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CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON
Department of International Politics

WORKING PAPERS ON
TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS

UNVEILED ISSUES:

REFLECTIONS FROM A COMPARATIVE PILOT STUDY ON EUROPE'S MUSLIM WOMEN*

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This is a work in progress. Feedback welcome.

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> 'Il n'y a pas *la* femme musulmane mais *des* femmes musulmanes. Et ce qui nous intéresse aujourd'hui - une fois n'est pas coutume - n'est pas de savoir *ce que l'islam dit ou ne dit pas*, mais de comprendre qu'est-ce qui fait que certaines lisent plutôt ceci ou plutôt cela dans leur islam.
>
> Pour entamer cette réflexion, il faut […] admettre que les musulmans sont des gens comme les autres..'[1]

Introduction: realities, perceptions, and theoretical dilemmas

There is an increasing reflection, in Politics, Sociology, Development Studies as well as in the public sector on religion as a positive source of social capital and resource for global governance.[2] Nevertheless, the issue of the Islamic veil (*hijab*) worn by Muslim women, awareness of restrictions applied to women's rights in certain Muslim countries, as well as news coverage of dramatic stories of forced marriages among immigrant-origin communities in Europe have created anxiety among the non-Muslim European public. There is a fear that wherever Muslim women are 'stubbornly sticking' to their own religious traditions they end up not only compromising for good their own individual freedoms but also dragging down the slope with them their families and the whole set of political principles and norms of social coexistence upon which the West is founded. More or less this concern appears across all European countries, regardless of their histories, political systems and political cultures and previous contacts with the Muslim world. Policy discussions, media coverage and general talk of people in the street are often articulated along these lines.

Looking at all this from the perspective of International Relations (IR), the discipline that is concerned with the maintenance of stability, and the dynamics surrounding global order, ethics, and the issue of governance,[3] it becomes evident that the micro experiences of and perceptions about Muslim women living in Europe have taken up a macro dimension that deserves to be looked at by IR scholars too. With their wearing of religious symbols and attachment to traditions

[1] D. Bouzar, 'Les nouvelles penseuses de l'islam', 7 March 2004, http://oumma.com/Les-nouvelles-penseuses-de-l-islam (accessed 1 August 2008)

[2] Cf. J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), S. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*. (Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan, 2005), R. Furbey et al., *Faith as Social Capital: Connecting or Dividing?* (Bristol: published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by The Policy Press, 2006), J. Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[3] H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), C. Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

and kinship these women have come to signify the most outward expression of a threat, of a challenge to modernity,[4] to national and international standards of peaceful cohabitation, and to basic values related to individual freedoms and human rights.

IR recently opened up to considering gender issues and the role of identities and religion in shaping political outcomes and peaceful or conflict relations.[5] Freedman – along others – has suggested that European uneasiness about the veil in public spaces is but a 'paradigmatic example' of a western crisis, 'of the conflict between advocating universal rights for women, and of protecting minority or cultural rights'.[6] These considerations and feminist perspectives – which tend to highlight subjectivity and the nature of societal and international relations – are helpful for opening up a broader reflection on how to reconsider the assumed 'universality' of certain values as well as female and Muslim agency in global politics.

However, publications in IR as well as in other disciplines appear not to have gone much beyond the dimension of the *hijab*. Most studies on Muslim women in Europe have primarily investigated the multiple meanings of veiling and its legal and political implications but not holistically the relational experiences of these women in Europe.[7] Publications on other issues pertaining Europe's Muslim women are only beginning to emerge and have the drawback of being segmented and localised, i.e. looking separately – not comparatively – at individual European

[4] Cf. N. Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003).

[5] Cf. Y. Lapid and F. Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995), C. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. (London: Pandora, 1989), V. Jabri and E. O'Gorman, eds., *Women, culture, and international relations* (Boulder, Colo.; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); M. Zalewski, 'The Women/"Women" Question In International Relations' (*Millennium*, 23:3, 1994)
Petito, F. and P. Hatzopoulos, eds. *Religion in International Relations. The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003); Thomas, *The Global Resurgence…*

[6] J. Freedman, 'Women, Islam and rights in Europe: beyond a universalist/ culturalist dichotomy' (*Review of International Studies*, 33, 2007), p.42.

[7] See for instance F.Gaspard & F. Khosrokhavar, *Le foulard et la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995); C. Dwyer, 'Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women and the Negotiation of Difference' (*Gender, Place and Culture*, 6:1, 1999); V. Amiraux, 'Veiled discourse on Muslim women in Europe: The feminization of debates over Islam' (*Social Compass*, 50:1, 2003); F. Lorcerie, ed., *La politisation du voile: L'affaire en France, en Europe et dans le monde arabe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005); D. McGoldrick, *Human Rights and Religion: The Islamic Headscarf Debate in Europe* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2006); J. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); P. Werbner, 'Veiled Interventions in Pure Space' (*Theory, Culture and Society*, 24:2, 2007); J. Scott-Wallach, *Politics of the Veil* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), M. Malik, '*Complex equality*: Muslim women and the "headscarf"' (*Droit et Societé*, 68:1, 2008).

countries, ethnic/national groups, or specific themes such as migration and the labour market.[8]

On the other hand, more rounded studies on the legal status, social conditions, political struggles, and negotiation of identities of Muslim women abound in so far as they are confined to the Middle East, 'Muslim world', and 'Islamist' contexts.[9] Other works with a theological or historical focus are also important but remain on the theoretical level.[10]

However, no-one seems to have tackled head on yet the hidden questions that appear to be haunting policy makers as well as the man in the street: Are Europe's Muslim women practising their religion in order to 'deliberately antagonise' and 'ultimately destroy' western political institutions and social norms? What do they think (and do they think?) about big subjects like democracy, governance, their experience of being in Europe?

Finding an appropriate way to challenge these assumptions and investigate these questions is not straightforward. In particular, these issues cannot be examined in a purely abstract or theoretical way; they need to be grounded into the reality of Europe's Muslim women's daily life. Hence my decision, in the autumn of 2007, to engage in an empirical pilot study[11] that would bring out some voices of Muslim women living in Europe in order to propose a new angle of analysis for both researchers and policy makers. This paper will summarise some aspects of that research which was conducted over ten months.

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[8] Cf. H. Jawad and T. Benn, eds., *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images* (Women and Gender: The Middle East and the Islamic World Series, vol. 2. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), R. Salih, *Gender in Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[9] Cf. L. Beck and N. Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim world* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1978); D. Kandyioti, *Women, Islam & The State* (Temple University Press, 1991); V. Moghadam, *Modernizing women: gender and social change in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO; London: L. Rienner, 1993); H. Afshar, ed., *Women in the Middle East: perceptions, realities and struggles for liberation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); Y. Yazbeck-Haddad & J. L. Esposito, eds., *Islam, Gender, & Social Change* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); R. Roded, ed., *Women in Islam and the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1999); M. Charrad, *States and women's rights, the making of postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001); O. Abdel-Latif and M. Ottaway, *Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism* (Carnegie Paper 2, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2007).

[10] Cf. Z. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and gender: the religious debate in contemporary Iran* (Princeton University Press, 1999); A. Wadud, *Quran and woman: rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); M. Siddiqui, 'The Ethics of Gender Discourse in Islam' (in M. Ipgrave, ed., *Scriptures in Dialogue*, London: Church House Publishing, 2004); T. Winter, 'The Chador of God on Earth' (*New Blackfriars*, 85, 2004); D. Bramon, *Ser Mujer y Musulmana* (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2009).

[11] Thanks to the support and suggestions of the King Baudouin Foundation in Brussels.

The project, published as *Europe's Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges*,[12] starts from a series of microscopic snapshots of experiences and local realities in order to put them together, to compare and contrast them, and to understand the macro dimension, with its trends and global policy implications. This research, which is part of a larger ongoing project, is of a qualitative nature and entails a number of semi-structured interviews, collection of personal stories, and ethnographic observation. These methods, broadly inspired by 'grounded theory',[13] seemed the most appropriate ones to fulfil the ambitious objective of putting issues into context, of bringing forth some unheard voices and providing snapshots of the day-to-day experience, and relationship to their faith and to the wider European society of the Muslim women who are living in European countries (whether as immigrants or as citizens), rather than focusing on saturated discussions 'about' Muslim women and the Islamic scarf affair.

In order to better understand reality and address real problems and perceptions in an appropriate way, it is important to a) explore and highlight Muslim women's contribution to European societies, and b) move away from a dual victim image, i.e. of Muslim women as victims of a racist and secularised society as well as of patriarchal traditions and restrictive religious values that dominate in closed families and communities. The victim discourse in fact does not seem to help the individuals concerned (who could, as a result, isolate even further) nor wider society (which could become even more suspicious of a community that keeps complaining of discrimination).

For a more objective understanding of reality it is equally important to move away from dichotomous and homogenising images that categorise Muslim women as either under the heading 'backward, religious, oppressed' or under the box of 'modern, anti-religious and politically engaged'. Other readings that see Muslim women donning the veil as either belonging to the bloc of the 'resistants/Islamists' or to that of the 'passive victims' are also too simplistic as they do not take into account the nuances of the experiences, feelings, and personal dynamics involved in their personal stories, daily experiences and gestures.

[12] By S. Silvestri (Brussels: King Baudouin Foundation, 2008).
[13] B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research* (Hawthorne, N.Y. : Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

The context

Muslim women continue to be associated in European public opinion with low employment levels, scarce upward social mobility and infrequent success in highly paid professions, conservative moral positions *vis à vis* social relations, and traditional religious practices and beliefs. They are often accused of choosing to segregate themselves voluntarily, by embracing backward and inhibiting religious values and by refusing to empower themselves through education and employment, which are considered to be the two best recipes for steering away from socio-economic failure and from the possible radicalisation of youth.

The unequal treatment of women – which includes imposition of strict dress-codes and deprivation from many fundamental freedoms – in Muslim countries like Iran (after the Revolution of 1979), Saudi Arabia, or Afghanistan (under the Taleban regime) contributes to constructing, in the West, a monolithic image of Islam as a 'fundamentalist' religion that by default 'submits' women.

Controversies around the donning of the Islamic scarf in countries like France, Germany, Belgium and Turkey, over the past five years, have on the one hand been perceived through and exacerbated by this perception. On the other hand, they have caused many articulate young Muslim women to speak out, to participate in public demonstrations, to found new associations, and to engage politically, at the civil society level, in campaigns venting their grievances, claiming their rights, and asserting their independence and single-mindedness.

The complexity of this picture, with the co-existence of contradictory factors convinced me last year that it was high time to devote attention to the topic of Europe's Muslim women by investigating their plight and potential, their expectations from and contribution to our societies. This subject in its complexity and entirety has been, so far, under-researched and under-considered, whereas a narrow focus on issues like the veil or migration has prevailed.

Innovation and limitations of the study

This research has been a preliminary attempt to charter the gendered features of Islam in contemporary Europe. It proposes a qualitative comparative overview and initial grid for analysis of the main issues that affect and concern Europe's Muslim women.

Whereas the literature about the status of women in the Muslim world is relatively rich, the research conducted for this project has revealed a gap in

academic knowledge and publications about the experience of Muslim women in present-day Europe. Publications on issues pertaining Europe's Muslim women are increasing but are segmented, either focused on specific country-studies or centred on particular issues like the *hijab* or labour migration. This research, on the contrary, has attempted to observe their daily life, their interaction with both their minority communities and with their European societies of residence, as well as various aspects of their relationship to their faith.

Although it was impossible, for the purpose of this pilot research project, fully to cover the wide and complex topic of Europe's Muslim women from a quantitative or geographical perspective, the study seeks nevertheless to begin to fill a gap. It does so by combining examination of primary and secondary material with in-depth analysis of the situation of Muslim women in a small sample of select European countries and cities that are densely populated with Muslims. The empirical part of the research consisted in semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and questionnaires involving around 50 Muslim women, mostly living in London, Turin, and Brussels. In order to have a sample rather close to reality and in order to avoid collecting the privileged views of the elites, middle class and working class women were deliberately contacted, among the users of ethnic and religious associations, among university students, through existing contacts, and from there through the snow-ball method. It was possible to reach a wide perspective because the group of respondents included women of different ages (although the majority were in the section 20-40), and the questions asked ranged from the personal articulation of the faith, to relations with their family, the ethnic or religious community of reference, and the wider European society.

Whilst there is no reason to believe that the very broad issues that emerged from the questionnaires and interviews conducted for this study would contradict the opinion of female Muslim respondents in other parts of Europe, still, in order to compose a fuller picture of the situation, more efforts need to be done to collect the views of people who have experienced violence and abuse in the family, as well as the voice of average Muslim women who live in closed communities, in very deprived areas, or simply outside of the big urban centres where the research was conducted. It would also be quite useful to expand this study by including and comparing the experience of Muslim women from other European countries and in particular by building a sample specifically aimed at measuring differences in attitudes and behaviours between generations. In addition, it is essential, in future

research, to include the voices of Muslim men, since male figures have been the producers and managers of the patriarchal rules to which Muslim women have often been subjugated. Since men are part and parcel of the problems that affect Muslim women in Europe, it seems urgent to involve men in the solution of these problems. A change in male perception of women could lead to a change of the culturalist norms often applied to societal relations with women in the name of Islam. However, this should be done gradually, through informal consultations, and through the involvement of gate-keepers and community groups, and not by abrupt acts of law that could intimidate and alienate the whole Muslim population of Europe.

Findings

In general, Muslim women are a heterogeneous group facing multiple challenges of diverse intensity and different levels that cannot be addressed with a one-answer solution. Some people argue that the teaching of Islam plays a crucial role in determining people's aspirations and capacity to succeed. Others argue that religion should be excluded from this discussion altogether. The material collected for this research suggests that religious traditions and values should be taken into account no more and no less than the other numerous factors that compose the mosaic of the experience of Muslim women in Europe. As many female Muslim voices and academic observers have noted, there is a double key challenge that Muslim women are facing in contemporary European society: they have to fight to claim their right to existence as women, as committed and pious individuals, and as citizens, both within and beyond the contours of the domestic space and of the ethnic or faith community to which they belong. They are daily resisting and negotiating on two fronts: with patriarchal norms and family structures in the community, and externally with prejudice coming from the non-Muslim environment.

Under- or poor performance of Europe's Muslim women in the employment and education sector remains a problem. Improving this situation may be difficult when disadvantageous socio-economic conditions of the family within which young women are born combine with other factors such as: the persistence of archaic cultural traditions that influence social relations, difficulties in communication between generations, and discrimination or suspicion on the part of the non-Muslim majority population.

In seeking a solution, it is crucial that policy-makers are aware of the key role played in this inequality by the social-class stratification that exists within Muslim communities. The Muslim population of Europe is disproportionately made up primarily of individuals coming from rural areas and lower classes. Upward social mobility for the children of these families is a difficult enterprise, especially for girls, even though they tend to perform better than boys at school. Muslim girls coming from more privileged classes (a minority) have indeed managed to succeed educationally and professionally in all sectors. Other success stories come from the lower classes, when parents with a strong 'migration project' managed to instil into their children their dream of moving up socially and enabled them to do so. Nevertheless, experiences of racism, societal stigmatisation of Muslim individuals, and western assumptions about religious intolerance and the passive and oppressed role of women in Muslim communities can create obstacles for the empowerment and upward mobility of Europe's Muslim women.

Beside uncovering the main constraints faced by Europe's Muslim women, this research project has looked for snapshots of their dreams, their feelings, their aspirations, and their motivations for engaging with their faith, the minority community, and the wider European public sphere. It highlights the way these individuals are negotiating their identities as European Muslims on a daily basis, with their family, with the religious community, with their Muslim and non-Muslim friends and neighbours, at school and at work.

The overarching response to the research was extremely positive. In spite of the initial fears of the researcher that Europe's Muslim women may be tired or dislike the idea of being questioned about their faith, the project proved extremely successful and timely. This is probably due to the careful preparation of the angle and of the presentation of the research. The respondents seemed to enjoy greatly the possibility to express their relationship to their faith and their feelings and aspirations *vis à vis* various aspects of life, rather than being interrogated, as it is often the case, about their 'level of integration' in European society, about the why and how of specific religious practices – such as the wearing of the *hijab* – or about the compatibility of Islam with democracy and secularism. They welcomed the project as a chance to redress stereotypical images about Muslim women. Most of them warmly 'thanked' the author of the research for taking the time and the trouble to give them an opportunity to be listened.

What do Europe's Muslim women want?

The main themes and considerations that came up strongly and repeatedly from the empirical data collected are:

JUSTICE, HUMAN DIGNITY & PARTICIPATION – Muslim women have a vivid desire to live in a more just society where politics serves the common good; where individuals and citizens, regardless of their gender and religion, are treated equally and are responsibly involved in the political process. They long for dignity as human beings. From their words it emerged that beyond the pro-*hijab* demonstrations, beyond the increasing adherence to specific religious practices, beyond the sense of feeling discriminated as Muslims, there is a desire not to assert Islam per se, in order to challenge and undermine Western society, but a more simple desire to be treated as individuals who deserve to be respected and listened to, and who would like to contribute to society.

DEMOCRACY & RULE OF LAW – All respondents said to be happy and satisfied to live in the European countries where they are based. No-one appeared to long for living in one of the Muslim countries where *Sharia* law is in place. The possibility to enjoy a range of freedoms in a democratic system respectful of the rule of law was constantly regarded as the most valuable feature of European society and the reason why people decided and liked to live in Europe. Benefiting from these rights and freedoms and being well integrated were also the two key things that the Muslim women wished for their children and the future Muslim generations.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE FAITH – Religion emerged as a very personalised free choice and all-encompassing experience. Islamic principles and practices were seen not as blind impositions but as a rational source of personal morality that the individual is free to follow. The key influencers in these women's access to and understanding of their faith were initially their parents and, only occasionally, the mosque. However, many respondents said that later in their lives they had independently explored the faith and sought additional religious knowledge from publications, associations, study groups, and religious scholars. Islam never came up, in any of the interviews and questionnaire, in negative light. On the contrary, the respondents appeared a bit frustrated or resentful about the fact that a question asking whether they found any negative aspect in their religion had been inserted in the research. On the other hand, quite a few complained about the unpreparedness of some religious leaders. Faced with distinct questions about what they liked and disliked about their ethnic community and about their religion,

all the respondents pointed out that they felt totally at ease with their faith and had freely chosen to adhere to it. They clearly distinguished, with critical and independent spirit, between the fundamental values and teaching of their faith – which all the respondents said to 'love',[14] study, and try to incorporate in every aspect of their lives – and the distortions of those individuals who manipulate religious teachings in order to preach hatred and for personal gain. Quite a few criticisms and frustration also emerged about the parochialism and gossip mentality that often reign in closed ethnic communities.

BELONGING TO EUROPE AS MUSLIMS – Despite some accounts of experiences of explicit or unintentional discrimination, what prevailed strongly among the respondents was admiration and respect for the cultural, technological, societal and political achievements of European societies in which they live, in terms of freedoms, rule of law, protection of human rights, respect of diversity, provision of high standards of education and professional opportunities. In relation to the aspirations for themselves and the future generations, a recurring wish was that their children and other Muslims become well integrated in a peaceful society. Among the younger generation, a process of identity formation as 'young European Muslim women' – with these four qualities coexisting on a par, not in antagonism with each other – is happening through a re-Islamisation which is conducted in a very personal way and does not necessarily entail the adoption of visible symbols like the *hijab*. Many Muslim women, with and without the veil, choose to study materials and attend lectures about Islam or to participate in Islamic associations, and do not do this through pressure from family members or religious leaders. This coming closer to the faith does not seem to impinge upon their appreciation of the western environment where they live. These young women take for granted that the European countries in which they live are the natural platform on which to engage, move, speak, love, laugh and cry. They believe in the values of freedom, fundamental rights, and equality, and expect to be respected as individuals by European society in those terms. From the answers to the various questions about their relationship to their respective local Muslim communities and European countries it was clear that these women are pursuing their desires and future plans in Europe, the part of the world in which they have chosen to settle or where they were born and are proud and happy to live. Observance of Islamic principles is not

[14] From an initial analysis this may suggest a more 'homogeneous' attitude of Muslim women to their faith compared to average secularised Europeans. However, since this is not a representative quantitative study one cannot generalise this observation for the whole female Muslim population in Europe

seen as an obstacle to living in Europe but, on the contrary, often serves as an inspiration to be better citizens and responsible parents.

DISCRIMINATION AND INTEGRATION – Most respondents complained about more or less overt forms of discrimination against Muslims and Islam in Europe, which they put down to individuals' ignorance, rather than to a broad and deliberate societal plot against Islam. In particular they felt that most Europeans are prejudiced towards Muslim women wearing a veil, wrongly assuming that they are oppressed and illiterate, and without acknowledging the possibility that Muslim women could be autonomous and intelligent individuals. Although Muslim women sense and fear discrimination on the part of secular society they have also developed the capacity to be resilient. They want fully to assert their Islamic identity but also want to be fully accepted, respected, and integrated in European society. Several respondents were actively involved in reclaiming their role as autonomous – not submitted – individuals by promoting or being involved in associations and campaigns. Some even expressed the dream of pursuing a career in politics or in journalism in order to be able to redress stereotypes about Islam and the oppression of women, which are believed to be propagated by the media. On the other hand, these women also criticised the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of closely-knit Muslim and ethnic communities. They condemned their fellow Muslims who monopolise faith in order to control the believers and attacked those who are trapped in old-fashioned culturalist traditions and refuse to integrate. It became clear that many Muslim women are fighting on two fronts patterns of prejudice that exist within and outside of their communities.

MARRIAGE, CONFLICT, & TRADITION – Research on arranged and forced marriages is very limited and unable to provide significant figures for two main reasons: a) the number of cases actually reported to the authorities seems to have no relation to the real numbers and scope of the problem;[15] b) research conducted among South Asian communities in Britain has shown that there is reticence and a sense of denial about this subject, especially among the elder male members of the communities. Also in this project these issues did not come up easily and frequently from the respondents' comments, despite the inclusion of a series of questions about the pros and cons of family life, adherence to faith, and about the relationship to the religious-ethnic community of reference. However, a couple of

[15] We acknowledge that 'arranged' and 'forced' marriages are two distinct issues and that in legal terms the latter only entail a breach of individual freedoms. However, in public perceptions the two issues are bundled together due to presupposition of a 'submission' of a woman, whether psychological or thorough physical violence.

respondents contrasted the rights enjoyed by women in Europe with the restrictions in Muslim countries; a woman criticised polygamy and another one condemned forced and arranged marriages as cultural impositions that have nothing to do with Islam. It has also become evident that increasing intra-generational conflicts are emerging around these issues. Honour-based restrictive narratives and norms of conduct still upheld by the elders are no longer valid or applicable to a young European Muslim population that is learning afresh the meaning of personal autonomy through Islam. Young Muslim women tend to engage in these conflicts – more or less consciously – by rejecting impositions from within; that is, rather than rejecting the received faith, these girls adhere to it with such renewed energy and personal determination that they transform themselves into active agents of transformation from within tradition.

'UNEXCEPTIONALLY ORDINARY' DREAMS – Very pragmatic desires combined with sense of religious piety emerged when Muslim women were asked to comment on their own and their children's aspirations for the future. A constant answer was: 'I would like a good education, a good job, and a decent husband with whom to bring up good Muslim children'. The respondents did not feel or show any dichotomy between being a practicing pious Muslim and fulfilling their educational and professional ambitions. On the other hand, they were very much aware of a difficulty that presents itself nowadays to most women, regardless of their religious background: the problem of reconciling professional, private, and family life. This is actually a dilemma that is present across the whole of the EU and is considered to be a persisting aspect of inequality between women and men in general. The desire to be able to worship and practice their faith freely also emerged in quite a few answers but not in connection with the specific question about personal aspirations for the future. There, many respondents said they wanted to become good mothers, an aspiration that is less likely to be heard among non-Muslim European young people of the same age.

VEILING – In the face of these aspirations and dreams of European Muslim women, it became clear – thus confirming previous research – that wearing the *hijab* and fighting for their right to do so is not an assertion of a 'primitive and backward' belief about female subjugation that originated in tribal or rural societies that embraced Islam. Although there are several Muslim women who are fiercely battling themselves against the veil, which they consider an imposition, many others defend this practice, which they consider to be full of a modern meaning.

Even when it is not instrumentalised politically, putting on the scarf is nevertheless perceived as a path to emancipation, whereby Muslim women exert their free choice and stand up for and articulate their own human rights within a secular context. Simultaneously, though, as it emerged also in side conversations before and after the interviews, veiling can also be adopted tactfully as a strategy for marriage, which both embodies an assertion of modern individualism and independence and conforms to a traditional image of feminine piety, modesty, and motherhood.

Typologies

The patriarchal mentality has not disappeared in communities that still tend to confuse religion with cultural and ethnic traditions, but women are beginning to resist it. It would be highly inaccurate to describe the current picture of Muslim women in Europe as a field divided into a feminist/modern and a conservative/backward camp. In fact, the situation is much more fluid, complex, and multi-layered, with many opinions and behaviours – often of an opposite nature – coexisting together.

The feminist voices of the past decades have left an implicit imprint into the discourse and in the strategies of mobilisation of the younger generations of Muslim women in Europe. Some Muslim women (intellectuals, writers, politicians) have indeed aggressively denounced – or even rejected – their own religion and culture of origin, accusing it of being the cause of female repression and patriarchal structures in Muslim societies. However, the findings of this research indicate that this is not the preferred strategy of emancipation for mainstream Muslim women in Europe.

Between the militant feminists and those who have withdrawn altogether from the battlefield – for fear or for weakness – there are many individuals and groups who have simply opted for less confrontational methods of resistance. They choose to articulate a new – often deliberately visible – Islamic identity, which is distinct from and in opposition both to secular feminist discourses and to the parochial, suffocating, and patriarchal mentality of their families and local communities. The majority of the respondents of this research fell into this very broad median category. It includes dynamic activists as well as quiet individuals, women who are involved in associations and those who are trying to rethink and live their own Muslim and female identity in a new and critical way. They were

adamant in explaining that they were not oppressed by their faith. There are also women who are muddling through, who are following their friends and the current without necessarily being much aware of the transformations that they are witnessing.

Finally, a very interesting case is that of some old-fashioned mothers, who may have been induced into unhappy marriages in the past and who themselves are not intending to abandon their traditional role in the community; nevertheless, they begin to encourage their daughters to emancipate themselves through education, good jobs, and by delaying marriage.

Whereas deprivation and economic inactivity remain serious problems for a large section of Europe's Muslim women, this research has also identified a range of fields in which Muslim women are increasingly active and autonomous. Especially the younger generations (who represent a very large slice of the current Muslim population of Europe) appear to be engaged in the most diverse projects, from advocacy groups that safeguard fundamental freedoms and minority rights, to Quranic study groups for adults, to charitable activities, to healthcare support services, to campaigns against domestic violence and against forced marriages, to current affairs and third wordlist causes, to cultural centres that organise music festivals and cultural exhibitions, to training and study centres for women, to Montessori-style children play groups where the Quran is taught in innovative and creative ways.

Conclusions: Looking forward

The findings of this study show that the Islamic veil affair is only an epiphenomenon and not the actual centre-piece of the problems that Muslim women and European society are facing. The increasing visibility of the Islamic scarf is not significant because of the veil per se. Scholars have pointed out that the debacle on religious signs in France, even before the 2003-2004 controversy, has exposed more the character of French mentality than the reality of Islam in France and in Europe. The political battles around the right to wear the scarf should not be reduced to an opposition between backwardness and modernity. Instead, they speak of and 'unveil' broader anxieties that Europe is facing due to fast social and political global transformations as well as to anxieties and aspirations that are mobilising Muslim women in the West. Many of the difficulties

experienced by Muslim women in Europe appear to reflect, although perhaps to a larger extent, broader concerns of European society.

As they undertake paths of self-empowerment through education, jobs, and networks of friends, the young generations of Muslim women increasingly resort to Islam, which they ‘choose’ to study, practice and interpret more critically than their mothers. This process is often marked by the proud decision of wearing the scarf. This dynamic of resistance and assertion of autonomy through a visible faith can make tensions more apparent to the wider European society, which nevertheless should understand and facilitate this development. Many Muslim women are politicising their religion in order to carve their space as human beings in European society because other points of reference have failed them or have become hostile. But beyond the veil – which paradoxically is both a deterritorialised sign of effective integration as well as a symbolic link with archaic traditions that subordinated women in society – they want nothing else than hope, happiness, freedom, and respect.

This research has revealed a significant dynamic that is under way among Europe’s Muslim women: an assertion of individual autonomy that goes hand in hand not only with an appropriation of visible Islamic symbols but also, and more importantly, with an acquisition of independent knowledge-thus-ownership of the faith. This process does not reject tradition – which is respected as a centre-piece of the faith – but takes place within it. By transforming the interpretation and application of tradition it redefines its boundaries. However, we have to remember that not all Muslim women have the internal drive, sufficient strength, or have been exposed to the right stimuli to be able to undertake such a step. In addition the picture of Europe’s Muslim women also includes some individuals who have decided to isolate themselves from western lifestyle as well as others who have rejected religious tradition altogether

The tensions that we often witness among Europe’s Muslim communities as well as some dramatic situations involving Muslim women are much more likely to be the consequence of intergenerational conflicts concerning this multifaceted process of emancipation, than the outcome of a pan-European fundamentalist project of Islamisation.

The existence of a large amount of positive energy among Europe’s Muslim women has emerged from this study. It needs to be directed and used for projects, for both genders, that could be centred around a number of issues of common

concern for Muslim and non Muslim individuals, from jobs, to training opportunities, to education, to family matters. However, inability to speak the language of the country of settlement, ignorance and stereotypes about Muslim women's oppression (both within and outside Muslim communities), societal prejudices against Islam, and draconian laws in the name of secularism do not seem to help this process of emancipation from within. Similarly, no successful transformation is likely to happen until Muslim men are involved in the reconsideration of the link between sacred and fixed Islamic values on the one hand and more fluid societal habits and cultural traditions on the other.

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