

## Halal consumer attitudes and opinion towards religious slaughter

A European survey - Six Focus Groups (FG) of between 7 and 8 male and female consumers aged between 18 and 69 were organized across Europe (in Renaix in Belgium, Berlin in Germany, Bordeaux in France, Cardiff in the UK, and Amsterdam in the Netherlands) and in Turkey (Istanbul). The participants were all regular halal eaters and were permanent residents in the country where they participated.

### I - Consumer attitudes: shopping practices, commitment, trust, and certification

Focus group participants in nearly all study countries believed that there was a sufficient supply of halal food. This contrasts strongly with the perceived lack of availability of kosher food, highlighted by participants within the kosher FGs. Despite participants' overall satisfaction with the availability of halal food, there were some interesting national differences in supply. FG participants from Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Cardiff and Istanbul believed that halal foods were widely available in butcher shops, whereas participants from Berlin and Renaix indicated that the supply of halal food was only 'average' or 'low' in these outlets. In contrast, the perceived availability of halal foods in supermarkets was low to average in all places, except for Istanbul. Concerns were also raised by FG participants in Bordeaux and Renaix regarding the perceived lack of the public provision of halal foods in state institutions, such as schools and hospitals. In all countries, FG participants expressed a preference for purchasing halal meat in Islamic butchers rather than in supermarkets. This was because butchers were believed to provide a good balance of hygiene, quality, price, variety and proximity, furthermore many participants had developed a personal relationship of trust with their butchers and they felt that this was the best way to guarantee that the meat they purchased was genuine halal. In contrast, participants were less positive about purchasing halal meat in supermarkets. This was due to several factors, including; a lack of trust in the authenticity of halal products in these outlets (even products specifically labelled as 'halal' were treated with scepticism); a lack of choice of halal products; and the proximity of non-halal (or haram) products, such as alcohol.

With the exception of Turkey, the majority of FG participants were highly committed to consuming halal food and they considered halal status to be a non-negotiable characteristic of the meat they bought. Self-defined 'religiously practicing' participants tended to view this issue in a strongly moralistic and polarized fashion. For these participants, eating halal was perceived as a 'good thing', and not eating halal, especially in a context of high availability, was viewed as a failure and, as such, would not be readily admitted. Moreover, admitting that one was only an occasional halal eater would imply that one also eats haram (or forbidden) foods. However, it is crucial to note that this *seemingly* high commitment to halal food might not always be translated into purchasing or consumption practices. This is because, firstly, it is notoriously difficult to make reliable links between stated consumer preferences and actual behaviours. Secondly, FG discussions can privilege a 'harmonization of opinions' at the expense of alternative views, especially if those views are deemed to be non-conforming. This is clearly a risk in the case of halal food consumption, where there is very strong social pressure to give the appearance of conforming to religious requirements, even if one is not that committed in practice. In contrast to the seemingly strong commitment to halal consumption expressed by religious consumers, certain non-religious participants were more open about their weaker commitment to halal foods, furthermore many Turkish participants viewed halal consumption as a cultural inclination rather than a religious obligation.

Halal food labels and certification schemes were present in all study countries, however participants questioned their reliability. Certain participants highlighted the complexity of food chains in industrialized societies and hence the difficulty of guaranteeing that 'halal' requirements are followed at all stages of production. Participants were also suspicious about the proliferation of different halal labels on both food and non-food products and many were unwilling to trust a halal label without additional assurances. In particular, they believed that halal labels should be authenticated by trustworthy religious institutions. Furthermore, many participants preferred to place their trust in what they perceived to be more traditional and personal networks of supply, such as butcher shops. This in turn implies an alternative regime of trust, where trust is based on indicators such as the integrity of the seller (e.g. morality, honesty, loyalty, care) and the integrity of the premises (e.g. cleanliness, hygiene), rather than on impersonal assurances from distant bodies.



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## II - Animal welfare: Halal slaughter and the issue of stunning

### Halal slaughter

Participants were invited to talk about their own understanding of animal welfare (and how this related to their interpretation of halal) and to talk about their perception of religious slaughter practices, both for ordinary consumption and during religious festivals. The issue of stunning at slaughter was also raised. Certain FG participants believed that there were strong links between halal and animal welfare. In Germany, two participants were keen to stress that halal requirements did not only relate to slaughter but also extended to a general principle of care for animals and another participant believed that this duty of care could also imply that we should try to reduce our meat consumption. A participant from the UK argued that treating an animal with respect constitutes a good deed that will be rewarded by God. However, certain participants believed that halal could not be fully equivalent to animal welfare, as animals must always be killed, and to a certain extent suffer, to produce food. In one focus group there was also a discussion regarding the appropriateness of certifying certain food items, such as foie gras, as halal. All the Muslim FG participants expressed a strong preference for the Islamic way of killing, however they did not posit a simple dichotomous opposition between a good religious way of slaughter and a bad secular way of slaughter. Instead, their main concerns about secular or conventional slaughter tended to focus on highly intensive or industrialised slaughter methods, which they perceived to be driven by profit motives, even at the expense of animal welfare. Most male participants believed that they had a good knowledge of the Islamic duty of care for animals at the time of slaughter, including; good feeding, stroking, not showing the knife, not seeing the slaughter of other animals etc. But these views were often based on their personal or family experience of sacrifice during Aid el Kebir/ Kurban bayrami, which involves very traditional methods or slaughter, rather than on any experience of the types of modern intensive slaughter techniques that can be used to produce halal meat for daily consumption. This led to a highly idealised view, in which halal slaughter was perceived to be more humane, compassionate and caring than secular-industrialised killing techniques.

### The issue of stunning

Many focus group participants were uncertain as to the definition of 'stunning' within the context of animal slaughter. This is hardly surprising, as it is a technical term, which is rarely used in everyday language. Some participants thought that it was equivalent to 'killing with a gun', whereas others, who had experience of slaughterhouses, believed that it was a method for making the animal 'asleep', 'insensitive' or 'unconscious'. All participants supported the aim of ensuring that animals suffered as little as possible during slaughter, however there were mixed views concerning the use of stunning as a means to achieve this aim. Those who rejected stunning cited incompatibility with religious requirements. Other concerns included the fear that stunning by gas or chemical methods was unnatural and might cause harm to the animals and damage the meat. Many participants were unaware that stunning might also involve methods such as electrical shocks. When these alternative methods were brought to their attention, concerns were expressed that they might inflict unnecessary additional suffering for animals. In contrast, certain participants believed that stunning methods were not forbidden by Islam and drew comparisons with the use of anaesthetics to eliminate or minimise pain in humans during surgical procedures such as circumcision. These participants focused on the effectiveness of stunning methods, especially on their capacity to induce insensibility, rather than on the permissibility of stunning.



The DIALREL project is funded by the European Commission and involves partners from 11 countries. It addresses issues relating to religious slaughter in order to encourage dialogue between stakeholders and interested parties. Religious slaughter has always been a controversial and emotive subject, caught between animal welfare considerations and cultural and human rights issues. There is considerable variation in current practices and the rules regarding religious requirements are confusing. Consumer demands and concerns also need to be addressed and the project is collecting and collating information relating to slaughter techniques, product ranges, consumer expectations, market share and socio-economic issues. The project is multidisciplinary and based on close cooperation between veterinarians, food scientists, sociologists, and jurists and other interested parties.

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