission ‘Stasi’ in November 2003, and the likelihood of a bill on the ban against ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols in public schools. Inspired by the French ban on headscarves, at the beginning of 2004 the senators of the Walloon socialist (Anne-Marie Lizin, Parti Socialiste) and liberal parties (Alain Destexhe, Mouvement des Réformateurs

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<sup>3</sup> De Belgian secular state has never been republican like France, and does not have a similar colonial past in which the hijab discourse has played an inferiorising role. The Belgian state recognises organised freethinking – in the French-speaking part of the country referred to as ‘la laïcité’ – as one service among others. The ubiquitous presence of Catholicism in the social life has invoked a strong secular opposition, that has also been partly revived in the wake of the headscarf debate. ‘Organised’ freethinking nevertheless, seems to be more closely aligned with pleas for active pluralism. The strong political and social embedding of the Christian pillar and the Christian-democratic party in Flanders holds up another mirror to new cultural-religious minorities to develop their claims to social integration.

Libéraux) launched a proposal to ban the headscarf in public schools and services. The Minister of Societal Integration and Equal Opportunities Marie Arena (Parti Socialiste) reacted negatively at this proposition and in a call not to limit the intercultural debate to the headscarf, took on the initiative of establishing a Commission on Intercultural Dialogue.

This federal commission, which took a start in February 2004, was instructed to draw up a state of affairs on intercultural relations on the basis of consultations with practitioners, representatives of religions and world-views, institutional representatives and academic experts around four working themes: citizenship, equality between men and women, the basic principles of governments services and the status of religion in a society with a predominantly non-confessional character. Whereas the report of the Commission, published in May 2005, did not offer a clear advice on the way the separation of church and state or the neutrality of the state should be interpreted in relation to the wearing of religious symbols in public services, it did stimulate the opening of a larger societal debate by presenting different but acceptable interpretations of the meaning of 'neutrality'. The wearing of the headscarf is not discussed in the report under the heading of gender issues, which mainly concerned the legal status of women in international family law, but was implicated under the heading of state-neutrality and religious signs. The only gendered concern which is left in the report is a suggestion to measure the impact of a possible ban on the wearing of religious signs on the employment of women in public services.

From an initial focus on gender equality, the headscarf debate shifted towards a focus on public neutrality and the Belgian secular state. The Commission considers three different viewpoints as defensible regarding the meaning of neutrality in fulfilling state positions. The first position, that of freedom of religion and inclusive neutrality, regards the exclusive understanding of neutrality as problematic in that it predominantly excludes signs that do not belong to the North European tradition and thus pleads for a no-limits approach to wearing religious signs by civil servants. The defenders of this first position argue that non-discrimination and neutrality should follow from the acts rather than the outward appearance of civil servants. The second viewpoint concerns a kind of state neutrality and therefore demands 'restraint' or a prohibition on any kind of expression of religious conviction on the part of civil servants, yet only for those who in office come into contact with the public and/or have a kind of authority relation. The third – republican – position, asks for strict neutrality with absence of any religious sign for all government officials, including those who do not come into contact with the public. In this viewpoint, public neutrality is prioritised above freedom of religion and neutrality is not only understood as an issue of deeds but also applies

to the appearance of civil servants. The CID ultimately does not defend one of these positions over another, but does in fact launch the idea that neutrality does not have to imply the eradication of all religious and ideological signs from clothing in government services. It thus does not suggest that the principle of neutrality itself (like that of freedom of religion and the equality principle) would be at stake, but rather questions how it must be applied in practice; whether one should strive to a further neutralising of public spaces and services, or conversely, if a more inclusive kind of neutrality is possible that on equal footing can give expression to the diversity of multicultural society.

### **3. Islam in the Belgian state**

Among the more profound dimensions of cultural diversity, religion assumes a fundamental position. Secularisation in Belgium has not resulted in a strict separation between state and church as in France, but in a mutual accord, thereby privileging the Catholic Church. All Belgian citizens contribute to the financing of the services of religious and philosophical communities (including the secular humanists), regardless of their personal conviction or income. The state, therefore, on the one hand appears to take a neutral and tolerant stance vis-à-vis religions and the Weltanschauungen of its citizens, yet decides on which religions and communities it shall recognise and finance. Officially, this recognition and financing is based on the general social, humanist and moral concerns that they may represent, but in practice recognition and financing is mostly a case of lobbying and the Catholic Church is clearly privileged in the allocation of government resources.<sup>4</sup> Following the settlement of 'guest worker' immigrants from Muslim countries such as Morocco and Turkey, Islam became the country's second religion. Although it was recognised as an official religion in 1974, this has not entailed equal treatment on par with other religions and worldviews. Despite the progressive decline in the practice of Catholicism, it still enjoys a privileged position and receives the vast majority of financial resources. Whereas in counting the number of adherents, Islam is the second largest religion in the country, only a tiny proportion of

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<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Catholicism and Protestantism were recognised, followed by the Anglican, Israelite (1870), Islamic (1974) and orthodox (1985) services. A number of non-confessional communities have been subsidised by the state since 1993. Despite the fact that the number of practising Catholics has dwindled substantially during the last three decades, Catholicism still enjoys a privileged position and receives the vast majority of the financial resources. Its dotation is determined by the number of inhabitants of a parish, regardless of the fact if these are practising Catholics. Although in numbers, Islam is the second biggest religion of the country, only a tiny proportion of the subsidies is allocated per practising Muslim. (cf. Husson, 2004) In order to rectify this imbalance in the allocation of resources, initiatives are being taken on designing a kind of ideological and religious registration of inhabitants at the local level.

subsidies are distributed per practising Muslim. Although the extent to which 'Islam' is a determinant of Muslim identity is debateable, and the way in which it is defined and experienced among Muslim minorities varies considerably, in general there is an evolution of socio-ethnic stratification at a religious level.

Prudential arguments will probably have a larger influence upon a fair subsidising of Islam in Belgium than distributive justice arguments. For financing would also imply that the Belgian government can place demands and exert influence and control, and for example form a counterbalance against the often conservative and fundamentalist influences from foreign donor countries.

One of the most striking and fairly unique effects of the secularisation process in Belgian society has been that of 'pillarisation': the creation of a network of resources and instruments (from political parties, trade unions to holiday resorts) carried by the community of citizens. As Timmerman (2003: 20) argues, these pillars stand in ambiguous relation to the nation state in which they function; they diminish the identification of the citizen with the nation state through the feeling of belonging to one's own – catholic, socialist or liberal – nest, yet simultaneously contribute to its social cohesion. For immigrants this has meant that despite not having gone through a similar process of secularisation, in order to claim a place within the host society they are forced to apply the same pillarisation logic. Hence, the debate on the formation of an 'Islamic pillar'. On the one hand it is doubted that this will benefit the emancipation – e.g., through erecting Islamic schools – of Muslim minorities. On the other hand it cannot be denied that the 'pillarisation' is still a reality in Belgium, and that withholding the same opportunities to religious minorities implies a breach of the equality principle. However, at this moment reality is far removed from the creation of an allochthonous or Islamic pillar. The established pillarised organisations – for example the labour unions – have embarked on efforts to accommodate new minorities under the heading of diversity (Flanders/Brussels) and/or anti-discrimination (Wallonia) policies.

Like in other European countries, Islam as a religion, but also as a collective identity is now part of the Belgian political space, upon which allochthones are mobilising. Following events such as 9/11/2001 and the headscarf controversy in Belgium, certain Muslim women are claiming their right to symbolise their religious convictions publicly.

#### **4. The mobilisation of Muslim girls and women**

In the headscarf controversies a (false) ideology of feminism as the mark of western civilization was strategically being co-opted in a colonial discourse that pits any form of gender justice against cultural pluralism. At worst it has contributed to an essentialist discourse on Islam as inherently oppressive to women and irreconcilable with western values, whereas discussion took place ‘over the heads’ of the actual women concerned. During the headscarf debate in the media and political agenda, - notwithstanding various protest marches on Antwerp and Brussels – the voices of Muslim women were hardly listened to and the discussion mostly took place ‘over their heads’. As a reaction to this exclusion, and the way in which the liberation of the Muslim woman had become the stake of a polarisation between minorities and the dominant society in Belgium, some 32 allochtonous women’s organisations signed an open letter to Minister of Internal Affairs Patrick Dewael, in reaction to his essay “forced veiling is unacceptable.”<sup>5</sup> This mobilisation further crystallised into the erection of self organisations such as the Action Committee of Muslim Women in Flanders (AMV, 2005a: 4). The platform ‘Keep off my headscarf’ (Blijf van mijn hoofddoek) in Mechelen was also established and launched a petition against any rule that would curtail wearing the headscarf at school. ([www.bismillah.be/blijfvanmijnhoofddoek](http://www.bismillah.be/blijfvanmijnhoofddoek)) The Centre for Allochtonous Girls and Women (SAMV), an umbrella organisation of allochtonous women’s organisations that is supported by the Flemish government, was also dismayed at the way the discussion

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<sup>5</sup> The peak of the headscarf debate in Flanders was to follow the publication of the essay “Forced veiling is unacceptable” by Patrick Dewael (2004), the liberal vice prime-minister and minister of Internal Affairs of the federal government, which was published simultaneously in main French and Dutch-language newspapers on January 10<sup>th</sup>. According to Dewael in his essay (2004), although groups demanding for their freedom of religion defend the ‘right’ of Muslim women to wear the headscarf, in practice this would often come down to the “implicit acceptance of the order by Muslim men that their women must be veiled.” The author concurs with the claim of Chirac that “the degree of civilization depends on the position of women in that society” and consequently any kind of forced veiling is unacceptable in as much as forced marriages, sexual mutilation and polygamy. Although it is noted that one “should respect those that veil voluntarily,” the “true motives of those enforcing the veil must be unmasked” and “through the law we must protect those who need our protection.” This essay unleashed a host of responses, and almost daily the newspapers had their special rubrics on the so-called ‘veil debate.’ Noticeable is the way Dewael rhetorically links the headscarf to practices such as sexual mutilation, forced marriages, gang rape, and so on. What is especially remarkable is that he draws on (non-academic) publications by Muslim women ‘in their own voices’ who have ‘cast off the veil.’ Among others, Dewael refers to the Iranian writer Chahdortt Djavann, whose essay *Bas les voiles!* was translated into Dutch the following month. In the mean time Djavann has been interviewed in many a journal and on prime time TV. Her basic view is that any kind of veiling would symbolize the status of women as ‘sex objects’ and ‘potential sinners,’ and that those Muslim girls in the French bidonvilles would merely be veiling out of protection against male sexual aggression. Another ‘liberated’ secular Muslim woman’s voice that the author refers to is that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Hirsi Ali gained much public attention with her sharp critique of ‘Islam,’ as what she perceives to be *the* central factor accounting for the problem of the integration of minorities in the Netherlands (Hirsi Ali 2002). Before she was – once more - forced into hiding after a series of death threats, among which that following the murder of the director Theo van Gogh in November 2004, for which she wrote the script for the film *Submission*, Hirsi Ali had become increasingly popular among the right-wing faction of Flemish liberal politicians (mostly male) and was often invited for speeches in those contexts.

took place ‘over’ instead of ‘with’ the groups in question and supports a kind of ‘positive neutrality’ in which pupils, teachers and civil servants have the right to wear the headscarf.

Seeing that the dominant discourse on the presumption that headscarf wearing women would be ‘forced’ or could impossibly be ‘emancipated’ was not supported by any research on empirical evidence, organisations such as AMV or the Brussels-based Al-Marifa have organised their own surveys among Muslim women on wearing and not-wearing the headscarf.<sup>6</sup> More recent research in Belgium (cf. Dala, 2005; Van der Heyden, Geets & Vanderwaeren, 2005; Vanderwaeren, 2005) and neighbouring countries (cf. Afshar, Aitken & Franks, 2005; Amiraux, 2003; Bartels, 2005) also wipes the floor with the simplistic association between the headscarf and oppression for the vast majority of Muslim women in the West. It is then often referred to the growing individual emancipatory identity politics for the second or third generation of Muslim women of this faith based practice.

Typical of the headscarf controversy is the one-sided way in which in very essentialist terms the relation between gender inequality and religion was discussed. The position of women had only been related to Islam, whereas it had never been an argument before to question, for example, the privileging and government subsidising of the Catholic Church that among others still refuses to open the priesthood to women. Whereas gender equality is anchored in the Belgian constitution, it also allows for an exemption in the framework of the equally constitutionally protected freedom of religion. This additionally illustrates how the feminism-multiculturalism debate is selectively used to stigmatise Islamic and Muslim minorities.

### **5. Gendering inclusive neutrality?**

In general, the headscarf debate can be contextualised within a broader debate on citizenship and the definition of national/regional identity opposed to other European countries on cultural and religious pluralism with the Belgian-nation state. Thus a headscarf ban as in secular-republican France has not been issued due to, among others, the specificity of state-church relations, the history of ‘pillarisation’ and the refracted school system. However, schools and organisations are still allowed to implement restrictions. Schools boards decide

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<sup>6</sup> AMV undertook a select sample of 225 Muslim women and girls from the province of Antwerp in the age category of 11-52. The largest group was of Moroccan origin, but women and girls of Turkish origins did make up an important percentage. A small minority of autochthonous Muslim converts with and without headscarves also took part. Both girls and women with and without headscarves participated. (AMV, 2005b). Al’Marifa (‘The Knowledge’) distributed and processed a survey in 2004 among predominantly 1000 women of Moroccan and Turkish origins from the capital region of Brussels (Al’Marifa 2004).



autonomously whether they either allow or forbid the wearing of the headscarf by pupils and/or teachers. This applies to various educational structures, including catholic, official, provincial and local educational networks. Not one of the institutional organisations has taken in a general position, but leaves the issue in the hands of the local autonomy of the schools. A number of court cases initiated by Muslim women against wearing head coverings at their schools have been rejected.

Currently being discussed are issues such as what state neutrality might actually mean for civil servants, and whether one may wear religious signs. The principle of neutrality as such is not at stake, but rather how it should be applied: by the inclusion of differences, or conversely, through their neutralisation. Belgium thus sways between on the one hand the political project of a ‘religious allotment country’, as Paul de Hert (2006: 122) describes the situation in the Netherlands and Germany, and on the other the French republican ideal that prioritises a further secularisation of the public sphere and space.

The new ‘intercultural’ notion of ‘active pluralism’ is also a concept that is gaining more and more popularity among politicians (cf. Stevaert, 2005) and the broad public. The concept – even though the reflection upon this concept is only in its initial phase – refers to a position in which religious diversity must be maximally supported and thus moves beyond the Rawlsian-liberal notion. Active pluralism implies that after a deep encounter with one’s own tradition, one can actively explore the other by way of an open intercultural dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Some public services, such as the VDAB (Flemish Public Employment Service) have already adopted a stance in favour of inclusive neutrality; among others it is currently being discussed. Pleas for inclusive neutrality in schools and public services are also supported by referring to the less appealing alternative of the formation of an Islamic pillar.

Notable is the way the Flemish Women’s Deliberation Committee (Vrouwen Overleg Komitee, VOK) also defends the idea of inclusive neutrality that would allow for Muslim women to wear their headscarf in their profession, whereas the same organisation had for years striven vehemently against the ubiquitous influence of the Catholic Church within the

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<sup>7</sup> Ludo Abicht, for example, sees active pluralism as authentic pluralism: “Authentic pluralism, whereby one aspires to approach the other actively as well as wishes to preserve the plurality of life stances, must be understood as an interest in, an inter-est for other life stances. For it is important, to all of us to get to know the other approach to shared life questions and as it were, to place ourselves in the mentality of the other, to understand as much as we can from the inside and to feel how others solve, look at and try to solve the same general human problems.” (Abicht, 2006: 231). However, Paul De Hert (2006) is also highly critical of the project of active pluralism and warns how easy the concept can be (mis)appropriated by the well-organised catholic block as means to hold on to the waning influence of its own life stance among the public. The fact that the public space in Flanders is a pillarised space, cannot be sufficient argument to strive towards an active pluralism in the place of retaining the already achieved status quo, according to De Hert. (2006: 121-122)

public sphere. Clearly inspired by the report of the Commission on Intercultural Dialogue, the VOK defends the position of inclusive neutrality that would allow Muslim women to wear the headscarf in their employment in public services. (VOK, 2005) It thus clearly chooses for an anti-racist position to which secularisation is subordinated.

However, pleas for inclusive neutrality are principally not limited to the wearing of the headscarf. What is advocated here is not an exemption to a general rule in favour of the emancipation of minority women, but a revision of a current – however implicit and not realized – interpretation of neutrality in the public domain.

## **6. Towards a feminist viewpoint on interculturality in white women's organisations**

Whereas a few allochtonous politicians had put the emancipation of allochtonous women on the political agenda, none of these have conceived the headscarf affair to be a priority in Belgium. Some individual 'white feminists', nevertheless publicly defended an anti-hijab stance during the headscarf debate, out of a concern for the perceived detrimental effects for the position of allochtonous women according to a cultural relativist view on religion and culture. (cf. Mia Doornaert in *De Standaard*, 10/11/04).

Women's organisations such as the Dutch-speaking Women's Council (Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad) did not immediately formulate a point of view regarding the headscarf yet rejected the way in which women's emancipation was being instrumentalised by 'white knights' who 'in their name' were supposedly defending the rights of oppressed veiled Muslim women. To date the Women's Council has not achieved consensus as to which position should be taken regarding the headscarf. Consequently, the debate initiated a discussion on the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism and has even led to an interculturalisation process in Flemish women's organisations (cf. S'Jegers, 2006). The Dutch-speaking Women's Council - an umbrella organisation of different Flemish women's organisations that in 2005 celebrated its 100 years of existence - started with an internal diversity process 'Towards a colourful Women's Council' (2005-2006), aiming among others, - and encouraged by the subsidising Minister - to include allochtonous women's organisations in its organisation. The Women's Deliberation Committee (Vrouwen Overleg Komitee - VOK), the oldest still remaining organisation of the second feminist wave in Flanders, in which individual women represent themselves, now also counts Muslim feminists among its active members. In 2005 the Committee published the brochure *A feminist look at*

*multiculturality (Een feministische kijk op multiculturaliteit)*, in which, for example, the ‘western Eurocentric appropriation’ of feminism and universal values is criticised.

## **7. Policies in gender quality and cultural diversity**

Whereas the headscarf debate in 2004-2005 can be viewed as the most salient example of the way the tensions between gender equality and cultural diversity have been played out in Belgium with various concrete effects on public discourse and policies pertaining to broad issues such as multiculturalism, the relationship between religion and state and the status of minority women, the latter has also received some specific attention during recent years within equal opportunities policy. After decennia of feminist struggle gender equality in itself, as in other countries, is anchored in the Belgian constitution, law and policy. Current equal opportunities policies in Belgium are implemented at both the federal and the community level and are defined both horizontally (gender mainstreaming in all department policies) and vertically (specific measures for achieving gender equality). Nominally, besides women, allochthones, disabled people, LGBs and the elder also come under equal opportunities policy.

At the federal level, the current Minister for Civil services, social integration, cities policy and equal opportunities, Christian Dupont (Parti Socialiste) has prioritised attention to ‘migrant women’ in his policy. This mainly involves the finalisation of the International Private Law (the problem of repudiation) and sensibilisation surrounding the Moudawana (the reform of Moroccan family law and repercussions thereof for Moroccan women in Belgium). Priority is being given to the legal status of women of foreign origins through the erection of ‘Support Centres International Private Law for Women of foreign origins’. These centres have the task to inform women and to assist them in defending their rights. A second priority but little concretised theme is the ‘impact of policy on the social and professional mobility of women of foreign origins’ ([www.christiandupont.be:beleid-interculturaliteit](http://www.christiandupont.be:beleid-interculturaliteit))

Differences in the communitarian conceptions of equal opportunities policy explicitly aimed at women in minority groups already become apparent in the way this group is conceptually designated and forms a first important stake in the articulation of policies: ‘allochtonous women’ (Flemish policy) and respectively ‘migrant women’ (federal and Walloon policy). The last, although theoretically, excludes second and third generations.

In sum we can state that Flemish minority policy allows 'allochtonous' women more 'visibility' in terms of policy measures, whereas on the French-speaking side the stigmatising effects of the focus on ethnicity are emphasised and the way this artificially deepens the divide between groups among the population.

Whereas minority women were practically invisible in the previous Flemish legislature (which focused on issues such as parity or the equal political representation of women on the one hand and the emancipation of minorities on the other), the current Flemish minister of Equal Opportunities has set out in her policy letter (2004-2009) in the language of a transversal equal opportunities approach and in applying intersectional terminology, to completely prioritise the emancipation of allochtonous (in particular Muslim) women, next to 'the emancipation of men', and achieving equality for LGBs, single mothers, low-income and older women. Characteristic for the greater part of gender equity philosophy and policy in general, is the underlying idea that for the vast majority of autochthonous women emancipation and equality are already achieved.

The same minister has approached Muslim women's secular and religious (self) organizations, and is entertaining the route of Islam as a means to emancipation for Muslim women. This appears as a striking move in the context of a secular democracy, and especially in a climate in which the place of religion in the public sphere and the relationship between religion and politics are being debated anew. The Support Centre for Allochtonous Girls and Women that is subsidised by the Flemish government is starting up an experimental project in 2006 in a number of Muslim women's groups in Flanders on the Koran as an instrument of emancipation.

The cabinet has also recently approached Muslim women's organizations through 'living room conversations' in order to start up a dialogue that may lead to concrete actions. This included, for example an invitation to the play 'The Veiled Monologues' followed by discussion between the organizations, the Minister and the director and actors of the play. A number of Muslim women walked out during the play and afterwards much critique was launched at the Minister for the way such initiatives only contribute to the portrayal of Muslim women in an orientalist and 'sexualized' manner, whilst Muslim men are portrayed as oppressors. Grass root organizations (cf. 'Keep off my headscarf') have also criticized the way 'art' is being used to deal with what they perceive to be 'political' problems, such as discrimination in education and employment (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 18/04/05).

In Wallonia, the Ministry of Social Action, Health and Equal Opportunities has prioritised the following issues after taking stock of Beijing+10: domestic violence, social housing for battered women, parity on communal and regional election lists, and practical and institutional support for (the mostly female) caretakers of the aged and disabled. Finally, the current minister plans to combat sexism in education and employment, with particular attention to immigrant women and women from foreign backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

Next to equality policy, the Flemish minority policy is also an institutional space in which allochtonous women as a specific category are trying to articulate their concerns, next to numerous other domains, institutions and structures, such as education, health care, welfare, etc. Acquiring a strategic-emancipatory position as a specific target group is nevertheless an ambiguous undertaking, that with Gloria Wekker (2002) can be best described metaphorically as ‘building nests in a windy place’.

### **8. Family and honour related violence**

The current National Action Plan against Partner Violence (2004-2007) is solely directed towards (ex)partner violence, opposed to an earlier action plan (2001-2003) that comprised a much broader notion of violence including domains such as violence within the contexts of the workplace, human trafficking, asylum policy, international relations and development cooperation. This narrowing down has implications for the attention to violence against women of minority and immigration backgrounds.

On the other hand, research into the prevalence and types of violence against women (in its broadest definition) of minority groups has been rather scant in Belgium, which can partly be explained by a reluctance to register ethnicity in data banks and social analyses, especially in the sphere of violence and criminality. Opponents on the multiculturalists’ side have argued that registration often leads to a reification of target groups that may acquire a pejorative connotation.

Minor media attention has been given to the perceived rise among ‘allochtonous’ women in women’s shelters. According to a report on homelessness and general welfare work in Flanders in 2003, allochtonous women make up more than the half of the inhabitants of

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<sup>8</sup> The Direction for Equal Opportunities of the French-Walloon government broadened its notion of equality beyond that of equality between women and men in 1999. Among its actions has been the development of pedagogical material on the status of women in secondary education, the support of projects pertaining to combating violence against women, and the representation of women in local politics. In 2004 the government ordered an exploratory study on forced marriages in the French-speaking community in order to offer suggestions on prevention and aid to both female and male victims of the practice.

some shelters. It often concerns women of the second or third generation with Belgian nationalities that have left their husbands. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that partner violence would be more prevalent than in autochthonous families in Belgium. It can also be explained by the fact that allochthonous women reside longer in the shelters than autochthonous women, due to their often precarious economic and social status. Another assertion is that minority women are almost completely absent in ambulant social care settings.

In contrast to other countries and those cases abroad that have received some press coverage, until recently similarly hardly any attention has been given to honour-related violence on Belgian territory. On 16 December 2005 the Kurdish Institute in Brussels together with the Federation of Flemish Women's groups organised a conference on honour-related violence. With this conference they hope to stimulate different governments and authorities in Belgium to deal with the phenomenon of HRV. That cases of HRV do prevail in Belgium is shown by e.g., Clycq et al. study (2004) in which conversations with social workers on 'honour revenge' and the locking up of partners is mentioned as a typical form of violence and as a specific form of legitimizing. Autochthonous perpetrators of violence are less apt to account for their acts of violence in terms of honour or refer to their culture or religion, but will refer to serious acts of violence as 'passionate'.

In response to some interpolations, inspired by Dutch studies, on this topic the Minister of Justice explained that honour related violence is not retained as a parameter in the national police data bank, nor do police officers receive any specialised training on the subject. Other interpolations have been met with numbers like some 5 honour killings having been committed in Belgium during the last 6 years and without any notable increase. The Minister of Justice has nevertheless promised (beginning 2006) to start up an action plan on intra-familial violence following experimental projects in the Netherlands. The problem of honour revenge would also be taken up in the context of 'partner violence' in higher education.

Despite the absence of or minimal attention by both politicians and the media, according to fieldworkers and practice experts, such as those present at the HRV conference in Brussels, honour related violent practices such as 'forced marriages', 'forced abortions' and 'forced virginity' (with consequent requests for hymen repair) are nevertheless present among minority and immigrant communities in Belgium.

However, there is also some reluctance to categorise and address violence against women as honour-related, since the notion itself refers to 'other' cultures and can therefore

easily used to stigmatise certain minority groups. Instead of ‘culturalising’ the needs of minority women, fieldworkers and self-organisations such as the SAMV give preferential attention to the ‘interculturalisation’ of services in society, working towards a greater inclusiveness and responsiveness for the needs of minority groups.

## **9. Genital Mutilation**

Genital mutilation is described as another form of violence against women, which regardless of its general ‘orientalist’ fascination among the public and in the media, its incidence in Belgium has not been problematised to any great extent. Despite the fact that Belgium passed a specific criminal law provision prohibiting female genital mutilation in 2000, to date no national court cases concerning FGM have occurred. On the basis of a limited case study (excluding factors such as ethnicity, illegal immigrants and migrants with a Belgian nationality) researchers from the International Centre for Reproductive Health in Ghent have roughly estimated the number of women and girls in Belgium that could be affected by FGM at 2.745 on a total population of over 10 million (De Leye & Deblonde 2004). Although health workers admit to being confronted with the consequences of FGM and with the request for reinfibulation, knowledge among aspects of FGM among professionals is scarce, nor are the legal aspects known (De Leye, Deblonde & Timmerman 2004). In May 2006, a parliamentary question was raised to the Minister of Justice, inspired by actions in Denmark and Finland, and proposing to effectively pursue parents who send their children abroad for this form of mutilation.

## **10. Concluding remarks**

The way in which gender and multicultural issues are articulated in any case illustrates the different fractures and complex political relations that mark the Belgian landscape and the diverse and ambiguous impact of developments in neighbouring countries, which are utmost difficult to ascertain. On the one hand the consecutive electoral victories and the xenophobic populism of the right-wing party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) have exerted a profound influence upon integration and minority policies. Gender issues, such as the presumed oppression of ‘the allochtonous or migrant woman’ are thereby often symbolically and

literally deployed in view of assimilationist agendas.<sup>9</sup> These attitudes no doubt mirror general tendencies such as immigration policies in other countries (for example on forced and bogus marriages), or the idea of a ‘clash between civilisations’ in which the West is celebrated as the sole and ultimate defender of women’s rights. Women in migrant and minority groups are thus often the stake of an agenda that transcends their interests as they are active participants and actors struggling to be recognized as equal partners in debates and policies on multiculturalism and equal opportunities.

On the other hand a radical shift in multicultural policies has not (yet?) taken place as is the case in the Netherlands and France; Flanders in contrast to the Netherlands by whom it was inspired, still holds on to a group oriented ethnic minority policy. The explanation for this is a very complex one and is partly related to electoral dynamics and the political embargo (cordon sanitair) to form a coalition with the extreme right wing party Vlaams Belang (cf. Jacobs, 2004). Some events, such as the anonymous death threats in 2005 which demanded the resignation of Naïma Amzil, because of her headscarf, also held a mirror to the Belgian population, to which terrible intolerance the stigmatisation of other cultures and religions could lead. Because of her composed reaction, and especially her West-Flemish accent, Naïma gained much sympathy among the Belgian public. This appreciation thus seems to testify to multicultural toleration, yet at the same time reveals the astonishment on how a headscarf-wearing woman of Moroccan origin could possibly be integrated to the extent that she had mastered the local dialect. This case nevertheless contributed to a certain shift in the debate on the emancipation of Muslim women, by bringing the problem of racist and gender specific ethnic discrimination in the workplace into the public eye.<sup>10</sup>

The recent shooting by a young Flemish man with family ties to the extreme right party the Flemish Interest of two minority women and a young girl in broad daylight in the city of Antwerp and a number of other violent racist attacks in the Spring of 2006, have also

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<sup>9</sup> After the death threats regarding the Amzil case, Flemish Interest party president Filip Dewinter sticks to his viewpoint: “Who wears a headscarf, shows unwillingness to integration (...).” (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 28/12/04: website Vlaams Belang/Filip Dewinter)

<sup>10</sup> Recently the low labour rate of ‘allochtonous’ women has been denounced. Here we can similarly detect different ideological discourses: on the left attention is focussed on the problem of neglect in education and discrimination and racism on the labour market. Until recently little attention was given to the gender dimension. The misconception (cf. Martens, Ouali, e.a., 2005: 31) is that ‘allochtonous’ girls by virtue of their higher school achievements would experience relatively less discrimination on the labour market compared to ‘allochtonous’ boys. On the right the low labour participation of allochtonous women is often translated in ‘culturalist’ terms. Bart Somers, president of the Flemish Liberal Party (VLD) explains the low working rate among Turkish and Moroccan women through ‘the social pressure from for example the husband’ (website ‘*Vijfkamp voor aanpak werkloosheid bij allochtonen*’). The impact of negative image regarding Muslim women (cf. E-Quality, 2005) is not acknowledged in this kind of discourse, neither is the ethno-stratification of the labour market and the problem of underachievement that highly educated allochtonous women suffer from (especially in Brussels. (Brussels Observatorium van de Arbeidsmarkt en Kwalificaties, 2004: 25).



opened up a public debate on the extent to which racism has become structurally institutionalised in all of Belgian society. Paradoxically, within this context critiques on current multicultural policies as contributing to a dangerous “group-oriented thinking” are also articulated by spokesmen of the Flemish liberal party.

Whereas public attention for integration and multiculturalism never seems to cease in Flanders, at the moment of writing this paper the question of gender equality and cultural diversity is not a very prominent one in public debate. It however remains salient in other core debates such as on religion and the state, and is also taken up and implemented in policy-making and different civil society organisations and institutions, e.g. within the implementation of diversity policies and/or gender mainstreaming. Theoretically included in both domains of policy-making, in practice minority women still have to go a long way in the struggle for recognition - as women in minorities or as minority women - within the different societal and institutional domains such as labour unions, political parties, health care, education, social services. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this in a fair manner but the issue of the integration and accommodation of minority women’s claims and needs ‘from below’ is nevertheless a very important one that should not be neglected, and more in particular in the pillarised Belgian society where the so-called ‘midfield’ (middenveld) is very important to policy-making and social cohesion.

Finally, the focus in this paper on minority women with a Muslim background does not imply that they are the only significant minority women’s group in Belgian society. As we have already explained in our first paper, due to old and new immigrant flows, Belgium is a very multi-ethnic/multicultural and diversifying society. Nevertheless, in line with global dynamics regarding Islam and Muslim minorities, the attention in public debate is very much focused on Islam and Muslim identities, Whereas religious identification is stimulated by the strategic opportunities for recognition it offers to minorities by the Belgian state, the historical-pragmatic – and to a much less extent debated - outcome of the typical Belgian secular state is now being questioned and/or re-funded. In these discussions gender-related issues have played, and will no doubt continue to play, - albeit often selectively and strategically - an important part.

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