

Dutch and Muslim are not mutually exclusive

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Rotterdam, Netherlands - A few years ago, I had a conversation in a mosque in Rotterdam with two Muslim girls who were about 6 or 7 years-old. They asked me, in fluent Dutch, if I was Turkish. I explained that I was Dutch, and had in fact converted to Islam. At one point during our exchange, one of them said, "So back when you were still Dutch..."

This innocent statement reveals a sad reality: these young children, born and raised in the Netherlands, were already "programmed" to think that people cannot be both Dutch and Muslim.

Many young Muslims who were born and grew up in the Netherlands feel alienated and unwelcome in society, which is illustrated by conversations like this one. This feeling can lead to stereotyping, and a disconnect between Muslims and non-Muslims. Despite this, through my work as the director of the Platform for Islamic Organisations Rijnmond (SPIOR) – the Netherlands' only local Muslim umbrella organisation, comprised of mosques and grassroots Muslim organisations in the area around Rotterdam – I am optimistic about the impact of a growing number of people looking for positive connections and common ground.

As was the case for many Muslims in the West, the events of 9/11 were a turning point for Muslims in the Netherlands. People who before 9/11 were considered guest labourers, migrants or ethnic minorities were suddenly identified as Muslims.

There is no such thing as a monolithic Muslim Dutch community, however. Muslims in the Netherlands constitute many diverse communities and are not organised under any specific religious institution. Of the Netherlands' roughly 16 million inhabitants, an estimated 900,000 Dutch citizens are Muslim, with roots in Indonesia, Suriname, Turkey, Morocco and more recently Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, among others.

Social problems, like a lack of fluency in Dutch, large numbers of school dropouts, high unemployment and crime rates and low levels of political participation are still often associated with "Muslims". Because these issues are connected to a mostly Muslim demographic, many Dutch people see them as intrinsic to Islam and believe that being Dutch and Muslim can't go hand in hand.

To show that Dutch and Muslim identity can go together, SPIOR tackles three relevant issues – the disconnect between Muslims and non-Muslims, perceptions of Islam and real problems within communities.

We bring people together who do not usually meet, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to talk about shared community concerns. Conversations can centre on the need for clean streets, children's education or caring for elderly relatives. These conversations do not need to address religion, and in fact most of the time they do not. We focus on shared problems, promoting understanding and respect for differences, and finding shared solutions.

Another part of our mission is working on current problems within Muslim communities. Although they do not occur exclusively within those communities and are not caused by Islam, we think it is important to be self-critical and address real issues.

For example, we cannot emphasise that Islam actually supports women's rights, if in reality some Muslim girls are still being forced to marry or raised very differently from boys.

When it comes to tackling these issues, we use an Islamic perspective to stress the core message. For instance, forced marriages are clearly forbidden in Islam.

We have been working on this issue for over eight years now through our campaign "Joining hands against Forced Marriages". Of the reports received each year on family violence and family conflict by the Domestic Violence Support Unit in the Municipal Health Department in Rijnmond (the area around the city of Rotterdam), about 50 are reports of forced marriages or conflicts related to partner choice, and there are also cases that are unreported.

Through this campaign, we point out that this problem affects both young men and women. We bring together hundreds of young people, parents, imams and religious scholars so that they can understand Islamic teachings on this issue – which we have found is an effective way to change individuals' mind-sets. We also emphasise that Dutch law and international human rights law support choice in marriage.

Trust is essential in this work and is our main resource. By building on our relationships with Muslim organisations, we are able to engage many more people. Through this campaign, we also demonstrate that core values many Dutch people hold – equality between men and women, regard for women's rights, personal autonomy and free choice – are also a part of Islamic tradition.

“Not just words, but actions” is a popular motto of Rotterdam. Through such campaigns, we use concrete actions to show both Muslims and non-Muslims that being Muslim and being Dutch can go hand in hand very well.