

Marie-Anne Valfort: “Yes, muslims are discriminated against in France. Yes, solutions exist”

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What was the motivation for your research into Muslim integration into western societies, particularly in France?

In 2008, a CV test (1) carried out internally by the Casino group showed that French job applicants of non-European origin (Asian, African, North African) are systematically discriminated against in favour of applicants of French origin. (2) However, the degree of discrimination suffered seems to depend greatly on which region they come from. Of the three backgrounds just cited, those of North African background are most discriminated against. This particular status, being North African, suggests that it is not simply non-European origins that are at the basis of recruiter discrimination. The likelihood of a French person of North African background being Muslim (the Maghreb being mostly Muslim) seems to constitute a handicap for that person.

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That was the hypothesis I wanted to test with two American colleagues, Claire Adida of the University of San Diego and David Laitin of Stanford University. So, in 2009, we launched a research programme funded by the National Science Foundation, that aimed to answer two questions: (i) do individuals experience more discrimination when they are perceived as Muslims rather than Christians? And if yes, (ii) what are the sources of that discrimination?

What did you learn from that research project? Are Muslims discriminated against simply because they are Muslims?

The answer is “yes”, unfortunately. In 2009, we conducted an experiment on CVs, which was the first to test for discrimination on the basis of religion. More precisely, in order to attribute possible differences in the response rate among our fictive candidates to their religion, we gave those candidates all the same country of origin (Senegal). We concluded from this CV trial that the assumption that someone is Muslim rather than Christian is a significant factor in discrimination in the French labour market. With the same CV, a French person of non-French background (in this case, Senegalese) is two to three times less likely to be called to a job interview if he or she is assumed to be a Muslim rather than a Christian.

[...] the assumption that someone is Muslim rather than Christian is a significant factor in discrimination in the French labour market

What are the bases of that discrimination?

In order to identify the reasons for the discrimination, we conducted an inquiry into 500 French households of Senegalese origin who shared certain characteristics when they arrived in France, with the exception of religion (some of the households are Christian, the others Muslim).

(1) A CV experiment consists of sending, in response to several real job advertisements, CVs and application letters from fictive applicants who are equal in all respects except one criterion (gender, origin, place of residence, etc.). If the rate of short-listing for an interview differs between these fictive applicants, then discrimination on the basis of that criterion is revealed. Indeed, discrimination in hiring has taken place when two applicants with equivalent CVs (that is, with equivalent academic and professional pathways) are treated differently by the recruiters. (2) See <http://www.groupe-casino.fr/IMG/testing.pdf>

We also organised “experimental games”, during which French without a recent migrant background interacted with Christian and Muslim immigrants of Senegalese origin. **The combination of these data brought to light a vicious circle that can be described as follows:**

- the Muslims differ from their Christian peers (and a fortiori from their non-migrant French peers) in relation to religious and gender norms. They attach more importance to religion and have a more traditional view of men's and women's roles;
- these cultural differences constitute a source of discrimination on the part of employers, who fear that in recruiting a Muslim candidate, they will be confronted not only by more demands of a religious nature but also by more conflict between male and female employees. These beliefs make elisions between “stronger attachment to religion” and “rejection of secularism”, and between “more traditional view of gender roles” and “oppression of women”. In other words, they perceive the presence of Muslims as a cultural threat likely to challenge at least two main principles to which they are particularly attached: the separation of church and state, and equality between men and women. This combination leads non-migrant French to reveal themselves to be less co-operative in relation to people they perceive as Muslim, even when they expect no particular hostility from such people when they interact with them;
- Muslims perceive more hostility from non-migrant French than do their Christian counterparts. This perception does not lead to them to erase the cultural differences that separate them from their host society but rather pushes them to emphasize them: these differences are inclined to deepen from one generation to the next rather than decline;
- in turn, this tendency to withdraw exacerbates the discrimination that Muslims experience in France.

How can we ensure better integration of Muslims in France?

First of all, the host society must understand the kind of elisions and confusions it is creating. Muslims' stronger attachment to their religion is not synonymous with a desire to replace our democracy with a theocracy governed by Islamic law. Within the Senegalese communities we studied, Muslims are equally as attached as Christians to the principle of separation of church and state. In addition, a more traditional view of gender roles is not synonymous with the oppression of women. Yes, the Christians are more likely to think that “when jobs are scarce, men and women should have the same level of access to those jobs”, while the Muslims are more inclined to believe that in those circumstances, “men should have the first opportunities”. But our inquiry data also show that the Muslims aspire as much as their Christian counterparts to see their girls succeed at school.



Next, we must improve equal opportunities at school because that is far from assured at present.

The descendants of immigrants from Muslim countries (who arrived in France with qualifications on average lower than those of the host society) also present lower academic achievements than people without recent migrant background. A study conducted by Crest (Centre de recherche en économie et statistique) showed that 28 per cent of French of whom at least one parent was born a national of a Maghreb country finished studying without obtaining a diploma. The equivalent proportion among French people with both parents born in France is 19 per cent (3).

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(3) See table 3 http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/ES433D.pdf.

Finally, we must act effectively against discrimination in the job market. As I just mentioned, the CVs of people who come from Muslim-majority countries are on average less “convincing” than those of non-migrant applicants. However, our research clearly shows that, with a given CV, a French person is discriminated against when he or she is perceived to be of Muslim rather than Christian origin. Consequently, firms are not simply caught up in or reflecting inequalities produced in French society as a whole; they are also contributing to deepening those inequalities through their own discriminatory behaviour.

To curb this behaviour, we need to make businesses understand that they “win” by acting to end discrimination. First, it reduces their legal risks: because discrimination on the basis of origin and religion is illegal and subject to sanctions, if it is proven, heavy fines are imposed. In order for this risk of sanction to be credible and therefore to lead firms to reduce their discriminatory behaviour, there must be greater control over their recruiting practices. So, we might imagine a public institution such as the Rights Ombudsman conducting more frequent and systematic checks. Manuel Valls' speech of 6 March 2015 on “The Republic in action” goes in this direction. (4). The goal of the minister of justice to extend class actions to the labour market should also increase the credibility of the legal risk that firms run when they discriminate (5).

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Furthermore, taking up the challenge of fighting ethno-religious discrimination allows firms to advertise themselves as socially responsible, which is a plus for attracting investment. Still, the company must be able to measure its ethno-religious diversity in order to set targets for improvement. While progress has been made in recent years in terms of gender equality and the integration of disabled people in the work place, that happened precisely because the proportion of women and disabled people was measured and considered a performance indicator in its own right by some companies (6).

It is therefore essential that the firm collect objective data, with the support of Cnil (7), at least on the nationality and place of birth of employees and their parents. This is the only way the company can show how representative is the ethno-religious composition of its work force in relation to the employment area in which it is situated (information on the ethno-religious composition of employment areas is available through INSEE's Employment inquiry, starting from 2005). Then, it can actively promote policies aimed at improving the representativeness.

Ethno-religious diversity boosts performance for the firm

Finally, it is important to remind businesses that the few studies that have succeeded in estimating the impact of ethno-religious diversity among staff on productivity, have, up to now, shown that the impact is positive. Ethno-religious diversity boosts performance for the firm because it assembles a richer pool of skills and experiences (8).

(4) “The goal of the 'testing' campaign that we will launch in autumn is to fight against all discrimination in the world of work. This testing will allow the better identification and definition of obstacles in the private sector. A specific class action will be created in order to help prove discrimination in the work place. This is a real leap forward in a domain in which individual actions almost always fail.” (Source : <http://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/3596-egalite-citoyennete-la-republique-en-actes>)

(5) A class action would allow those who believe they have been discriminated against by a company to sue for compensation.

(6) See <http://www.institutmontaigne.org/fr/publications/dix-ans-de-politiques-de-diversite-quel-bilan>

(7) The Cnil (Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés – National commission for data protection) is the independent administrative authority in France charged with ensuring respect for privacy, individual freedoms and civil liberties in the processing of personal data..

(8) See especially <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6731.pdf>

How to access your full results?

Our results have formed the basis of **five articles** published in refereed journals: *Annals of Economics and Statistics*, *Economic Inquiry*, *Economics and Politics*, *Journal of Population Economics*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. As well, the use of data from already-existing inquiries (notably, ESS) has allowed us to generalize some of the findings made in France to other countries in Western Europe and the United States. That work appears in **two articles currently under review** for refereed journals.

We are trying to **disseminate our results beyond these academic revues**, so we have written some more accessible articles for a larger number of French media (La Vie des Idées, for example) and overseas media (in particular, the Washington Post). Also, we are about to publish a book destined for a wide audience with Harvard University Press (it will come out in 2015). This volume, entitled *Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies*, synthesizes all of our results. It also contains our recommendations for public policies likely to improve the integration of Muslims in traditionally Christian societies, above and beyond the solutions I have sketched in this interview. All the references are available on my personal website.

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