

PES Women Conference - 24 May 2006, Copenhagen

By Maria Scali, PvdA women representative

Dear friends,

To begin with, I would like to thank the PES women warmly for this invitation. Holding a debate today on a theme as important as 'women and Islam' is an inspiring experience.

In this speech, I would like to share some points view.

The position of Islamic women in Europe has attracted a great deal of attention over the past three years and rightly so.

The situation in the Netherlands: the statistics, the context and the problems

In many countries, the gap between the native population and ethnic minorities has widened since September 11, 2001. And this is particularly true of the gap between non-Muslims and Muslims. In the Netherlands, this polarisation has intensified as a result of the murder of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. People are afraid of each other and the Government is unable to build bridges. On the contrary, the policy pursued by the present coalition government of Christian Democrats and Liberals has created even more segregation and polarisation in recent years.

At the end of 2003, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs drew up a policy overview for the current Government's action plan 'emancipation and integration'. According to the statistics included in the report, about 1.5 million immigrant women (first and second generation) lived in the Netherlands at that point. About half of these were of Western origin and about half were of non-Western origin.

Another group of Muslim women who have entered the Netherlands are the women with refugee status. These women come mainly from African countries and the Middle East. Most of them came with their husband and children. A few came here independently. In general, these women were well educated in their country of origin. I know a lot of Iranians and Iraqi people who were engineers, teachers or professors in their own countries. But they are now working as grocery clerks in retail chains or they are actively supporting other immigrants. This group includes plenty of unrecognised talent.

Most non-Western immigrants are of Turkish origin, followed by those of Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean origin.¹

¹ Bron CBS, bevolkingsstatistieken 2003

The immigration of women from Islamic countries around the Mediterranean is a recent phenomenon. A less recent phenomenon is the immigration of the inhabitants of former colonies, including Surinamese individuals and Indonesians, which involved people with different religious backgrounds. Namely: Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Until 10 years ago, most integration problems were associated with these groups. Nobody ever linked *these* problems with culture or religion; instead, the economic and social context was highlighted.

The immigration from the Mediterranean started in the 1950s with the Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Yugoslavs and Portuguese and concerned a classical kind of labour migration. This meant that these people came to the Netherlands with contracts to earn money for a specified period. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, immigrant workers came from Turkey and Morocco. But even though these immigrant workers were supposed to stay in the Netherlands only temporarily, it became increasingly clear that they were here permanently. The men stayed and did not return to their home countries in the short term, and in the mid-1970s, their families (women and children) joined them in the context of family reunification. At the time, politicians did not pay much attention to the consequences of the rapid demographic growth and changes, certainly in terms of life in the major cities, for society as a whole.

For the most part, this first generation of immigrants lead isolated lives in the host country. Generally, they hardly speak the language of their new country, are relatively unskilled and often belong to the lower social classes. Over the years, they have developed their own social infrastructure: their own shops, their own circle of acquaintances, and their own mosques. There is still a strong bond with the country of origin, and this group of immigrants generally continue to cling to the traditions they knew from the period before they left their countries. Among this group poverty is a big problem. Migration wasn't a success story.

For the second and, sometimes, the third generation, the situation is different. There is no illiteracy here. Most children – boys and girls – go to school. The report on the position of immigrant girls, which I mentioned earlier, shows that the group of Moroccan girls who leave school with a diploma is increasing all the time. Moroccan and Turkish girls do well at school and reach higher professional education and university level to an ever increasing extent.

If they do well, what is the problem?

In my view, there are different kinds of problems. I will define some of these briefly:

First: the different generations and the clash of cultures

Girls get in touch with the Western world at school, through television and through friends. They are more or less part of it themselves. They are doing well, because

in their public lives, they also bring along things from their religious or cultural backgrounds that they share with their Western friends. Due to the parents' bond with traditions from the country of origin and the small extent of their participation in Dutch society, this Western world is unknown and sometimes frightening for these parents.

Often, these second or third-generation girls embark on a process of lying in order to be able to live in both worlds. Many parents react to this by imposing all kinds of restrictions and prohibitions. For example, sending girls back to the country of origin is not an unknown phenomenon in the Netherlands.

The outside world does not always respond adequately to the cries of distress from these second and third-generation girls. Many girls are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they are loyal to their parents and also to their culture and religion, which are part of their identity. On the other hand, they feel a need to give shape to their own lives in the Western country that has become *their* country. Pressure is being put on them from all sides. Certainly since September 11, the dialogue between these two worlds in which girls and women live has come under pressure.

Women and girls perform pretty well at school but their participation in the labour market still lags far behind. This is often related to discrimination. After September 11, the first name 'Fatima' or 'Zeyneb' is no recommendation for getting a job, especially if you wear a headscarf. For boys, it is even harder to find and keep a job than for girls, and as a result of their increasing frustration, they tend to take their sisters and wives down a peg or two. Wounded pride and frustration may stir up violence.

Second: the image

Islamic women are sometimes perceived as defenceless creatures, who exist merely by the grace of men. This image does not correspond to reality. To illustrate this, I would like to give an example from my daily practice as a director of a women's refuge. A client in the refuge (a Turkish young woman, with a headscarf) told me, in connection with the film *Submission* (by Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali), the following.

'Dear Maria, it is not God that beats me up, but my husband, and it is not the prophet that harasses me but my husband's family.' In other words, this woman indicated that she was exactly aware of the origin of the blows and the threats.

She was also aware that the fact that her family-in-law wanted to take her children away from her had everything to do with pride, prestige, hereditary rights and that it had nothing to do with the Koran. I would not be able to help her by focusing attention on the religious discussion. Asking her to distance herself from her religion would not bring me any closer to her. The solution for these clients can be found in Turkish and Dutch family law, her opportunities to build up an economic future independently and obtain a safe home in the Netherlands independently. There also is a problem with legislation and regulations. For example when it concerns residence permits. These are mostly given to men. Women and wives are depending on their husbands and fathers.

At this moment, I notice quite a substantial emancipation movement. It often concerns individuals, but the group process certainly plays a part here as well. It is often individuals who are not afraid to stick their necks out. And this is exactly the paradox that characterises the attack launched at Islam by conservatives. They approach the group only as a group and they shut their eyes to all women who, based on empowerment, are finding their ways in society often in a lonely manner. The streets, schools and universities in the Netherlands are filled with young Muslim women wearing tight headscarves. Have a good look at them: their defiant look, their make-up, and the colours matching their clothes. It expresses: I am a Muslim woman and I want to participate; I have ambitions and I want to achieve them.

It is our choice, a political choice. Shall we devote our efforts to dividing the world into Muslims versus Christians, or shall we work, at a local and national level, at creating legislation and promising action plans to give these women the position they claim for themselves?

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the municipal elections recently held in the Netherlands. The Dutch Labour Party was the great victor in these elections. We won over 700 seats and we are now larger than ever before. The overwhelming percentage of immigrant votes for the Dutch Labour Party in March 2006 was striking. Eighty percent of the immigrants who participated in the elections voted for us. The reasons for it are quite simple.

First, the Dutch population, in particular the immigrants, are very unhappy about the tone of the integration debate. In this context, it is above all the Minister of Immigration and Integration who plays a negative role.

Second, like other Dutch people, the immigrants are very disappointed about the Balkenende Government's policies.

In addition, it is good to see that more immigrants were elected to the municipal councils for the Dutch Labour Party than ever before. Migrant networks have actively lobbied amongst their various groups of voters. For us this is a signal that the participation of migrant women and men is a precondition for emancipation and integration. They have become a part of our society.

Participation, education, work and better legislation are the keys to the empowerment process of second and third generation migrant women. We must express our solidarity with these groups of women and stand next to them.

These elections were very important to us, certainly because we will have national elections next year. For some time now, the Dutch Labour Party has been the largest party in the polls. We hope that we will be able to cling to this position until May 2007, when Parliament will be elected. Of course, with a firm position for immigrants *and* women.

Thank you very much!