

# Action programme to combat Islamophobia



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Racism has no place in our society. Racism leads to discrimination, inequality, segregation and puts people at risk of social exclusion. In recent years, there have been numerous initiatives to prevent and combat racism, for example within the framework of the National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime, adopted in 2016. The plan is the Government's tool for preventing and combating racism and polarisation in society. The plan addresses racism in general as well as different types of racism; that is, Afrophobia, antisemitism, antigypsyism, Islamophobia and racism against Sami.

In the autumn of 2021, work was initiated on specific action programmes to combat different forms of racism as one of several commitments by Sweden, in connection with Remember – ReAct, the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating antisemitism.

The action programmes intend to complement the National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime, and include both measures aimed at bringing to light and combating each form of racism, and measures aimed at combating racism at large. The action programmes are based on four of the strategic areas set out in the plan: More knowledge, education and research, Strengthening preventive measures online, A more active legal system and Civil society: greater support and more in-depth dialogue. The work will be monitored within the present structures of the plan in accordance with the fifth strategic area of the plan, Improved coordination and monitoring.

The action programmes have been developed based on dialogues with representatives of civil society, reports on the prevalence of racism and hate crimes in Sweden and recommendations from regional and international human rights bodies. They also raise the level of ambition in the effort to combat different forms of racism, in line with the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020–2025.

The action programme to combat Islamophobia contains measures for the period 2022–2024. A comprehensive presentation of the Government's work in the area cannot be accommodated within the action programme. However, together with the National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime, it forms a common basis for the Government's continuing efforts to combat Islamophobia.

### **The terms “racism” and “Islamophobia”**

The terms “racism” and “Islamophobia” are subject to constant development and discussion. In the action programme, the Government proceeds based on the definitions set out in the National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime. By “racism”, the Government means views that people – due to assumptions concerning race, national, cultural or ethnic origin, religion, skin colour or other similar circumstance – are essentially different from each other and that they therefore can or

should be treated in different ways. The plan also uses the term “structural racism” in the sense that racist actions are not always based on an individual’s political convictions but can occur unconsciously. The term “Islamophobia” is used in the sense of ideologies, beliefs or values that express hostility towards Muslims.

### **Strategic area More knowledge, education and research – needs and actions**

Measures to improve knowledge are key in efforts to combat Islamophobia. This has been emphasised in dialogues with organisations representing Muslims, which describe how ignorance concerning Islam, Muslims and Islamophobia lead to Muslims – also as a group – being associated with phenomena such as violent extremism and culture of honour.

The National Council for Crime Prevention’s report “Islamofobiska hatbrott” (*Islamophobic hate crime*) (2021:3) describes how Muslims feel that they have received inferior assistance from government agencies, or the healthcare system compared with others. The report “Likvärdigt bemötande i myndigheter” (*Equal treatment from authorities*) (Kontigo 2019) describes experiences of how Muslims are treated with prejudice, through the assumption that they cannot speak Swedish, or suspicion in contacts with authorities.

The Living History Forum has a central role to play in raising awareness of Islamophobia in society. The agency is conducting a major educational initiative on various forms of racism in history and today. An important part of this work is to offer training aimed at school staff and other public sector employees with a focus on quality-assuring how the public sector treats the public through anti-racism efforts.

Muslims are at risk of discrimination in the workplace. This is evident from several studies in which applicants’ prospects of being invited to an interview by an employer have been examined. According to a report by the Equality Ombudsman (2022), a large proportion of the complaints relating to religion or other belief concern discrimination against Muslims in the workplace. This includes harassment by colleagues associated with the employee wearing a headscarf.

### **Greater knowledge of discrimination relating to religion**

- The Equality Ombudsman will improve knowledge of the prevalence of discrimination related to religion or other belief and how it interacts with discrimination linked to ethnicity. The remit includes developing a knowledge base on the challenges and obstacles that people face when practising their religion or are visible in their religion, for example through their clothing. Within the remit, discrimination against Muslims, for example, will be illuminated.

### **Discrimination on multiple grounds**

- The Equality Ombudsman will, based on reports of discrimination, deepen knowledge concerning discrimination on multiple grounds and illuminate issues relating to intersectionality; that is, how different power structures and grounds for discrimination affect and sometimes aggravate each other.

### **Develop and disseminate methodology support in efforts to combat racism**

- In 2022–2024, the Living History Forum will develop and disseminate methodology materials on efforts to combat racism to quality-assure how the public sector treats the general public. The agency will also offer opportunities to exchange knowledge and experience for these target groups to provide long-term and effective support in the effort to combat racism and similar forms of hostility in the public sector.

### **Produce, develop and disseminate knowledge-enhancing support to combat racism in the healthcare system**

- The National Board of Health and Welfare will produce, develop and disseminate knowledge-enhancing support to combat the occurrence of racism and promote equal rights and opportunities for everyone in the healthcare system and contribute towards equal care. The knowledge-enhancing support will be disseminated among professionals in the healthcare sector to provide support in their treatment of patients and relatives. The knowledge-enhancing support will be tailored to target groups and designed so that it can be assimilated and engrained into the everyday work of healthcare professionals.

### **Work-related stress among certain vulnerable groups**

- The Swedish Agency for Work Environment will collect and compile insights concerning the relationship between the vulnerability of certain groups and work-related stress. A particular focus area will be work environment-related knowledge and the potential implications of vulnerability – due to ethnicity, skin colour and religion or other belief – for the individual’s health. The compilation of insights will be disseminated so that it can serve to support employers, safety representatives and other elected representatives in workplaces.

### **Continued funding for a national research programme on racism**

- The Swedish Research Council, in consultation with the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte), will continue to earmark funding for a national research programme on racism, consisting of SEK 20 million annually.

### **The subjection of children and youths to Islamophobia**

The report by the Ombudsman for Children “Om barns och ungas utsatthet för rasism” (*Report on the subjection of children and youths to racism*) (2021) shows that many children find that racist expressions have been normalised and that racism forms part of their daily lives, especially at school and online. The report is based on interviews with children who have been victims of racism and those who have not been victims themselves but who have experienced racism in various contexts.

A study on children’s experience of subjection to racism by Save the Children (2021) shows that religious Muslim children in particular are victims of discrimination and harassment and are also frequently subjected on multiple grounds. A compilation of complaints of discrimination from the Equality Ombudsman (2022) shows that Muslim pupils experience harassment from other pupils as well as from teachers. A recurrent feature in complaints is that Muslim girls describe how they are subjected to harassment targeting their wearing of a headscarf.

Representatives of Muslim organisations have confirmed this depiction of the vulnerability of children and youths at school in dialogues. In one dialogue with organisations representing children and youths, it was highlighted that children and youths often do not know where to turn to get rectification and have their rights respected.

Through schools, children and youths are educated in fundamental democratic values and human rights. A revision of the curriculum, which will start to apply in the autumn of 2022, illuminates the concept of racism and sets out that racism must be prevented and countered with knowledge and active initiatives. It is important that tools are available to improve knowledge on Islamophobia and other forms of racism throughout schooling and that the initiatives carried out optimally meet the needs of teachers and pupils. Central to these efforts are both the Living History Forum and the work of the National Agency for Education.

#### **Higher training materials on Islamophobia designed for teachers**

- The Living History Forum will, during 2022–2024, produce supporting materials on Islamophobia designed for teachers and conduct further training initiatives as part of intensified work on awareness-raising measures concerning different forms of racism.

#### **Greater knowledge of racism and rights among children**

- The Ombudsman for Children will implement awareness-raising initiatives on racism based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to bolster the ability of children and youths to exercise their own rights. The remit includes enhancing the Mina Rättigheter (My Rights) website.

#### **Greater knowledge on where pupils and guardians can turn to when someone has been discriminated against or subjected to victimisation**

- The Equality Ombudsman will, in cooperation with the Child and School Student Representative (BEO) at the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, implement specific information initiatives on where children, school students and guardians can turn to when someone has been discriminated against or been subjected to victimisation at school.

#### **Support and information materials on talking to children about racism**

- The Family Law and Parental Support Authority will review, collect and compile knowledge into support and information materials on how adults can talk to children and youths about racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime. The compilation of insights will be disseminated so that it can be used in practice and can serve as support primarily for guardians, but also for the staff of government agencies, municipalities and regions.

#### **Initiatives to bolster democracy to combat racism in schools**

- In 2022 and 2023, the National Agency for Education, together with the Living History Forum, will develop a tool for systematic work on initiatives to bolster democracy in the school system and beyond, to combat different forms of racism, including Islamophobia.

## **Strategic area Strengthening preventive measures online – needs and actions**

According to the Ombudsman for Children, the internet is one of the most common arenas in which children are subjected to or experience racism. According to the report “Utsatt på internet” (*Online victimisation*) (Swedish Media Council, 2020), research shows that certain groups are at greater risk of falling victim to online bullying than others, such as youths with a different ethnicity than the majority of people where they live.

The Council of Europe’s Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) General Policy Recommendation No 5 on preventing and combating anti-Muslim racism and discrimination describes how hatred directed specifically at Muslims has increased online in recent years. The National Council for Crime Prevention’s report “Islamofobiska hatbrott” (*Islamophobic hate crime*) (2021:3) highlights reinforced preventive efforts online as particularly important in the work to combat Islamophobic hate crime.

The Swedish Media Council and civil society organisations have contributed knowledge and educational materials to raise awareness of how online texts, images and symbols can entrench racist ideas. Further mapping processes and analyses need to be performed to devise tools and initiatives to prevent Islamophobia and other forms of racism with better precision.

### **Surveying violent extremism and racism in digital environments**

- The Swedish Defence Research Agency will survey the prevalence of different forms of racism in digital environments. The remit includes measuring the prevalence of racism and analysing how it manifests itself in different digital environments connected to Sweden. In particular, the agency will examine the prevalence of Islamophobia and other forms of racism.
- As of 2022, the Swedish Defence Research Agency will conduct a permanent survey and analysis of violent extremism and racism in Swedish digital environments.

### **Methods to combat racism online**

- The Swedish Media Council has been commissioned to compile methods for combating racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime online among children and youths. The task entails to identify methods capable of combating the occurrence of such expressions online, for instance based on the different roles that children and youths may have in online bullying situations. It also includes disseminating methods that have proven to work.

## **Strategic area A more active legal system – needs and actions**

The National Council for Crime Prevention’s report on Islamophobic hate crime (2021:3) shows that Islamophobic hate crimes are manifested in numerous ways and are not confined to any particular place, time or person. Visibility in the form of religious clothing causes women wearing a headscarf, for example, to experience Islamophobia as part of everyday life. The report also shows that particularly large and visible mosques are the object of threats and attacks. In the National Council for Crime Prevention’s interviews with representatives of Muslim communities, it emerges that many of these incidents are not reported to the police

and that victims often had a sense of exclusion and injustice.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has recommended that Sweden take immediate action and improve measures already implemented to protect Muslim ethnic-religious minority groups from violence, racist hate crimes and racist hate propaganda.

There is a need for initiatives that lay down conditions for further efforts to combat Islamophobic hate crimes. In recent years, the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prosecution Authority have raised the level of ambition with regard to hate crimes and other crimes that threaten democracy. An objective formulated by the Swedish Police Authority in an interim report on its work is that all hate crimes shall be investigated by a special resource with in-depth knowledge in the field, and that it should feel meaningful for citizens to report crimes and contact the police irrespective of the outcome in the individual case (Swedish Police Authority, 2022).

The current ban on discrimination is, for some operations, limited to how employees treat the general public. The inquiry on certain issues in the Discrimination Act has, in its final report “Ett utökat skydd mot diskriminering” (*Extended protection against discrimination*) (SOU 2021:94) proposed aspects such as an extended ban for certain public-sector operations, such as law enforcement agencies.

The inquiry proposes that the provision be amended to also include the exercise of public authority in relation to individuals and decisions. The proposals have been referred for consultation.

#### **Advanced and improved efforts to combat hate crime**

- In 2022 and 2023, the Swedish Police Authority will continue to advance and improve efforts to combat hate crimes and other crimes that threaten democracy. The Swedish Police Authority will for example implement knowledge-boosting initiatives at the agency and present the results of the work conducted to improve investigative capacity and clearing of such crimes. Within the remit, the Swedish Police Authority will cooperate with other agencies and organisations.

#### **Information materials for victims**

- The Swedish Crime Victim Authority will produce information materials for victims of, or people at risk of falling victim to, hate crimes with Islamophobic motives.

#### **Strategic area Civil society: greater support and more in-depth dialogue – needs and measures**

Since 2008, The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society has allocated funds to support activities that combat or prevent racism or similar forms of intolerance.

Within civil society, there are organisations whose operations are particularly vulnerable to the impact of fear of intimidation, violence or harassment related to aspects such as ethnic origin. Support for safety-enhancing measures for vulnerable groups can enable them to continue to operate in civil society. Also, the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities is implementing measures to improve knowledge about safety for mosques and Muslim communities, including through the production of training materials and

training sessions at the local and regional level. Part of the agency's work also involves promoting strengthened relations between Muslim communities, Muslim organisations, municipalities, county councils and other relevant authorities.

In the work on the National plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime and the action programme to combat Islamophobia, special dialogues have been organised with organisations representing Muslims and other organisations combating Islamophobia. The organisations have particularly emphasised the importance of dialogue with the Government and other authorities in efforts to combat Islamophobia and in general.

#### **Support for civil society's work to combat different forms of racism**

- The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society will allocate more than SEK 14 million in 2022 to operations that combat or prevent racism or similar forms of intolerance.

#### **Government grant for measures to improve security**

- The government grant for measures to improve security has been increased. For 2022, the amount is SEK 44 million. Applications for the grant can be submitted to the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency by faith communities, non-profit organisations and foundations that fear violence, intimidation or harassment associated with the association's premises.

#### **Greater knowledge about security and actors' vulnerability to Islamophobia and hate crime**

- The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities will continue to raise awareness on security for mosques and Muslim communities and on vulnerability to Islamophobia and hate crime at the local, regional and national level with respect to these activities.

#### **Dialogue with civil society**

- The Government intends to continue the dialogue with Muslim organisations through ongoing meetings on the topic of Islamophobia and the work within the framework of the action programme.