

**“RECONCILIATION THROUGH ART: PERCEPTIONS OF HIJAB”**

CULTURE 2000

**The debate on the custom of Hijab in Greece**

Prepared by



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Purpose and aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to identify the issues related to the use of the hijab by Muslim women in Greece, as perceived by both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations living in the country.

The study was conducted as part of a project co-funded by the EC under the framework CULTURE 2007-2013 the “Reconciliation Through Art: Perceptions of Hijab” which takes place in Italy, Greece and Bulgaria. Eventually, the three national studies will be synthesized into one single research report.

The research will help contextualize the topic of the project by supporting it with historical, anthropological, sociological and political information.

### **1.2 Research objectives**

1. To collect and present socio-demographic information of the (female) Muslim population living in Greece
2. To analyse the historical and current position (religious, social, cultural and political) of the Muslim population in Greece, particularly of women
3. To depict the attitudes of the Greek society towards Muslims and specifically hijab-wearing Muslims

### **1.3 Methodology**

Much of the information available in this study was obtained through secondary sources, namely Government and other official reports, NGO reports, academic research, media articles and news items, journals and publications. During the past couple of years there has been some journalistic interest in the subject. However, there is a very limited availability of other types of information such as surveys, academic research and other official information.

A considerable part of the study however, was based on primary sources: a focus group and interviews with individuals.

With regards to the focus group a discussion was organised by PRISMA and attended by eight women. The participants can be described as follows:

- Greek anthropologist with extensive experience in women’s issues as part of international organisation
- Greek anthropologist with background in theology

- Art historian with particular interest in the depiction of hijab in art
- Muslim woman of Syrian origin, head of the Muslim Women's Group in Athens
- Greek Muslim woman, recent convert to Islam and midwife
- Researcher (with extensive experience in research in cultural and social inclusion issues
- Theatre actress and director, researcher and activist in women's issues, of Iranian origin.

The discussion was led by a facilitator; it was recorded and then transcribed.

Further, three informal interviews were conducted with three women working with the Muslim minority living in the Gazi area of Athens (two NGO workers and a nursery teacher).

#### **1.4 Structure of the report**

The report examines first the Muslim population of Greece (2.) and then reviews the position of other religions and ethnicities in Greece (3). It continues with a review of the debate on the hijab as observed by the Greek media and population living in Greece (4) and ends with the attitudes of the Greek (Orthodox) society towards women wearing the hijab (5).

## 2. THE MUSLIM POPULATION IN GREECE

It is estimated that around 360.000 Muslims live in Greece today. There are two broad groups of Muslims: immigrants and indigenous.

### 2.1 Indigenous Muslims in Greece

The Muslim minority of Greece consists of people belonging to three distinct ethnic groups: Turkish, Pomak and Roma gypsies. The origin of the Muslim Minority of Greece as an officially defined group dates back to 1923, when under the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, the Muslims living in Greece were required to immigrate to Turkey; whereas, the Christians living in Turkey were required to immigrate to Greece in an "Exchange of Populations". The Muslims of Thrace and the Christians of Istanbul and the islands of Gökçeada and Bozcaada (Imvros and Tenedos) were the only populations not exchanged and for this reason the current Muslim Minority in Greece resides mainly in the area of Thrace (north-east part of Greece, a region bordering Turkey and Bulgaria). To current date the Muslim Minority of Thrace is the only formally recognized minority of Greece.



According to 1991 census the Muslim Minority numbers approximately 98.000 people and represents 0.92% of the total population (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999). The minority of Western Thrace is a religious one and not an ethnic one even though its population is far from homogenic. Historically alongside Turks, Pomaks (indigenous population that speaks a Slavic dialect who converted to Islam) and certain Roma (gypsy) groups lived there for centuries too. Each group has their own linguistic and social backgrounds -which often overlap. In Thrace the Minority makes up 29% of the population (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999). The breakdown between the three groups is: 50% of Turkish origin, 35% Pomaks, and 15% Muslim Roma (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999).

There is also a small Muslim community in some of the Dodecanese islands which, as part of Italy between 1912 and 1947 were not subjected to the exchange of the population between Turkey and Greece in 1923. The 1951 census records show that they numbered 5000 approximately (Touloumakos, 2005).

### ***Ethnic Turks***

Ethnic Turks have resided in Thrace since at least the fourteenth century. Proportionally they represent the largest of the three ethnic groups of which the Minority is made up. The Treaty of Lausanne, granted rights protecting the Minority's religion, language, culture, and equality before the law. However, since no distinction was made regarding the ethnic origins of the Minority in the Treaty, the Turkish element prevailed and education for example was delivered in Turkish and not the Pomak or Gypsy dialect.

### ***Pomaks***

Pomaks are an Islamized people historically concentrated in rural parts of the Rhodope region (Greece), as well as in parts of Turkey, Bulgaria and FYROM. They speak Pomak, a language which belongs to the linguistic family of Slavic languages. Their origins are obscure, but they are generally believed to be of Christian origin who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans.

The Pomaks remained rather cut off from the rest of the population of the country until the mid '90s. Until 1995, they lived in a "restricted zone" dating back to the Balkan war which prevented their resettlement to other neighbouring areas without authorization as well as access to outsiders visiting the area (Greek Helsinki Monitor, undated). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Pomak people have been claimed by all three neighbouring countries (Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria) and have been a centre of controversy during the Balkan war, the Greek junta and at various other points in recent history of these regions (Michail, 2003).

### ***Roma (gypsies)***

There are no accurate figures on the size of the Romani population living in Greece and estimates range from 120,000 to 500,000. The huge discrepancy between the estimates is due to administrative and political complexities. Most of the Romas in Greece are

Christians but some are Muslim. The Roma who lived in Thrace were the only ones officially “recognized” under the Treaty of Lausanne as part of the Muslim minority. Many more have lived in other parts of Greece for centuries but were not recognised as entitled to Greek citizenship until the mid-1970s.

It is now known that gypsies generally originated from India and emigrated over several centuries in other parts of the world. The Romas have usually adopted the dominant religion of the host country while often preserving their particular belief systems and indigenous religion and worship (Balazova, 2000). It was during the Ottoman period that some Romas living in Greece converted to Islam.

### ***Citizenship, Education, Religion***

The Muslim minority of Western Thrace enjoys full equality to the Greek majority in law and citizenship, *equality before the Law* and *equality of civil rights* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007). Politically the Minority is represented in the Greek parliament, and during the local elections of 2002, approximately 250 Muslim municipal and prefectural councillors and mayors were elected. The government recognizes Shari’a law on family and civic issues for Muslims that live in Thrace. For this reason the Greek Authorities appoint Muftis after consultation with the local leaders. There are two Islamic theological seminaries, and since 1998, the qualification awarded by these institutions has been recognized as equal to that of the Greek Orthodox Theological lyceums in the country (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2008).

Thrace is the only region where Minority schools exist and operate as equal to Greek state schools. The education is provided in Turkish and Greek languages. Today there are 240 Minority schools, of which two are secondary (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2008). It is generally agreed that these two schools do not provide sufficient capacity to accommodate all pupils of secondary school age. In the remote mountainous areas of Xanthi where the Pomak element is dominant, the Greek government has set up two more Greek language secondary education schools in which religious studies is taught in Turkish and the Koran is taught in Arabic. The Pomak language, however, is not taught at any level of the education system. The government finances the transportation to and from the schools for students who live in remote areas. All the aforementioned institutions are funded by the state.

### ***The position of the Muslim Minority in the Greek State***

Due to the Minority’s geographical concentration in the area of Thrace, the Minority of Thrace has not caused controversy amongst the wider population Greece. It has nevertheless been an important political matter over the 20<sup>th</sup> century for political parties, Governments, organisations concerned with Minority issues as well as for community leaders of the Minority. Clearly, the presence of the Minority has also been far weightier for the local Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

Until the 1980's, the Minority was cut off from the rest of Greece and no effort was made for their integration. As a result the minority has remained underdeveloped compared with the rest of the Greek society and demonstrates traits of a minority community: low education level (it has a staggering 65% school drop-out rate, arguably due to lack of secondary level schools), reduced employment opportunities, inadequate access to public services. In this type of isolated society people tend to attach themselves to more traditional values (pertinent to the Minority). Muslim Minority women tend not to complete full education, stay at home and tend to marry young into arranged marriages (Varla, 2007). The hijab, but even the burqa is common among Thracian Muslims.

There have been some major improvements in the rights of the Muslims of Thrace over the last couple of decades. During the 1990's laws on ownership have been repealed: The Muslim minority can now buy and sell houses and land, repair houses, obtain cars, truck and tractor licenses, and open coffee houses and machine and electrical shops, activities they were banned from in the past (Human Rights Watch, 1999). From 1996, 0.5% of places in Greek higher education institutions are reserved for members of the minority. In recent years there has been a significant rise in the number of Muslim minority graduates which is manifested in the 750 members of the Association of Scientists from Western Thrace (Ta Nea, 2008) and which includes women. The more educated Muslims of the Thrace region now send their children to Greek schools rather than their own Islamic schools "Older generations spoke no Greek at all, younger ones tend to speak a little which is a positive sign" says a Greek focus group participant .

Having been granted freedom of movement, since the 80's many have started emigrating to other parts of Greece looking for better employment opportunities. It is estimated that there about 5000 Thracian Muslims living in Athens (around 800 families) the majority of who have settled in rundown areas in the centre of Athens (in the area of Gazi and Votanikos) (Dama, 2008). Still though, the mentality persists. They live in seclusion and socialize between them, women marry young, and they often remain uneducated and are mostly unemployed (Dama, 2008; Varla, 2007). Speaking of the Muslim Minority in Gazi, one local nursery teacher says: "During the first years of the nursery's operation, these people did not send their children to nursery at all, and if they did they did this sporadically, especially girls".

Over the past decade efforts have also been made by NGO's and government programmes to support Muslim Minority families by providing practical help, psychological support, childcare, Greek language tuition, citizenship and health advice etc. This is of course very positive sign but is also an indication of the conditions under which the Minority has lived and the society traits it portrays. "To properly assess the situation one would need to review it in 20 years when the younger generation that has been educated have attended university and has lived in more open conditions" concludes one of the Greek focus group participants.

## **2.2 Immigrant Muslims in Greece**

The 2001 census reports 797.091 foreigners living in Greece. This number represents a tremendous increase of 450% since the previous census of 1991. Women make up 45.5% of these and men the 54.5%. Additionally, it is estimated there are another 200.000-250.000 undocumented aliens which when added to the 797.091 gives a total of 1 million approximately (Stelmach, 2006). The total represents over 9% of the population, a percent which can hardly be ignored. Just under half of these live in Attiki region (Baldwing-Edwards, 2005)

#### Population- official data

	1991	2001
Total population of Greece	10.260.000	10.964.020
Of which foreigners	167.000	797.091
In %	2%	7%

Source: National Statistics Service of Greece

#### Breakdown of foreign-born population in Greece by main nationality group

<b>Total number of foreigners</b>	<b>797.091</b>
<i>of wich approximately:</i>	
Albanians	438.000
Pontic Greeks (from ex-Soviet Union)	152.204
Nationals from EU 15	47.000
Bulgarians	35.000
Georgians	20.000
Romanians	20.000
Russians	17.500



Cypriots	17.000
Poles	13.000
Pakistanis	10.000
Ukrainians	10.000
Indians	10.000
Others	7.500

Source: National Statistics Service of Greece, General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad in Selmach, 2006.

The first immigrants of Islamic faith, mostly Palestinian Arabs, arrived in the early 1970s from the Middle East (Wikipedia, 2008). Since 1990, there has been an increase in the numbers of immigrant Muslims from various countries of the Middle East, as well as from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. However, the bulk of the immigrant Muslim community has come from the Balkans, and particularly from Albania and Albanian communities in the Republic of Macedonia, and other former Yugoslav republics. It is worth mentioning that Albanian Muslims are generally not practicing. As with all immigrants, Muslims too are concentrated in the country's two main urban centres, Athens and Thessaloniki . In Attiki prefecture alone informal sources estimate there are approximately 250,000 Muslim immigrants (Krystalli, 2004). It is unclear whether this number includes internal immigrants of the Muslim Minority of Thrace and whether it includes Albanian Muslims.

### **3. OTHER RELIGIONS AND ETHNIC GROUPS IN ORTHODOX GREECE**

#### **3.1 The prevalence of Greek Orthodoxy**

The majority of the almost 11 million people in Greece (up to 95.2 percent) are recorded as members of the Orthodox Church, with small numbers belonging to other denominations, (Filos, 2004).

The position of the Greek Orthodox Church and its relations with the State are set forth in Article 3, par. 1 of the present Constitution (1975/1986/2001) whereby the Greek Orthodox Church is the prevailing religion in Greece. The Greek Orthodox Church is recognized as a legal body of public law and the Orthodox clergy is paid by state budget. The strong ties between the Greek Church and the State are strong and manifest themselves in multiple ways in Greek administration. There is for example an institutionalised link between the Church and the Ministry of Education and Religion to handle administrative matters around education and religions.

Nevertheless, constitutionally and in law Islam is one of the three recognized religions governed under public law, along with Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy; and prohibition against discrimination and freedom of religion are provided for in Article 5 and Article 13 of the Greek constitution.

In understanding attitudes towards Muslims living in Greece and their position in the Greek State one has to bear in mind the strong Greek Orthodox sentiment among Greeks and affiliation to the Orthodox Church at both societal and state level, borne largely out of a historical dispute between Greece and Turkey. Being Greek and being Orthodox is so very tightly connected and together they make up the Greek identity, that not being Orthodox is perceived as something very unusual and is treated often with unease (Focus group, 2008; US Department of State, 2007). Still to date the Church wields significant social, political and economic influence on the government and society.

#### **3.2 Greece's new multi-cultural identity**

Another important factor related to the position of and societal attitudes towards the Muslim population is the fact that Greece has become multi-cultural only during the past couple of decades. Until now, besides the Muslim minority of Thrace and Romas living in Greece, the number of people from other ethnicities and religious groups was limited and not noticeable to the majority of Greeks. The "foreigners" therefore were not an issue that either affected the status quo or one that was high on government agendas. The influx of foreigners has been met with conflicting sentiment. On some occasions such as following the 9/11 attacks Greeks have sympathized with the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers or in earlier times with the Kurdish ones, a feeling which they do not share with other Muslim or non Muslim immigrants (Information centre for racism, ecology, peace and non-violence, 2001).

Since the influx of immigrants from the Balkans, Middle East, Africa, Asia, and area of Thrace Greek people are only now learning to co-live with people from other ethnicities, cultures and religions and many stereotypes prevail, preventing their integration. There have been some incidents of societal discrimination against members of minority faiths especially from fanatic Christians (Forum 18, 2001). Despite that, several research studies concluded that religion-oriented racism is not the case in the Greek society and intolerance toward Muslims or Islamophobia has not occurred (Pavlou, 2005; Information centre for racism, ecology, peace and non-violence, 2001; US Department of state, 2007).

The majority of the economically active population of immigrants has been quick to enter the labour market, often the grey or black one, providing cheap labour to factories, agricultural units, construction sites, cleaning and gardening services, and domestic assistance. This has helped with their acceptance as part of the society but not yet with their integration. There is still an intangible segregation between Greeks (Christians) and “foreigners”. The segregation is most “problematic” with Thracian Muslims, Romas and Albanians. The first signs of more meaningful integration are starting to appear now that second generation immigrants attend normal Greek school, speak the language fluently and socialize with Greeks in a more equal basis.

Athens has become the hub of the Greek multicultural society, with neighbourhoods once almost exclusively Greek having turned into mainly Pakistani, Albanian, Muslim minority of Thrace, Filipino etc. The only exception is that of Romas who have lived in the outskirts of Athens for many decades or even centuries – the majority of which is Christians.

Immigrants have often been held responsible (not necessarily justifiably) for the soaring criminality around Greece. However, as one focus group participants declared (2008), statistics about crime in Greece show that Muslims demonstrate the lowest levels of crime. It was generally the view of the non-Muslim participants of the focus group that Muslims were less feared than other foreigners living in Greece, which may be partly explained because of “their fear of God”.

### **3.3 Integration of Muslims**

Things have been more controversial regarding the practice and study of Muslim religion. Despite the recognition of Islam as legal person of public law, which in theory means they can establish “houses of prayer”, Greece is the only EU country without a mosque (outside Thrace) and imams are forbidden. In 1996, a bill was passed forming a Governing Commission for an Islamic Temple in Athens, to manage and sustain a Mosque, the first official mosque to be built in Athens. The Mosque would be funded by the state in territory offered by the state. The bill has never been implemented due to oppositions from residents, the Church and political leaders as well as administrative complications (Kathimerini, 2006a; Papachristos, 2006, Yiannarou, 2006). The lack of progress on this matter was heavily criticized by Alvaro Hill-Robles, a former human rights commissioner for the European Council (Kathimerini, 2006b). Instead Muslims have set up informal

mosques. Informal sources suggest that the number of informal mosques operating in Athens is approximately 20 where as other sources suggests there are as many as 70. As the European Commissioner remarked, “the fact that Muslims are forced to meet in secret and in unsuitable places to pray has done anything but promote smooth relations among religious creeds in Greece” (Kathimerini, 2006b).

The church has also opposed to an Islamic studies centre in Athens in fear that this would become a hub for political propaganda (Papachristos, 2006). The Islamic Studies Centre has nevertheless been built in Moschato with funds donated by a private sponsor.

Until now the Muslim community has been lobbying for a Muslim cemetery which did not exist outside Thrace. The Church has finally donated a 300,000 square feet, worth an estimated \$20 million, in west Athens for the purpose of a Muslim cemetery (Wikipedia 2007). Some Thracian Muslims resident in Athens have also been lobbying for Islamic religious instruction for their children at schools for Muslim children that opt out of the standard (Orthodox) religious instruction (U.S Department of State, 2007).

In other public domains, the state has made some effort for the integration of other faiths and ethnicities. Responding to the needs of the multi-cultural, multi-faith population of Athens, in 1996 the Ministry for National Education and Religious Matters laid the foundations of a system designed to meet the educational needs of non Greek and non Orthodox groups leading to the establishment of the first cross cultural schools. A school can only be described as cross-cultural when repatriated Greek and/or foreign students account for at least 45% of the total student body (Ministry of Education & Religious affairs, 2008). Currently, there are 26 cross-cultural schools mostly in Athens. In cross-cultural schools, the standard curriculum is adapted to meet the specific educational, social or cultural needs of the students attending them. There has however been criticism that other schools with significant foreign/ multi-faith population receive practically no additional support from the state.

Other positive steps towards the integration of other religions in Greek society include the recent option of alternative military service for religious and conscientious objectors, who can in lieu opt for community service in hospitals or other public services (U.S. Department of State, 2007). Also, 2006 law amendments gave greater autonomy to the Ministry of Education and Religious affairs to decide whether to grant house of prayer permits without consulting the local Orthodox Bishop.

It is possible to conclude from the above that the majority of Greeks hold a tolerant stance towards other ethnicities and religions founded on until now on other marginalisation. The Greek state is slowly making progress towards a more meaningful integration of foreigners and other religions.

## **4 THE HEADSCARF DEBATE IN GREECE**

### **4.2 The global debate on hijab, in Greece**

News and opinion articles written about the hijab, interviews with Muslim women in the Greek media, as well as the thorough focus group discussion held in Athens in 2008, provides a good indication the issues related to the use of the hijab by Muslim women in Europe and around the world, as perceived by both non-Muslims and Muslim people in Greece.

#### ***Gender***

Hijab is most frequently approached by non-Muslim Greeks as a gender issue: an oppressive custom in a hugely unfair Islam. This point of view considers the hijab as a symbol of gender inequality where women are victims of their religion, society and government (Kambylis 2007a; Skouteri-Didaskalou, 1998; Doukidou & Petralia, 2008). It is quite possibly the most popular point of view not as portrayed by the media but as held by the Greek people through opinions voiced through articles and blogs as well as by the focus group.

As stated by the Greek focus group participants, for the majority of Greeks hijab encapsulates the oppression of the Muslim woman. Greek women consider hijab wearing women as oppressed by being forced, culturally, within the family, by the religion or by law to wear the hijab. While the Muslim women of the focus group agree that the forceful wearing of the hijab is wrong, they point out that injustices against women were also prevalent in Greece until recently, often in the name of the Christian faith.

Many Muslim women argue that in Islam the woman is not oppressed and hijab does not mean submission. "Historically, women prior to Islam had a much lower status than men and in fact Islam elevated the status of woman" confirms a focus group participant who has studied Islam. For a Muslim woman wearing the hijab does not feel as oppression state the Muslim women of the focus group, both of which have freely chosen to wear it.

As for states that impose the hijab, the Muslim participants were quick to explain that imposing the hijab and other such practices is not Islam; it is an arrogation of the Islamic religion. God according to the Koran "suggests but does not impose the wearing of the veil; it is how a woman should be dressed in order to be liked by God". Not wearing it is nevertheless not punishable. They do agree however, that over the centuries certain Muslim customs became tools in the hands of leaders or sections of the society and used against women, the poor or in some cases against the majority of the population. Western non-Muslim people tend to mistake the oppressive regimes of certain Arab countries for Islamic faith.

#### ***Political statement***

The second most popular point of view appearing in the media relates to the political dimension of the hijab. According to this point of view the resurgence of the hijab is a political consequence of an intensely polarized world.

While the deeper reason of conflict is political, the religion of Islam has been employed (popularized, and probably mis-used) by both sides as a way to build support for or against it. The focus group discussion agreed that the oppression of women in many Arab or Muslim-dominated countries, which is very often manifested in the forceful wearing of the hijab, has also been an instrument of manipulation by political leaders in Western countries who have used it to build public support to justify interventions in countries where the state laws indeed oppress women, although the reasons of the West for propagating have clearly been political (Focus group, 2008). Specifically, focus group participants raised the example that the USA for many years had information about violations of human rights against women in Middle Eastern countries but only brought it forward after the Sept 11<sup>th</sup> because it suited it to gain public support for the war.

While it was agreed by the participants of the focus group that there is political and social manipulation of the Islamic religion and the custom of hijab by Islamic countries and the West alike, opinions differed about the hijab being a political statement. Some newspaper articles and the non-Muslim Greek focus group participants are of the opinion that the recent popularity of the hijab is a medium of resistance and a demonstration of the return to the Islamic roots “not because women Muslim women have suddenly become more religious” as one participant pointed out. In the eyes of the non-Muslim focus group participants, the wearing of the hijab during these times of conflict is a political response to those that have been trying to reduce, destroy, or suppress Islam, their culture or their country. It is a way of asserting their Islamic identity and national pride.

“It is a common case”, explained one of the participants who is an anthropologist, “that if a country is under attack by someone who is stronger than them, they will defend themselves and affirm their identity that will distinguish them from the assailant, and add symbols to propagate their identity. These are “things” that cannot be taken away by the assailant”. “In so far that Muslims feel threatened, and are being misunderstood, they don’t have a country as is the example of Palestine, they don’t have rights, they have to assert their **Islamic identity**, because in recent years either you are a Muslim or you are not” added another participant. Perhaps non-Muslims in Europe opposing the American tactics, had they had a special dress code, would be wearing it to set them apart from the political and military happenings, suggested another.

The Muslim participants disagree: For them the hijab is a matter of faith and also a deeply personal one. “Wearing [the hijab] is not easy and is only sufferable if it is driven by faith”, one says. “A woman that wears it a resistance/ political statement will not keep it” she adds. “What happened after the September 11<sup>th</sup> is that the public associates religion with political system” she explains further. Any political sentiment related to Islam came long

after she had decided to wear the hijab, and was not related to the hijab, explains the other Muslim woman.

Doukidou and Petralia (2007) also question the free-willed political use of the hijab by asking whether resistance is only done by Muslim women: Why don't Muslim men wear something to mark their resistance? Why has it got to be the women? What they allude to with this question is that underneath, the hijab remains an instrument of control; even if the reason for this control is now mainly for political reasons rather than social ones (Kambylis a, 2007, Doukidou & Petralia, 2007).

### ***Human rights***

Increasingly the debate around the hijab appears as part of the wider debate on human rights and freedom of religion. Triggered by famous incidents across Europe but also Turkey, the more "progressive" women voice their view that women have the right to wear the hijab. Being forbidden to wear it, is arguably as oppressive as those regimes that impose it. However, Doukidou and Petralia (2007) as they point out in their article, the same women question other Islamic practices such as polygamy or female mutilation, even though these are not practices which are practiced at least openly in Greece.

One article takes the view that the West imposes double standards regarding acceptance of Islam and the hijab (Abatzis & Triantafyllou, 2008). Opinions, beliefs and practices, such as the freedom of religion accepted in the Christian Western world and practiced with regards to the Christian faith are not accepted when it comes to the Muslims of Europe.

### ***Cultural identity***

Anthropologically, there is another more moderate opinion about the recent popularity of the hijab in the West which relates to the increased levels of immigration from Muslim countries to Europe. Some focus group participants argued that for women that come from Arab or other Muslim-dominated countries and live in Western countries especially ones with a colonial past, the hijab is a way to manifest their cultural identity. Hijab in the West is a matter of choice but also a matter identity. "When one lives in a small minority community there is a tendency for conservatism and this can be manifested in a social pressure to conform with the customs of their home country, to distinguish themselves from the foreign (hosting) country. Small Muslim communities that live in Europe, will tend to adopt the hijab even though in their country they probably wouldn't. This is also known as re-affirmation of identity" says, the anthropologist who participated in the focus group.

Again Muslim women do not agree (Focus group, 2008; Oikonoumakou, 2008). According to them the hijab is a matter of faith. Wearing it is a personal, spiritual matter that concerns them and God alone. "It is more difficult to wear the hijab in Europe... Stares in the metro, many questions and quite often laugh" says a Syrian Muslim woman living in Greece (Kambylis, 2007a).

## ***Faith***

Clearly, the hijab is a garment related to religion. Interviews with hijab-wearing women from Greece and abroad bring out the view that Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab do so because their faith to Islam. The two Muslim participants of the focus group explained that in the Muslim religion the wearing of the veil “distinguishes/ elevates the woman’s personality”. Stories of Muslim women appearing in articles (Kambylis, 2007a, Kambylis, 2007b, Onisenko, 2008,) and the Muslim participants of the focus group plainly state that they wear the hijab because of their faith and in many of these cases decided to wear it after studying the Koran.

What Western women find difficult to understand with this argument is that there are moderately religious, as well as religious Muslims that do not wear the hijab in their day-to-day life. Are these therefore *incorrect* or *not very religious Muslims*? For Western women, as identified through focus group participants this is an indication that hijab is not only a religious matter.

One of these faithful but non-hijab wearing Muslims, explains that the hijab is not the most important or unique prerequisite for a woman to be faithful to Islam (Kambylis, 2007b). The two Muslim participants explain that wearing the hijab belongs to the second stage of “religiousness” and that there are other obligations a faithful Muslim should comply with before wearing. According to them “the Muslim women that do not wear it are personally not ready; they have not yet reached the “level” of religiousness. Yet a practicing Muslim will surely wear it when praying or when entering a mosque”.

## ***Islamic feminism***

Articles and interviews appearing in newspapers, indeed portray a news “breed” of educated Muslim women who have chosen to wear the hijab turning down the argument that hijab is a controlling tool in the hands of men (Kambylis, 2007a, Kambylis, 2007b). They all exclaim that they chose it to wear it for religious reasons, and not because they were forced. The story of one of the Muslim participants of the focus group explains:

“The women’s revolution in many Arab countries was to take off the hijab: hijab was the norm, people would wear it without questioning it and then the younger generations wanted to take it off to show they are different. Then the younger generations attended schools and universities, and took control of their religion and faith. They study the Koran and have chosen to wear the hijab. It is very common and natural for a Muslim woman who studies her religion to turn to wearing the hijab. Our hijab is in no way related to the hijab of our grandmother generations. We wear it for very different reasons. ... [Back in Syria] I saw it as something completely irrelevant to faith. Newer generations had stopped wearing the hijab in Syria. It was modern not to wear the hijab. In Greece I escaped from the “common” custom prevalent in Syria, it was a different environment.” She decided to wear it after studying the Koran.



It was remarked by one of the non-Muslim participants that Muslim women in Greece were in an advantageous position; they lived in a tolerant, free and politically sympathetic environment that afforded them the luxury to wear the hijab purely as a statement of their faith, something which many other Muslim women in many, if not most other Muslim communities were not, because either their family, culture or state imposed it.

The Muslim women do not see it as a luxury but rather as an opportunity: “it is not a luxury [to be able to wear the hijab but an opportunity we have to express our religion as we see fit” says one of the Muslim women of the focus group. “It is us that try to liberate the others [Muslim women] that do not have the education or even know they have a choice; because many of the women in those closed communities do not know they have a choice. It is us, the educated women that explain to the other Muslims in Europe firstly what their rights are in Islam, and then what their rights are in Europe: first they need to understand they are in Islam and then they can go out to demand their right to employment”.

### **4.3 The practice of Hijab in Greece**

The headscarf-hijab has remained a live tradition in Islamic nations for over 1500 years, but the covering of the head is hardly unique to Islam. The headscarf has been a traditional clothing item across Greece and is still worn by older women, especially widows, in rural Greece. Wearing a headscarf does not appear unnatural in these circumstances but is accepted as part of the folk customs of rural communities.

In Western Thrace the hijab is commonplace, and some, mainly older women, cover themselves entirely with the burqa. The widespread use of hijab by the Muslim Minority in Thrace is arguably a symptom of decades of seclusion and a trait of a closed society loyal to traditional customs (Focus group - Greece, 2008).

However, those that have moved to Athens or other cities, at least the younger ones, tend in general to have hurred the hijab for a more Westernized attire and tend to dress like other Greek women of their age (Varla, 2007; Avramopoulou, 2008). It is unclear why outside Thrace they no longer wear the hijab: Is it an issue of wanting to integrate more fully, or a freedom the liberal urban environment lends to them?

In either case, it is clear that the increase in the number of immigrants and Thracian Muslims in the country and mainly in Athens has resulted in a growing number of hijab-wearing women and girls one sees in the streets, the markets, the schools, and the cinema. These are generally headscarves in different colours worn over regular western-type clothing. It is rare to see a woman in a burqa outside Thrace.

### **4.4 Societal attitudes towards women wearing the hijab in Greece**

As Greece is becoming familiar with its newly-found multi-cultural identity, modern Greek society, or at least the urban one, appears generally tolerant of the hijab as something which women have the right to if they so wish (Kambylis 2007a, Doukidou & Petralia, 2008).

Muslim women living tend to share the view that Greeks (Orthodox) are tolerant of the hijab (Oikonomakou 2007; Loukakou & Petralia, 2007; Focus group, 2008).

In fact many people (including Muslims) are of the opinion that the hijab *is not an issue* in Greece, a view also confirmed by the findings of the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2006) that “no racist violence or Islamophobia against women who wear the hijab has been reported in Greece” (even though the same report concludes that data collection on racist violence or Islamophobia, around Europe in general, is inadequate). Of course the concept of the headscarf is quite familiar to Greek people from their own cultural heritage and probably this plays a role in shaping people’s attitudes towards the hijab.

In an interview with a Greek newspaper, a Thracian Muslim woman, the first hijab-wearing one to graduate from a Greek University, stated that younger people are accepting of women choosing to wear the hijab (Damianos, 2008). She is also quick to add that respect for religious freedom at all levels of education in Greece is exemplary. This was her reference to Greece in comparison with other European countries where the hijab has been banned. Her experience was quite different to the one of Kaouthar Sachan, the first hijab wearing Muslim –of Palestinian origin- to attend the University of Ioannina. In the beginning she was harassed and bullied and people looked strangely at her. Over time though, she was accepted by the majority of students and academics. This was in the 90’s. It seems that attitudes have shifted as people become more accustomed to living in a multi-cultural society. “People were definitely not as tolerant in the 90’s as they are now” the same woman states (Oikonomakou, 2008).

In fact the journalist interviewing Kaouthar Sachan observes that no-one stares at the hijab-wearing woman when they sit down in a café in the centre of Athens. This may partly have to do with the location. Athens is definitely more open to other religions, than smaller towns and rural areas. The Muslim focus group participants who arrived in Athens 18 years ago find that people were friendly even back in the 90’s. In Northern part of Greece, wearing a headscarf is automatically associated with being Turkish. Being Turkish or from the Muslim minority is still met with a lot of prejudice and suspicion. (Oikonomakou, 2007)

It would be inaccurate to suggest that prejudice and intolerance towards women wearing the hijab have totally subsided. Derogatory comments towards women wearing the headscarf are still commonplace especially by older people according to Onisenko (2008) and Oikonomakou (2007). There are accounts of women – mainly students - who face bullying from fellow students because of the hijab (Oikonomakou, 2007; Onisenko, 2008). According to one article, many of these girls in the end chose to drop the headscarf while they attend school in order to avoid bullying and harassment (Onisenko, 2008). So far, only one incident, whereby a school in Attika expelled a hijab-wearing student, has reached the national media. The matter was dealt with swiftly and the girl returned to school (Onisenko, 2008). Albeit few, it is such incidents in Greece but also the rest of Europe that

have touched the Greek public's moral, cultural and political sensitivities and sparked a modest debate around the topic in Greece

A small but growing number of Greek women are converting to Islam and choose to wear a hijab. For them the reality is different. While it is acceptable for others to be Muslim and wear a headscarf, it is more difficult for Greeks to accept Greeks that convert to it. Even more than citizenship issues a Greek -convert- Muslim faces the rather conservative values of Greek society especially within the family. One such woman who at 16 converted to Islam, spoke to PRISMA and explained that eventually she compromised to not wearing the hijab around her family, even though she feels she is "committing a sin for which she will be punished". Another young woman, says that the derogatory comments and stares in the street, were not as big a problem as the reaction of her family. The family would refuse to accept her and her decision to convert to Islam and wear the hijab lead to constant arguments and threats (Onisenko, 2008). As for the close circle outside the family one Greek Muslim (participant of the focus group) talking about her professional circle, says that in spite of some initial surprise (a mix of fear and curiosity) amongst colleagues and clients, which admittedly led to the *temporary* loss of clients, the surprise quickly subsided and people eventually behaved normally and clients returned.

The same woman adds that being Greek and being Muslim is not contradictory (Focus group, 2008). "One can be Greek and Muslim and be proud of it. By wearing the hijab in a country like Greece, it does not mean I want to isolate myself from the rest of society" she says. "European Muslims do not disavow the Western world, their national culture, their traditions or their family; they lead practically the same lives as before", she adds. Nevertheless, she points out, one is faced with some sensitive citizenship issues such as religion at school or in the army. According to the same woman the administrative system of Greece, is completely unprepared when it comes to Greek citizens of other religions.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The Islamic population in Greece comprises mainly of an indigenous minority group which has resided in the country for centuries and a recent stream of immigrants from various countries.

At first sight the presence of Muslim people in Greece appears not to be an issue of concern. As several reports indicate incidents of Islamophobia are very scarce. Partly this has to do with the sheer numbers of Muslims. The total Muslim population, immigrant and indigenous, is still comparatively small. As a result, with the exception of neighborhoods where Muslim communities concentrate, the hijab is not yet a widespread phenomenon in the country.

The other important reason for the acceptance of Muslim people is economic. Immigrants, regardless of faith, constitute an important layer of the workforce, offering cheap labour, especially in sectors that have been slowly been deserted by Greeks (technicians, builder, factory workers, housekeeping etc.). In this sense (Muslim) immigrants are very useful to the formal and informal Greek economy. However, as the Islamic culture prescribes, it is usually Muslim men that hold jobs, leaving women to look after the house and children, and thus making Muslim women, and consequently women wearing the hijab, less visible outside specific neighbourhoods.

Where the hijab appears, aside a mild curiosity, reactions generally are moderate with the majority of the native Christian population believing that these women are free to express their culture and faith as they see fit. Opinions of the hijab's links to Islamism and gender issue connotations exist but do not take prevalence over people's tolerance of the hijab.

Underneath this picture of unchallenging cohabitation however there are traits of a more complicated relationship between the Greek (Orthodox) and Muslims (Thracian, immigrants, converts).

The Thracian minority for example has endured isolation and exclusion over the decades. In this way the minority has remained "invisible" to the majority of the Greeks, at least to the ones that live outside the area of Thrace where the minority concentrates. As a result the Muslim minority community is closed and under-developed in all aspects of life (education, employment access to services etc.). In reality, as it appears from the study, the Greek Muslim minority is a sensitive political matter, grown largely out of a long-standing dispute with Turkey where an equivalent (less populous) excluded Greek Orthodox community resides. During the last couple of decades important policy changes have taken place to alter this situation but these are too recent to have had any significant impact on the Muslim minority society. The Minority remains marginalized, underdeveloped and rather suspicious of any intentions of Greeks to approach them.

Also incidents involving the Greek Church, the state, and many times citizens suggest some sense of fear, or resistance to allow Islam to integrate more fully into the Greek society.

This is to a large extent due to the strong Orthodox culture and strength of the Orthodox Church. This is felt stronger among older people, the more religious as well as towards Greek Christians converting to Islam. It is among these groups and these circumstances that the hijab causes greater reactions, as it represents a “non-Greek” faith.

Very importantly though this resistance and fear is also due to the fact that the presence of Muslim people in Greece is only recent. It is only natural that the integration of a different culture into the existing one will require years to be accomplished. As the number of Muslim people increases, Muslim children graduate from Greek schools and compete for proper jobs, and the state obliges to comply with European and International rules on freedom of religion, Greek society and administration will eventually need to adapt to the realities of being a multi-cultural society.

It is at this last level this project can contribute by providing a valuable space where representatives of the –female- Muslim and non Muslim populations can come closer together: firstly by allowing women who take part in it to express their feelings and experiences and then challenging their own and their counterparts’ perceptions and beliefs.

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