

## **Narrative Thread Three**

### **“Just because I wear the hijab”**

**by Simone Pfeifer**

We are sitting in a room of the mosque where usually teaching and learning takes place. I'm talking to three women in a casual way in German and we chose this room for some privacy. We brought snacks and soft drinks, like we usually do in the women's area, to socialise and talk after Friday prayer.

As often is the case, we also talk about the experiences of our everyday life and those relating to work. After a while one of the women, Maryam, started out reflecting on her work as a paediatrician, I translate all quotes to English here:

“(..) it happens quite often that the older people get lost on the floor, they come in to us and then there was also a granny, and then she sees me with the headscarf and I politely said, "Yes, please, what can I do for you? And she said: "No, I won't go to you. I don't want to be served by you.”

And with disapproval she stressed: “Just because I wear a headscarf.”

Now that she had brought up this very relevant issue for her everyday life, Maryam continued to talk about another situation in her neighbourhood that happened to her sister:

“Or, you know this neighbourhood? Well, I don't think there are more foreigners in a neighbourhood than here [pointing with both hands around herself]. My sister studied pharmacy; she went to every pharmacy to apply for a job. [...]

One of the other young women and Maryam's long-time friend, Sarah already knew the story responded sighingly “... and got nothing.” With a voice still vibrating with anger and disappointment Maryam finished her story: “No. All of them cancelled and they also said quite openly, sorry, we don't take anyone with a headscarf”.

I was not very surprised to hear these kinds of stories from the three women, as we had been talking about these kinds of discrimination before. Contrasting to these, some of them had told me that they did not have really “bad” experiences themselves, and mostly only had to deal with the “looks” by other people; yet all could report experiences from close friends and family. What surprised me about this story was that the potential employers talked so openly about not hiring someone because she was wearing the hijab. Openly acknowledging this as a reason for not hiring someone shows how little these employers cared about the General Equal Treatment Act – or possible consequences for discriminating against someone because of her religion.

Relating to the health sector, the stories in our conversations just poured out. Sarah reported on the experiences of her close relative.

“My sister-in-law is a dental assistant and when she put on a headscarf - she didn't have a headscarf before - and then after a while she put on a headscarf, that was her worst experience at work. Her boss, I don't know if it's a man or a woman, then said: ‘we have to talk to your mum about what happened?’ And then she responded to her boss: "Why, what happened that I put on a headscarf, is that bad for you or what happened?”

I'm still upset that these kinds of experiences happen on a daily basis, reproducing the same stereotypes all over again. The mere putting on of the hijab seemed like an alarming signal to the work environment, raising suspicion and stereotypically relating Muslim women's bodies with 'Otherness' and danger. The work environment did not even relate or listen to the woman herself anymore, but immediately addressed the close environment and more "responsible" or senior persons.

This did not at all relate to how we started off our conversation about wellbeing and employment, where Dilek, a young mother with a toddler, described how working besides being a mother was very important to her wellbeing. As she pointed out: "I need to do something besides being a mother, I also need to earn money for my children. That makes me feel good. And if the mother is doing well, she can also take good care of the children."