

## **Muslim discrimination in secondary education**

### **A study conducted among teachers**

A study commissioned  
by the Anne Frank House  
and FORUM, Institute for  
Multicultural Issues

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The Anne Frank House and FORUM, in cooperation with Amsterdam University, commissioned the Panteia research institute to conduct a study into Muslim discrimination in secondary education. The reason for the commission was a lack of quantitative information that would be able to provide more understanding of the nature and scope of the discrimination against Muslims in secondary education. In addition, the study can be viewed as a follow-up of the research commissioned by the Anne Frank House and carried out by Panteia in 2013 into anti-Semitism in secondary education.

## Setup and results

The study consisted of a questionnaire distributed among history teachers, social studies teachers, and teachers of religious studies and teachers of general subjects (in secondary schools offering vocational education). The list of questions consisted of four parts:

- a Incidents of discrimination in the last year.
- b Incidents of discrimination against or involving Muslims in the past year.
- c Most recent case of discrimination against or involving Muslims.
- d Need for support.

All teachers who filled in the questionnaire answered the questions from sections A and D (n=498). Sections B and C, focusing specifically on discrimination against or involving Muslims, were only asked of teachers who had witnessed such incidents in the past year.

Figure 1 Structure of the questionnaire



### A – Incidents of discrimination in the last year

#### Over half the teachers have witnessed discrimination against Muslims

Over half the teachers (61%) have witnessed students making hurtful comments about Muslims or causing physical harassment of a discriminatory nature against Muslims. As such, discrimination against Muslims is more common than anti-Semitism (36%) or discrimination against Christians (30%), but less common than discrimination against homosexuals (77%) [NOTE 1]. This ranking of occurrences of discrimination corresponds with previous research conducted by Panteia into



discrimination in secondary education. [NOTE 2] The majority of teachers (76%) have not observed an increase or decrease in the number of incidents of Muslim discrimination.

## B – Incidents of discrimination against Muslims in the past year

### **Mainly hurtful remarks about the Islam and Muslims in general**

The teachers who witnessed incidents aimed against or involving Muslims in the last year (n=301) were asked about the nature of the incidents. A majority of these teachers (83%) witnessed hurtful remarks being made about the Islam and Muslims in general. The verbal abuse in these cases was not directed against individuals. In answering the open questions, the teachers clarified that this involved students making sweeping statements, based on prejudices that were triggered by discussions in the media, at home or in the classroom.

Insulting people on account of their being Muslim or on account of being associated with Muslims, is common as well. 60% of the teachers witnesses such behaviour once or several times a year. 5% of the teachers has witnessed physical violence against Muslims. Some teachers clarified that this mainly concerns bullying among students. Usually, these incidents are not caused by religion, but the bullying involves offensive remarks against Muslims, or their religion or nationality. Words such as 'Muslim' and 'Islam', as well as 'Moroccan' and 'Turk' are used as terms of abuse. Some teachers added that students often make such remarks out of ignorance, without the intent to insult, even though the remarks can be considered insulting.

### **Incidents often caused by media coverage of anti-social behaviour and crime**

Looking at the incidents themselves, they are often a result of media coverage of anti-social and criminal behaviour from young people from an Islamic background or who are perceived to be of an Islamic background. 72% of the teachers witnesses such incidents once or several times a year or month, 6% of the teachers witnesses such incidents once or several times a week or even daily. The direct cause of the incident is often media coverage or public debates regarding anti-social behaviour displayed by Muslims and criminal acts committed by Muslims (80%). Media coverage of and public debates regarding recent statements from Dutch politicians, public figures and celebrities, or media coverage and public conceptions with regard to terrorism or terrorist organisations in the Netherlands and abroad are identified by many teachers as possible causes of the incidents (75% and 71% respectively).

Teachers often witness incidents that pertain to the situation in the Middle East (39%) or the practice of Islam (34%). Other incidents involve theological debates within various Islamic movements (15%). Finally, teachers list media coverage and public conceptions of the situation in the Middle East and media coverage of and debates on conflicts between various schools of thought within Islam as causes of incidents (47% and 22% respectively).

### **Higher number of incidents in secondary schools offering vocational education on lower and intermediate levels and in rural areas**

Incidents often take place in employment-oriented secondary schools offering employment-oriented vocational education on a basic level (*Praktijkonderwijs*: 78%) or in secondary schools offering pre-vocational education on an intermediate level (*VMBO k*: 70%), and less often in schools for senior general secondary education (*HAVO*: 55%) or schools for pre-university education (*VWO*: 51%). A relation with the degree of urbanisation has been observed as well. Teachers in less urbanised areas more often (73%) witness incidents than teachers in highly urbanised areas (45%).



## C – Most recent incident of discrimination against Muslims

### **The offenders are often native Dutch male students attending pre-vocational secondary schools**

The offenders are more often male than female (57% versus 8%). 36% of the incidents involved mixed groups. The offenders are further characterised by the fact that they usually have a native Dutch background (84%), attend schools for pre-vocational secondary training (*VMBO*, 58%) and, according to their teachers, do not have a religious background (41%) or have an unknown religious background (32%).

### **The victims are often male students from Moroccan or Turkish descent, attending schools for pre-vocational secondary training**

The victims are more often male (49%) than female (20%). 30% of the incidents concerned mixed groups. In most of the incidents, the victims were of Moroccan (53%) or Turkish (45%) descent. The majority of the victims (69%) had an Islamic background.

The victims more often attend secondary schools offering employment-oriented vocational education on a basic level (*Praktijkonderwijs*) or pre-vocational education on an intermediate level (*VMBO-k*) (42% and 51% respectively) than schools for senior general secondary education (*HAVO*: 12%) or pre-university education (*VWO*: 6%).

In nearly half of the most recent incidents, the victims sustained some (30%) or severe (13%) emotional damage from the incident. Behavioural responses (8%) and physical (5%) or material damage (2%) were reported as well.

### **Blurred lines between victims and offenders**

Notably, some teachers indicate that Muslim students (20%) or students with a Turkish or Moroccan background (both 18%) participate in incidents of discrimination against Muslims. By the same token, close to one third of the victims of Muslim discrimination are native Dutch students (27%). Christian (16%), Jewish (6%) and Hindu (2%) students fall victim to incidents against or involving Muslims as well. Based on the answers given by the teachers to the open questions, we assume that these incidents concern fights, arguments and exchanges of abuse, in which general, hurtful remarks are made against the Islam and Muslims. Teachers thus sometimes label the students who are the *victims* of discrimination of Muslims as *offenders* ('instigators') of the fight, argument or exchange of verbal abuse at the same time, and, vice versa, the *offenders* as both 'offender' and 'victim'. It seems as though incidents of discrimination against or involving Muslims or Islamic identity are often part of 'ordinary' fights, arguments or exchanges of verbal abuse.

### **Often, offenders and victims do not show social problems**

Teachers were asked to respond to a number of statements about personal or environmental factors that could potentially influence the incidents. The vast majority of the teachers feel that these statements concerning the background of the offender (67%) or the victim (66%) do not apply. They are not of the opinion that the offenders or the victims are involved in criminal activities, nor do they feel that the offenders are frequently absent from school without permission, have problems at home or are unable to keep up in school. None of the teachers suggest that either offenders or victims were involved in political or religious extremist movements. In other words, incidents usually occur between students without obvious social problems.



### **Students react in different ways, teachers intervene**

Half of the teachers queried respond that the students react in different ways. In some cases, the majority of students do not say anything, while a minority respond with approval or disapproval. In other cases, some students respond disapprovingly, but are overruled by the students who do approve. Cases of students 'laughing it off' are mentioned several times on the questionnaires. Almost all of the teachers (94%) intervene. They do so by reprimanding offenders verbally or by initiating a discussion with the students involved together with the rest of the class. Teachers are not inclined to inform third parties. This may be related to the (assessed) seriousness of the incident. On a scale from 1 to 10, on which 1 is quite harmless and 10 is very serious, the teachers rate the most recent incident as a 4.4 average. More than half of the teachers (55%) consider the most recent incident aimed against Muslims neutral or harmless, while 32% of the teachers deemed the incident to be (quite) serious. Most of the teachers who did intervene felt that their response had a positive effect on the incident. On a scale from -5 (very negative) to 5 (very positive), the teachers rate the effect on average as a 2. A minority of teachers (10%) feel that the school does not respond adequately to incidents of discrimination involving Muslims.

Almost half of the teachers (40%) state that the incident did influence the teaching session, but not in a negative way. The incidents often trigger a (positive) discussion. In 26% of the incidents, the incident did not have any consequences. In individual cases, the incident had a negative influence on current (6%) and future (3%) classes.

## **D – Need for support**

### **Half of the teachers feel the need for support**

The teachers were asked to what extent their schools value the discussion of topics such as Islam, religion, good manners, preventing discrimination, preventing Muslim discrimination, Muslims in the Netherlands, prejudice, stereotyping and general perception. Almost all of the teachers appreciate information or training with regard to good manners, preventing discrimination and prejudice, stereotyping and perceptions (94%, 92% and 91% respectively). More than half of teachers appreciate information or training in their schools on more specific topics, such as 'Muslims in the Netherlands' and 'Islam' (55% and 59% respectively).

Subsequently, the teachers were asked on which topics they would like to receive further information. Over half of the teachers feel that more information should be provided on prejudice, stereotyping and perceptions, and preventing discrimination (55% and 54% respectively). In addition, 45% of the teachers feel that more information should be provided on preventing Muslim discrimination, 40% would like general information on Muslims in the Netherlands and 39% on Islam as a religion.

### **Teachers feel the need for information geared to their students as well**

Three quarters of the teachers feel that more training and/or information should be provided for their students on the topics of prejudice, stereotyping and perception, good manners and preventing discrimination (77%, 75% and 74% respectively). In addition, over half of the teachers would like to see their students receive more training or information on Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands (60% and 59% respectively). The majority of the teachers prefer inviting external parties or organising excursions (both 74%). Approximately half of the teachers feel that new teaching material or new lessons should be provided as part of the current curriculum (61% and 51% respectively).



## Conclusion

This study conducted among teachers indicates that 61% of the teachers who were questioned witnessed hurtful remarks about Muslims or physical acts against Muslims at their schools in the last year. This makes Muslim discrimination more common than discrimination against Jews or Christians, but less common than discrimination against gays. [NOTE 3]

According to the teachers, Muslim discrimination often consists of hurtful remarks about Islam and Muslims in general. Incidents aimed against specific individuals are less common, and mainly involve verbal abuse. Physical violence against Muslims or students associated with Muslims does occur, but is much more rare. In this sense, incidents involving Muslim discrimination resemble incidents involving anti-Semitism. Most of those cases also involve general verbal abuse and insults of Jews as a group, not against specific students or teachers. [NOTE 4]

The cause and context of Muslim discrimination and anti-Semitism are different. Important triggers for Muslim discrimination are (media) coverage of anti-social behaviour or criminal acts allegedly committed by Muslims, statements from politicians or other Dutch celebrities, and terrorism. Anti-Semitic incidents often involve verbal abuse against Jews in the context of football and developments in the Middle East. [NOTE 5]

Offenders tend to be of Dutch descent. In addition, the offenders tend to be male rather than female. Over two thirds of victims are from an Islamic background. According to the teachers, the victims are often of Moroccan or Turkish descent. In addition, there are complicated incidents such as exchanges of verbal abuse between students, in which the teachers present consider the students involved both victim and offender. The students involved in the incidents do not show obvious social problems, such as problems at home or absenteeism. Nor do any teachers report about offenders or victims who are involved in extremist political or religious movements.

According to the information on the most recent incidents, almost all of the teachers intervened. This was usually done by reprimanding the offender or by initiating a class discussion. Most of the teachers are of the opinion that their interventions carried positive results. Incidents rarely seriously affect the victims. These results are very similar to those of the studies into anti-Semitism in schools for secondary education. The same applies to the need for additional support experienced by the teachers. The teachers primarily value general information about behaviour, stereotyping, prejudice and preventing discrimination. Three quarters of the teachers feel that more training and/or information on these topics should be provided.

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### NOTES

- 1 In this study, teachers were asked for their personal experiences regarding discrimination against Muslims. They were questioned about their own observations rather than events in which discrimination in a legal sense was established. In the questionnaire, specific types of event were described, and the teachers were asked whether they had witnessed such events.
- 2 Ron van Wonderen (Research voor Beleid, 2004) *Agressie en Geweld in het onderwijs*, and E. Wolf, J. Berger and L. de Ruig (Panteia, 2013) *Antisemitisme in het voortgezet onderwijs*.
- 3 In this study, teachers were asked for their personal experience with discrimination against Muslims. They were questioned about their own observations rather than events in which discrimination in a legal sense was established. In the questionnaire, specific types of event were described, and the teachers were asked whether they had witnessed such events.
- 4 E. Wolf, J. Berger and L. de Ruig (Panteia, 2013) *Antisemitisme in het voortgezet onderwijs*.
- 5 Idem.
- 6

