Europe’s Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges

Research report
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By Sara Silvestri ©
(City University, London, and Cambridge University)
Today there are approximately 400,000 people of Muslim origin in Belgium and, depending on the source, between 9 and 15 million in Europe. And yet, despite the opportunities it represents, it is clear that the presence of Muslims and Islam in Belgium and Europe gives rise to debate. One particularly sensitive topic, attracting strongly polarised opinions, is undoubtedly that of equality between men and women within Muslim communities.

Non-Muslims emphasise the fact that the religious teachings, their interpretation and methods of applying them, in addition to traditional observances, are jeopardising the still fragile achievements of the struggle for equality between men and women in society in Belgium and Europe. The picture that usually emerges is a rather negative and over-simplified image of gender relations in Muslim communities. Yet even deep within Muslim communities the same debate is going on, examining as much the goals to be achieved (what kind of equality?) as the religious teachings and the strategies to be put in place. The King Baudouin Foundation firmly believes that the further development of gender relations will depend for the most part on the Muslim communities themselves.

With this in mind, the King Baudouin Foundation invited Dr Sara Silvestri, professor at London’s City University and Cambridge University (UK) to write a report based on a series of interviews with Muslim women conducted in different European countries. The report aims to present a general sense of the extent to which the religion of Islam plays a role in defining the experiences of Europe’s Muslim women, and to charter the main issues of concern, and trends of thinking and of mobilisation among them. The study has the ambition of bringing out the voice, daily life, problems, and aspirations of these women, rather than focusing on saturated discussions ‘about’ Muslim women and the Islamic headscarf affair.

More specifically, the report seeks:
— to understand the social and legal status of Muslim women living in contemporary Europe and how it intersects with their values as well as personal and professional aspirations;
— to explore the problems affecting gender relations among the Muslim communities of Europe, so that effective social and family policies can be developed;
— to obtain a picture of Muslim women’s activism and interests in Europe so that these positive resources can be drawn upon to improve the cohesion of society;
— to understand how Muslim women negotiate their beliefs and the norms of their faith tradition in their daily interaction with European society.
This empirical research was conducted in Belgium, the United Kingdom and Italy, primarily in three cities with large concentrations of Muslim populations: Brussels, London, and Turin. It involved questionnaires and structured and unstructured interviews with 49 Muslim women, mainly European citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds – Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Moroccan, Egyptian, Somali, Turkish, and Chad. This was supplemented with analysis of secondary sources and informal conversations with Muslim women, academics, and practitioners in other European countries. In the report, the analysis of the data collected is prefaced by an overview of the status of women in Islam and of socio-economic and legal issues surrounding the history of the Muslim presence and of female migration into Europe over the past five decades.

There was a very enthusiastic and large participation of Europe’s Muslim women in this research. They welcomed such a study that would finally set out Muslim women’s experiences and aspirations rather than talk ‘about’ them and their headscarves. This proved very helpful, and the King Baudouin Foundation would like to thank all of them for their contribution to this research.

This study is only one of many contributions to the debate. It would be useful to complete it with more analysis carried out from complementary viewpoints. Indeed, it was also thought essential to include the visions and commitment of men in the debate.

The King Baudouin Foundation is grateful to Dr Sara Silvestri for her work and trusts that it will provide useful additional material to the discussions on this crucial subject for the future of Muslim communities, for the daily lives of millions of Muslims, men and women, and for a more accurate and balanced perception of these communities by non-Muslims.

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This report presents the key findings of a qualitative study about Europe’s Muslim women, conducted by Dr Sara Silvestri (London’s City University and Cambridge University, United Kingdom), on behalf of the King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium).

It aims to obtain a general sense of the extent to which the religion of Islam plays a role in defining the experiences of Europe’s Muslim women and to charter the main issues of concern, and trends of thinking and of mobilisation among them. The study has the ambition to bring forth the voice, daily life, problems, and aspirations of these women.

The research is innovative because the subject of Europe’s Muslim women, in its complexity and entirety, has been under-researched and under-considered, as a narrow focus on the veil issue has prevailed in some academic publications and in media and policy circles.

The empirical research was conducted in Belgium, Great Britain and Italy, primarily in three cities with large concentrations of Muslim populations: Brussels, London, and Turin. It involved questionnaires and structured and unstructured interviews with 49 Muslim women.

Findings

This research unveils a picture about Europe’s Muslim women that is highly variegated. The respondents’ relationship to their faith and their ordinary interaction with and feelings towards European society had some common features but at the same time differed in relation to personal experiences of migration or relations to the local environment, social class, age, access to –and level of– education, marital status, the presence and influence of the extended family. The principal findings are:

- **HETEROGENEOUS TYPOLOGIES** – 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. For instance, despite recent vocal attacks of controversial Muslim intellectuals and female activists denouncing female repression in their religion and culture of origin, all the respondents of this research affirmed to love and follow their religion freely. 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. They were adamant in explaining that they were not submitted by their faith. On the other hand, they rejected the culturalist approach of those communities and religious leaders that often exploit Islam to impose ethnic rather than faith-based beliefs and un-necessarily strict norms of conduct.
• **BELONGING TO EUROPE** – Muslim women living in Europe proudly feel to belong to Europe fully. In particular they appreciate the European promotion of values such as rule of law, democracy, freedom, and respect of diversity. Most of the respondents were actually European citizens. For all these reasons they said to be especially frustrated when they feel discriminated for being unable to practice their faith as they would like, or when they are misrepresented as passively submitted to Islam. Simultaneously, they also complained about another source of prejudice: the judgmental mentality of closely-knit minority communities. Nevertheless they demonstrated resilience and ability to face prejudice in a rational balanced way.

• **EMANCIPATION WITHIN TRADITION** – Although archaic and patriarchal features that undermine female autonomy and equality persist among Europe’s Muslim communities, many Muslim women are emerging as independent, determined individuals. Empowered by increased levels of education and by independent access to religious knowledge, they have the potential to become important agents of radical transformations from within tradition that does not need to go through radical means. However, knowledge of the language of the country of residence and employment opportunities are the keys to their full success.

• **DIVERSITY & INTEGRATION** – Contrary to the fears of many Europeans who, at the sight of Muslim veils, point to the risk of an Iran- or Saudi Arabia-style curtailment of freedoms and Islamisation of Europe, none of the respondents said that they wished to live under that type of sharia law in Europe, not even those who wore the full jilbab (full black robe, covering the body from top to toe). Instead, they felt privileged for living in democratic European countries where the rule of law is in place and that protect gender equality, diversity, and fundamental freedoms. 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.

• **ASPIRATIONS** – The wishes of Europe’s Muslim women for their own future and for the future generations are unexceptionally ordinary. Their recurring dreams are: to be respected as individuals, to live in peace and within the law, to feel integrated, to receive good education, to have a decent job, and to have a happy family, ideally in the shade of God’s blessing.

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**Knowledge versus oppression – Islam as a path to individual autonomy**

Many Muslim women, in Europe and abroad, are still constrained in their actions and choice by a combination of factors: socio-economic deprivation and patriarchal norms of conduct, family structures, and community expectations that are articulated in Islamic terms. However, this is not the only phenomenon characterising European Islam.
Beyond the veil, this research has revealed a crucial innovative 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, strength, or have been exposed to sufficient 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.

Some dramatic situations involving Muslim women as well as the tensions that we often see among Europe’s Muslim communities 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 current process of re-appropriation of the Islamic faith through search for knowledge and adherence to religious practices initiated by the young Muslim generation should enable them, in the long term, to withstand the pressures of social conventions. 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 till Muslim men are not involved in the reconsideration of the link between sacred and fixed Islamic values and more fluid societal habits and cultural traditions.
Ce rapport présente les principaux résultats d’une étude qualitative portant sur les femmes musulmanes d’Europe, menée par le professeur Sara Silvestri (City University de Londres et Cambridge University, Royaume-Uni), à la demande de la Fondation Roi Baudouin.

L’étude a pour but de brosser un tableau reflétant la mesure dans laquelle la religion islamique intervient dans les expériences des femmes musulmanes d’Europe et de répertorier les principales sources d’inquiétude, les courants de pensée et de mobilisation parmi elles. L’étude a pour ambition de présenter la voix, la vie quotidienne, les problèmes et les aspirations de ces femmes.

Cette étude est novatrice dans la mesure où le sujet des femmes musulmanes d’Europe, dans sa complexité et sa globalité, a été fort peu étudié et pris en compte, le problème du voile ayant fait l’objet d’une focalisation dans certaines publications académiques et dans les cercles politiques et journalistiques.

L’étude empirique a été menée en Belgique, en Grande-Bretagne et en Italie, essentiellement dans trois villes comptant de fortes concentrations de populations musulmanes: Bruxelles, Londres et Turin. Elle comportait des questionnaires, ainsi que des interviews structurées et non structurées de 49 femmes musulmanes.

**Résultats**

Cette étude révèle une image très nuancée des femmes musulmanes d’Europe. La relation des personnes sondées avec leur foi, leur interaction habituelle ainsi que leurs sentiments vis-à-vis de la société européenne présentaient certains traits communs, mais se différenciaient en même temps en fonction des expériences migratoires personnelles ou des relations entretenues avec l’environnement local, selon la classe sociale, l’âge, l’accès et le niveau d’éducation, l’état civil, la présence et l’influence d’une famille élargie. Voici les principales observations:

- **TYPOLOGIES HÉTÉROGÈNES** – Il serait totalement incorrect de présenter les femmes musulmanes en Europe comme un ensemble se répartissant en un groupe féministe/moderne et un groupe conservateur/rétrograde. En réalité, la situation est bien plus fluide, complexe et variée, conséquence de la coexistence de nombreux avis et comportements – souvent de nature opposée. Ainsi, en dépit d’attaques verbales portées récemment par des intellectuels musulmans controversés et des activistes féminines à l’encontre de la répression subie par les femmes dans leur religion et leur culture d’origine, toutes les répondantes de cette étude ont affirmé embrasser et suivre leur religion librement. Les principes et pratiques de l’Islam n’ont pas été perçus comme des obligations à suivre aveuglément mais comme une source rationnelle de moralité personnelle que l’individu est libre d’adopter.
Elles ont affirmé avec force qu'elles n'étaient pas soumises par leur foi. D'autre part, elles ont rejeté l'approche culturaliste des communautés et des chefs religieux, qui exploitent souvent l'Islam pour imposer des croyances plus ethniques que fondées sur la foi, ainsi que des préceptes de conduite inutilement stricts.

**APPARTENANCE À L'EUROPE** – Les femmes musulmanes d'Europe ont la sensation de faire pleinement partie de l'Europe et en sont fières. Elles apprécient en particulier le fait que l'Europe promeut des valeurs telles que le respect du droit, la démocratie, la liberté et le respect de la diversité. La plupart des personnes sondées étaient bel et bien des citoyennes européennes. Pour toutes ces raisons, elles se sont déclarées particulièrement frustrées de ne pouvoir pratiquer leur foi comme elles l'entendent, ou lorsqu'on donne d'elles l'impression erronée d'être soumises à l'Islam. Elles se sont plaintes également d'une autre source de préjudice: la mentalité moralisatrice de certaines communautés minoritaires très soudées. Elles faisaient néanmoins preuve de force de caractère et d'une aptitude à affronter les préjugés de manière équilibrée et rationnelle.

**ÉMANCIPATION AU SÉIN DE LA TRADITION** – Bien que des aspects patriarcaux et archaïques sapant l'autonomie et l'égalité des femmes persistent au sein des communautés musulmanes d'Europe, de nombreuses femmes musulmanes se profilent maintenant comme des individus indépendants, déterminés. Devenues plus autonomes grâce à une instruction plus poussée et un accès indépendant aux connaissances religieuses, elles ont la possibilité de devenir des leviers importants de transformations radicales au sein même d'une tradition, sans avoir besoin d'adopter des méthodes radicales. Toutefois, la connaissance de la langue de leur pays d'adoption et des perspectives d'emploi constituent les clés de leur pleine réussite.

**DIVERSITÉ & INTÉGRATION** – Contrairement aux craintes de bon nombre d'Européens qui pointent, lorsqu’ils sont confrontés à des voiles musulmans, le risque d’une réduction des libertés comme en Iran ou en Arabie Saoudite et d’une islamisation de l’Europe, aucune des répondantes n’a dit souhaiter se plier à ce type de loi sharia en Europe, pas même celles revêtues du jilbab (robe noire recouvrant intégralement le corps, de la tête aux pieds). Elles s’estimaient plutôt privilégiées de vivre dans des états européens démocratiques régis par les règles de droit et protégeant l’égalité des sexes, la diversité et les libertés fondamentales. Pouvoir bénéficier de ces droits et libertés et être bien intégrés constituait d’ailleurs les principaux souhaits que les femmes musulmanes formulaient pour leurs enfants et les générations musulmanes à venir.

**ASPIRATIONS** – Ce que les femmes musulmanes d’Europe souhaitent pour leur avenir et les générations futures n’est rien que de très ordinaire. Leurs rêves récurrents sont: être respectées en tant qu’individus, vivre en paix et dans le respect de la loi, se sentir intégrées, recevoir une bonne éducation, avoir un emploi décent et être entourées d’une famille heureuse, si possible avec la grâce de Dieu.
Le savoir contre l’oppression – l’islam, chemin d’autonomie individuelle

De nombreuses femmes musulmanes, en Europe et ailleurs, voient toujours leurs choix et leurs agissements entravés par une combinaison de facteurs: un dénuement socio-économique et des normes de comportement patriarcales, des structures familiales et des attentes collectives articulées en termes islamiques. Ceci n’est toutefois pas le seul phénomène caractéristique de l’islam européen.

Au-delà du voile, cette étude a révélé l’émergence d’une dynamique innovante essentielle parmi les femmes musulmanes d’Europe: une affirmation de l’autonomie individuelle allant de pair non seulement avec une appropriation de symboles islamiques visibles, mais également, et c’est bien plus important, avec l’acquisition d’une connaissance et donc d’une appropriation indépendante de la foi. Ce processus ne rejette pas la tradition – qui est respectée comme un pilier de la foi – mais s’effectue en son sein. En transformant l’interprétation et l’application de la tradition, il en redéfinit les limites. Il faut cependant garder à l’esprit que toutes les femmes musulmanes n’ont pas l’énergie intérieure, la force, ou n’ont pas été suffisamment stimulées pour pouvoir franchir ce pas. Le tableau des femmes musulmanes d’Europe inclut aussi quelques personnes qui ont décidé de s’isoler du style de vie occidental de même que d’autres qui ont rejeté la tradition religieuse dans son intégralité.

Quelques situations dramatiques incluant des femmes musulmanes et les tensions fréquemment observées au sein des communautés musulmanes d’Europe résultent plus vraisemblablement de conflits de générations liés à ce processus complexe d’émancipation que d’un projet paneuropéen fondamentaliste d’islamisation.

Le processus actuel de réappropriation de la foi islamique, par le biais d’une quête de savoir et l’adhésion à des pratiques religieuses, initié par la jeune génération musulmane devrait à long terme permettre aux femmes musulmanes de résister aux pressions des conventions sociales. L’incapacité de parler la langue du pays d’adoption, l’ignorance et les stéréotypes concernant l’oppression des femmes musulmanes (tant au sein des communautés musulmanes qu’à l’extérieur), les préjugés de la société à l’égard de l’islam et la sévérité des lois édictées au nom de la sécularisation semblent toutefois faire obstacle à ce processus d’émancipation interne. De même, aucune transformation ne se mettra vraiment en place tant que les hommes musulmans ne seront pas amenés à reconsidérer le lien entre les valeurs islamiques fixes et sacrées et les usages sociétaux et traditions culturelles plus souples.
SAMENVATTING

Dit rapport stelt de belangrijkste bevindingen voor van een kwalitatief onderzoek over de Europese moslimvrouwen, uitgevoerd door Dr. Sara Silvestri (City University, Londen, and Cambridge University, Verenigd Koninkrijk), in opdracht van de Koning Boudewijnstichting.

Het doel van het rapport is een algemene indruk weer te geven van de mate waarin de islam als godsdienst een bepalende rol speelt in de ervaringen van de Europese moslimvrouwen en tevens de belangrijkste redenen voor hun bezorgdheid, voor hun manier van denken en voor hun reacties aan te halen. Dit onderzoek wil vooral de stem, het dagelijkse leven, de problemen en verzuchtingen van deze vrouwen naar voren brengen.

Het onderzoek is vernieuwend, omdat het theme van de Europese moslimvrouwen, in zijn complexiteit en in zijn geheel, tot nu toe te weinig onderzocht werd en te weinig aandacht heeft gekregen. Sommige academische publicaties, media en beleidskringen hebben zich immers te eng toegespitst op het probleem van de hoofddoeken.

Het empirisch onderzoek werd uitgevoerd in België, Groot-Brittannië en Italië, en meer bepaald in drie steden met een grote concentratie van mosliminwoners: Brussel, Londen en Turijn. Het onderzoek werkte met vragenlijsten en gestructureerde en ongestructureerde interviews met 49 moslimvrouwen.

Bevindingen

Dit onderzoek geeft een heel gevariëerd beeld weer van de Europese moslimvrouwen. De manier waarop ze hun geloof belijden, hun gewone omgang in de Europese samenleving en hoe ze zich voelen in die samenleving vertonen enkele gemeenschappelijke kenmerken, maar ook duidelijke verschillen, afhankelijk van persoonlijke ervaringen met migratie of van de relatie met de plaatselijke omgeving. Maatschappelijke klasse, leeftijd, toegang tot – en niveau van – onderwijs, burgerlijke stand, de aanwezigheid en invloed van de uitgebreide familie spelen eveneens een rol.

Dit zijn de belangrijkste bevindingen:

- HETEROGENE TYPLOGIEËN – Het zou bijzonder onnauwkeurig zijn om het huidige beeld van moslimvrouwen in Europa te omschrijven in termen van een tweedeling tussen een feministisch/modern en een conservatief/achterlijk kamp. In werkelijkheid is de situatie veel veranderlijker, complexer en bevat ze verschillende lagen, waarbij veel – vaak tegengestelde – meningen en gedragingen naast elkaar bestaan. Ondanks recente meldondelinge aanvallen van omstreden moslimintellectuelen en vrouwelijke actievoerders die de onderdrukking van de vrouw in hun religie en cultuur van oorsprong aanklagen, bevestigen alle respondentes bij dit onderzoek bijvoorbeeld dat zij vrijelijk van hun religie houden en die ook belijden. Islamitische principes en gewoonten worden niet gezien als blind opgelegde
regels, maar als een rationale bron van persoonlijke moraliteit die het individu vrij kan volgen. Zij leggen onvermijdelijk uit dat zij niet onderworpen zijn door hun geloof. Daartegenover staat dat zij de culturalistische benadering afwijzen van gemeenschappen en religieuze leiders die de islam vaak misbruiken om veeleer etnische dan op geloof gebaseerde overtuigingen en onnodig strenge gedragsnormen op te leggen.

**BIJ EUROPA HOREN** – Moslimvrouwen die in Europa wonen, hebben trots het gevoel dat zij volledig bij Europa horen. Zij waarderen vooral de Europese promotie van waarden als de rechtsstaat, democratie, vrijheid en respect voor diversiteit. De meeste respondentes zijn inderdaad Europese staatsburgers. Om al die redenen stellen zij dat ze bijzonder geïrriteerd zijn wanneer zij zich niet volledig in hun geloof kunnen belijden zoals ze dat zouden willen, of wanneer zij verkeerd worden voorgesteld als passief onderworpen aan de islam. Tegelijk klagen zij ook over een andere bron van vooroordelen: de veroordelende mentaliteit van hechte minderheidsgemeenschappen. Maar zij vertonen wel veerkracht en het vermogen om op een rationeel evenwichtige manier om te gaan met vooroordelen.

**EMANCIPATIE BINNEN DE TRADITIE** – Hoewel de Europese moslimgemeenschappen nog altijd hardnekkige archaïsche en patriarchale trekjes vertonen, die de zelfstandigheid en de gelijkheid van vrouwen ondermijnen, staan veel moslimvrouwen op als onafhankelijke, vastberaden individuen. Gesterkt door een hogere opleiding en door een zelfstandige toegang tot religieuze kennis, hebben zij de mogelijkheid om belangrijke instrumenten te worden van radicale hervormingen vanuit de traditie zelf waarvoor geen radicale middelen nodig zijn. Kennis van de taal van het land van verblijf en werkgelegenheidskansen vormen evenwel de sleutels voor hun volledige succes.

**DIVERSEITÉ & INTEGRATIE** – In tegenstelling tot de vrees van veel Europese moslimvrouwen, die bij het zien van een moslimsluier wijzen op het risico van een beknotting van vrijheden zoals in Iran of Saoedi-Arabië en een islamisering van Europa, stelt geen enkele van de respondentes dat zij onder die vorm van sharia-wetgeving willen leven in Europa, zelfs niet degenen die de volledige jilbab dragen (een volledig zwart kleed, dat van top tot teen het hele lichaam bedekt). In plaats daarvan voelen zij zich bevoorrecht dat ze in democratische Europese landen wonen waar de volledige rechtsstaat geldt en waar gendergelijkheid, diversiteit en de fundamentele vrijheden worden beschermd. Het genot van deze rechten en een goede integratie zijn ook de twee belangrijkste zaken die de moslimvrouwen wensen voor hun kinderen en de toekomstige moslimgeneraties.

**VERZUCHTINGEN** – De wensen van de Europese moslimvrouwen voor hun eigen toekomst en voor de volgende generaties zijn buitengewoon gewoon. Hun telkens terugkerende dromen zijn: worden gerespecteerd als individu, in vrede en binnen de wet leven, zich geïntegreerd voelen, goed onderwijs krijgen, een fatsoenlijke baan en een gelukkig gezin te hebben, liefst in de beschutting van Gods zegen.
Kennis versus onderdrukking – de islam als een weg naar individuele autonomie

Veel moslimvrouwen, in Europa en daarbuiten, worden in hun handelingen en keuzes nog altijd belemmerd door een combinatie van factoren: sociaaleconomische ontbering en patriarchale gedragsnormen, familiestructuren en verwachtingen van de gemeenschap die worden uitgedrukt in islamitische termen. Maar dit is het niet het enige fenomeen dat typisch is voor de Europese islam.

Dit onderzoek heeft onthuld dat er achter de sluier een cruciale vernieuwende dynamiek onder de Europese moslimvrouwen aan het ontstaan is: een bevestiging van individuele autonomie die niet alleen hand in hand gaat met een toe-eigening van zichtbare islamitische symbolen maar ook, en nog belangrijker, met het verwerven van onafhankelijke kennis-en-dus-eigendom van het geloof. Dit proces betekent niet het verwerpen van de traditie – die wordt gerespecteerd als een centraal onderdeel van het geloof – maar vindt precies plaats binnen die traditie. Door de interpretatie en de toepassing van de traditie te veranderen, worden de grenzen ervan opnieuw vastgelegd. Maar we mogen niet vergeten dat niet alle moslimvrouwen de interne drang of kracht hebben of in aanraking zijn gekomen met voldoende stimuli om die stap te kunnen zetten. Bovendien omvat het beeld van de Europese moslimvrouwen ook enkele individuen die hebben beslist om zich te isoleren van de westere levensstijl en ook anderen die de religieuze traditie helemaal hebben afgewezen.

Enkele dramatische situaties waarbij moslimvrouwen betrokken waren en ook de spanningen die we vaak vaststellen binnen Europese moslimgemeenschappen zijn waarschijnlijk veeleer het gevolg van intergenerationele conflicten over dit veelzijdige emancipatieproces, dan het resultaat van een pan-Europees fundamentalistisch project van islamisering.

Het huidige proces waarbij de jonge moslimgeneratie zich het islamitische geloof opnieuw toe-eigent door te zoeken naar kennis en vast te houden aan religieuze gewoonten, zou de jongeren in staat moeten stellen om, op lange termijn, te weerstaan aan de druk van maatschappelijke conventies. Maar het onvermogen om de taal van het land van verblijf te spreken, onwetendheid en stereotypes over de onderdrukking van moslimvrouwen (zowel binnen als buiten de moslimgemeenschappen), maatschappelijke vooroordelen tegenover de islam en draconische wetten in naam van het secularisme lijken niet bevorderlijk voor dit proces van emancipatie van binnenuit. Op dezelfde wijze zal er waarschijnlijk ook geen succesvolle verandering kunnen plaatshebben zolang de moslimmannen niet worden betrokken bij het herzien van het verband tussen heilige en vaste islamitische waarden en meer veranderlijke maatschappelijke gewoonten en culturele tradities.
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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 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, led the author of this report and the commissioning body to the conclusion that it was now high time to devote attention to the topic of Europe’s Muslim women by investigating their plight, potential, and expectations. This subject in its complexity and entirety has been, so far, under-researched and under-considered, whereas a narrow focus on the veil issue has prevailed in media and policy circles.

The purpose of this study, which is not a demographic or a quantitative work, is therefore that of chartering the main issues of concern for and trends of thinking among Europe’s Muslim women. This report has the ambitious objective to bring forth some voices and provide snapshots of the day-to-day experience, and relationship to their faith of the Muslim women who are living in Europe (both immigrants and citizens), rather than focusing on saturated discussions ‘about’ Muslim women and the Islamic scarf affair.
Objectives

The main objectives of this research are:

- To understand the social and legal status of Muslim women living in contemporary Europe and how it intersects with their values as well as personal and professional aspirations;
- To explore the problems affecting gender relations among the Muslim communities of Europe so that effective social and family policies can be developed;
- To obtain a picture of Muslim women’s activism and interests in Europe so that these positive resources can be drawn upon to improve the cohesion of society;
- To understand how they negotiate their beliefs and the norms of their faith tradition in their daily interaction with European society.

Rationale and method

This study took place between October 2007 and March 2008 but also draws on previous research conducted by the author of this report. It is based on analysis of primary and secondary sources in European languages supplemented by empirical research in the form of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with Muslim women in three European countries (Belgium, Italy and the UK) as well as occasional monitoring of Belgian and British Muslim women online blogs. In addition, informal conversations with researchers and with Muslim and non Muslim men and women were held in these same countries as well as in Germany and France. The choice to concentrate on these five countries stems from the need to find a sample of European countries characterised by: demographically significant Muslim populations, different histories, strategies of (and motivations for) interaction with Muslim populations, diverse political systems, and different legal systems regulating institutional relations with faith groups.

The literature review covered academic publications about Islam (including its history, political developments, and societal and legal concepts), ethnicity, immigration, feminism, post-colonial history, gender and class relations. The primary sources included national statistics, governments and EU reports, country reports, various policy papers, speeches and press releases by political and religious leaders, materials produced by Muslim associations and by groups operating in the social and cultural sector, media coverage of issues pertaining Islam and Muslim women in a number of EU member states and with a special focus on Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain and Holland, i.e. countries with large Muslim populations.

The empirical part of the research was carried out in a qualitative way, through a mix of methods (interviews, questionnaires, analysis of material produced by Muslim groups), adapted to the cultural specificities of the national contexts, in order to maximise the number of respondents, and also mindful of the time limitations of the research. It also depended on the range and quality of contacts of the principal investigator and her assistants in the various countries. This methodological inconsistency is justified by the overall purpose of the research, that is, to identify key issues about the experience of Muslim women living in Europe that should guide future research agendas and European policies (both at the national and at the EU level) in a number of areas, from social cohesion, to education, to immigrants integration, to security. In fact, the objective of this research is not to produce scientifically measurable quantitative materials but to identify salient issues that may deserve to be studied in a more accurate way and also to get a general sense of the extent to which the religion of Islam plays a role in defining issues surrounding the experiences of Europe’s Muslim women.
A constant characteristic of the sample of respondents is that it involved people living or working in medium-large European urban and economic centres with high percentages of immigrants and of individuals of Muslim background (Antwerp, Brussels, London, Rome, Turin) and that the majority of the respondents were women aged 20-40, although occasionally older women and some teen-agers also participated. A large number of respondents, especially in Italy, were reached through women-focused advocacy groups or associations providing services, ethnic-oriented organisations, as well as through religious associations or higher education institutions with large numbers of Muslims in the student population (especially in the UK case). The researchers made efforts to reach out more broadly, so that the material collected would not reflect the views of an elite only – that is, the leaders and the activists – but would include the views of the ordinary members and of the occasional users of the services provided by specific organisations. In addition, quite often the snow-ball method worked out well, as individual members of organised groups proved very useful bridges to contact friends, relatives and acquaintances outside and beyond the associational level. This proved crucial for the researchers as it enabled them to collect a larger world of experiences, feelings, and opinions.

A total of 49 women replied positively to questionnaires or semi-structured interviews in Great Britain, Italy and Belgium. They were mainly European citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds: Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Moroccan, Egyptian, Somali, Turkish, Chad. In general, the researchers sought to collect the voice of both ordinary women and of those mainly active in associations dedicated to cultural activities, religious affairs and women issues. In Great Britain, 26 questionnaires – overall a large proportion of those distributed in the London area – were returned. In the Italian case, a total of 13 interviews took place, of which 11 in Turin, and two unstructured ones, respectively in Milan in Rome. Successful semi-structured interviews in Belgium involved two women in the Flemish context, both playing important roles at the associational level, and eight structured interviews, with very diverse individual types in the French-speaking context. In addition, informal conversations were held with: a number of British Muslim girls and professionals, a French activist, and three women who run initiatives for Muslim women and Muslim youth networks at the EU level.

Beyond the veil: The research process

The post 9/11 context has been charged with anxieties from all corners. Emergencies provoked by new security threats have become intertwined with a visible re-emergence of religiosity in countries that used to be the stronghold of secular values (from France, to Great Britain, to Turkey) and a sudden general interest in the plight of Muslim communities across the globe. This has also generated resentment and sense of fatigue among Muslims living in Europe, for the continuous – and often perceived as biased – media attention to Muslim issues (Allen 2005; Alcock et al 2006) as well as towards the insistence and eagerness of the research community and of policy-makers soliciting ‘Muslim perspectives’ and responses to national and international crises (Silvestri and Cherti 2007).

Against a politically and emotionally charged background where the ‘veil’ affair has been increasingly blurred with issues of terrorism, with the condition of repression experienced by women in certain Middle Eastern countries, and ideas of ‘backwardness’ (see Göle 2003), it seemed inappropriate to make the topic of the Islamic female dress-code a centre-piece of this research. On the contrary, also based on considerations derived from previous research (cf. Amiraux 2003, 2007), it seemed essential to let European Muslim women put forth their own aspirations, fears, and expectations through a range of questions about their daily life, biography, relationship to their faith, and interaction with family, community and the broader European society.
The decision to adopt a positive-sounding title for the research – ‘Europe’s Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges’ – proved quite a sound and effective strategy, fully in line with the overall purpose of the research, and capable to attract the interest and the participation of Muslim women. Avoiding in the title any words referring to problems or crises that may indeed affect the lives of Muslim women in Europe was important in order not to bias the engagement of the respondents and to allow them to participate in the study in a relaxed atmosphere.

Differently from similar sociological studies involving Muslims, the response rate for this research was impressively high. Most women approached were happy and confident to participate in this study as they felt that this focus would allow them to comfortably express their feelings and views in a fully rounded life perspective, and not constrained by a specific agenda. Despite initially showing a degree of suspicion and being inquisitive about the aims and use of this research project, the respondents felt reassured when they learnt that the questions centred around their daily life and were formulated in a fashion that would allow them to talk about their experience as individuals and as Muslim faithful not in a defensive way but in a relaxed and balanced atmosphere. The professional position, previous experience and specialist competence of the lead researcher and her assistants in the field of Middle Eastern and European Islam and on women issues, as well as their ability to earn the respect and trust of the respondents were obviously key factors in determining their positive involvement of the latter.

Questions like: ‘what do you love about your faith?’ or ‘what do you love about the country where you live?’ seemed particularly attractive and welcome to the respondents. It is interesting to remark that one recurrent motivation that led them to participate in this study was the opportunity that many saw for redressing what they thought to be a distorted Western image of women in Islam. In reply to the final comment line of the questionnaire, quite a few specified that they wanted to correct the image of Muslim women in public opinion and came across as assertive and very proud of their religious identity. The positive reception of this study on the part of the respondents was also evident by their concluding remarks to the interviews/questionnaires and in the warmth with which they greeted the researcher(s). At times, especially in Italy – where Muslims tend to be individuals with the legal status of ‘immigrant’ and not yet of ‘citizen’, and where there has been less exposure of Muslims in the media and in sociological research – women were particularly enthusiastic to be asked for their views and the interview atmosphere became quite charged emotionally. Some women felt touched and anxious at the same time to be able to tell their own story freely, and in particular to learn that someone was interested in listening to them, not driven by any hidden agenda or prejudice. Other respondents became very emotional and even fell into tears in recollecting painful memories of their past in their home countries or the process of emigrating and installing in the receiving society.
Islamic female models

‘Modesty’ is the key concept defining the role and ideal behaviour of women in Islam. It is directly in line with the idea of chastity and with the ‘peaceful submission to God’s will’ that is implicit in the term Islam. The Islamic teaching about women is derived partly from the holy book, the Quran, which mentions only one woman by name and only rarely refers to female figures in negative terms in an almost allegorical way. Other Islamic conceptions about women derive from the example of the real women that rotated around the life of the Prophet Muhammad, his wives (especially Khadija and Aisha) and his daughter Fatima (cf. Armstrong 2001, Esposito 1998, Roded 1999). Beside these women, who are esteemed for their piety, honesty, and crucial role in transmitting, through the hadiths, the deeds and the example of the Prophet and are admired as role models for their wisdom, the Islamic tradition also mentions with respect the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. He is considered one of the Prophets who anticipated Mohammad. In the early centuries of Islam, other important female figures appeared: Muslim women mystics who provided original scholarship and renewed inspiration in this religion.¹

Veiling: between modesty and honour

The hijab (veil or headscarf) and other covering forms of the female dress code, like the jilbab (full black dress head to toe), the burqa (cloak covering the whole body including the face), and the niqab (face veil), as well as the notion of harem (the secluded part of the Arab house inhabited by women only and where only close male family members can enter) are practices derived from specific verses of the Quran but are not among the ‘pillars’, i.e. the fundamental precepts of Islam. Experts relate the following key controversial Surah for the elaboration of these norms:²

Surah XXIV: ‘Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. [...] And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms...’,

²) The following quotes reproduce the translation provided by Roded (1999: 29-30).
Surah XXXIII: ‘Oh ye wives of the Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye keep your duty (to Allah) then be not soft of speech […] And stay in your houses […] Be regular in prayer, and pay the poor due, and obey Allah and His messenger. Allah’s wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you…’

Surah IV: ‘Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those whom ye fear rebellious, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them…’

Seen in the light of the culture of the region and of the epoch when Muhammad lived (and when all female bodies were controlled, also in Europe), these requirements for women seem less of an imposition, or a way to oppress them, and more of a standardisation of the fashion and custom of the time, especially if we consider Muhammad’s innovation by giving women a legal status, i.e. the right of inheritance (despite its actual limitations, if seen with contemporary eyes). On the other hand, the historical submission of Muslim women to male guardians as well as verses like the one above suggesting that men have the right to beat their wives have provoked many animosities against Islam. However, experts have argued that very often male social domination, rather than doctrinal teaching, has put Muslim women in a situation of submission and deficiency vis-à-vis men. This was despite – or maybe because – a privileged role was recognised to women in transmitting the faith at home. As Haleh Afshar (1994: 129) has explained,

‘Amongst Muslims, women have traditionally been the appointed site of familial honour and shame and the representatives of the public face of the society’s apparent commitment to its faith. Thus Muslim women as both guardians and guarded. They are the custodians of the religious beliefs, even though for centuries it has been men who have been the interpreters of norms, values and practices according to that belief. Women, whether they have wished it or not, have been required to reflect the religious commitment of the group in their attire and behaviour as well as in most aspects of their lives. This has not been a painless or a static process’.

As many researchers have highlighted, the veil does not simply signify submission to family and to religious duty. In recent years, in particular since the first ‘veil affair’ in France in 1989, it has increasingly signified ‘political action’ and the ‘feminisation’ of a field (Islamic political mobilisation) that has otherwise been associated with the dominant ‘masculine’ and violent images of terrorism (Afshar et al 2005). However the emergence of the hijab as a political issue has not entailed a loss of the other ‘traditional’ meaning of veiling connected with ‘honour’, ‘modesty’ and ‘piety’ (Dwyer 1999; Gaspard & Khosrokhavar 1995, Göl 2008; 2003; Amiraux 2003; Lorcerie 2005; Keaton 2006; Bowen 2006; McGoldrick 2006; McGoldrick 2006; Wallach-Scott 2007; Afshar 1994; Afshar et al 2005; Werbner 1999). It has been observed that the issue of the veil has ‘enabled’ Muslim women – rather than distanced them from European values and political system – to become more engaged in it; they are fighting within it, in secular terms of human rights (cf. McGoldrick 2006). One could even argue that from a certain point of view the way the hijab is worn and fought for nowadays in Europe is an expression of the fact that Muslim women ‘are integrated’ (cf. Göl 2003; Brion 2000; Malik 2008). They feel to belong to Europe as European citizens and as such they fight for their right to be themselves in their own terms in ‘their own’ Europe. The sense of belonging to European countries whilst assertively pronouncing their Islamic belief clearly emerged from the empirical data (questionnaires and interviews) collected for this research and analysed in section 6.
Sharia and marriage

Sharia is the ‘expression of the will of Allah manifested in his guidance of Muhammad and preserved by the community in their scripture, the Quran’; this immutable law is therefore ‘central to the individual and collective Muslim identity’ (Waines 2003: 63). Through time, and with various methods, Muslim scholars have engaged in the interpretation and ‘translation’ of the divine will into jurisprudence and practical guidelines to be adopted by the community of the observant faithful.

Although the family and related matters lie ‘at the core of Islam’s social laws’, ‘the patriarchal nature of Muslim societies was not a characteristic created or invented by Muslim scripture’ but a feature of the Middle East prior to the rise of Islam (Waines 2003: 93). Islamic family codes – i.e. all the laws that regulate family relations – were often created in Muslim societies. This type of legislation can operate beside – and can complement – civil law, but has a different source, as it is inspired by sharia, or religious law. The ambits covered by Islamic family codes include: a person’s status and ability (in particular women’s), marriage, personal and patrimonial relations between spouses, children, inheritance (cf. Waines 2003: ch. 3). Although they have often manifested themselves in the most prescriptive, severe, and authoritarian forms, Islamic family codes are not eternally-fixed systems. Although theoretically inspired to the same timeless religious principles, they can, and did, vary and evolve depending on two factors: (1) the particular school of interpretation of sharia adopted by the scholars or rulers involved; (2) historical, social, economic and political transformations in the context of reference. One could say that Islamic family codes have absorbed and reflected the cultural features, political ideologies, economic needs, and social norms of different Muslim regions of the world in diverse epochs.

Although Muslim marriage is often criticised as a ‘contract of purchase’ of a wife and as an inequitable relationship for the woman, Islamic studies experts explain that the roles of the spouses in Islam ‘are perceived as complementary, reflecting their difference capacities and dispositions in conformity with the values of traditional patriarchal society’ (Waines 2003: 95). They also argue that polygamy is ‘tolerated’ in Islam but was never meant as an ‘encouragement’ to Muslims to do so; on the contrary, it was a restriction to a widespread ‘central Arabian customs of unlimited polygyny’. Other norms that are difficult to understand for a contemporary western audience that is used to the grammar of gender equality are those pertaining the treatment of Muslim women in matters of inheritance and in situations of repudiation and divorce, where no or little agency is conferred upon the woman. These practices, as well as the Islamic scarf and ideas about honour and shame stem from a same common ‘concern with female sexual modesty and control within a politics of embodiment’ (Werbner 2007: 165).

The application and interpretation of the norms about the behaviour and the rights of Muslim women has been a matter of contention for a long time in Muslim societies and – as contemporary Muslim feminists maintain – one could argue that the unequal treatment of women that we have often seen in Muslim society is not part and parcel of the faith but of a male-dominated society that has manipulated it. The ‘Sharia Courts’ (or Councils) that were much discussed in recent news coverage in Europe and Canada, for instance, are not an immediate requirement of Islamic law and do not apply a same univocal Islamic law. They vary from each other for the interpretive framework adopted by their scholars, for the cultural traditions of the communities involved, and also on the basis of the personal attitudes of the people working there. Practitioners and researchers who have worked with Sharia Councils maintain that these are male-dominated institutions essentially ‘embedded within patriarchal norms and values’ (Bano 2007). These are biased institutions to which Muslim women –
especially but not only in the West – are very much opposed (Rohe 2008). However, a limited benefit derived from these Courts is that through this process of Sharia-based dispute resolution ‘some women were able to challenge cultural practices such as forced marriage as “un-Islamic” and antithetical to the values of “being a Muslim”’ (Bano 2007).

In the summer of 2008, a very interesting innovation emerged in Britain concerning Muslim marriages. Prominent Muslim institutions based in the UK (the Muslim Law (Sharia) Council UK, the Imams and Mosques Council UK, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Parliament, Utruj Foundation, Muslim Women’s Network UK, Fatima Women’s Network, Muslim Community Helpline (formerly Muslim Women’s Helpline) and The City Circle) endorsed a new European version of Muslim marriage Contract (Nikah) promoted by the Muslim Institute. This Contract, which ‘emphasises the Qur’anic vision of marriage as a relationship of mutual love, mercy and kindness’, ‘recognises the role Muslim women play in modern societies’; in practical terms it no longer requires ‘a marriage guardian (wali) for the bride’ and ‘enables the wife to initiate divorce and retain all her financial rights agreed in the marriage contract’ (City Circle 2008).

As personal code experts have argued, past and recent transformations of the family and women’s legal code in Arab countries can tell us a lot about the actual progress, or involution, of a country with regard to economic transformations, modernisation, and democratisation, as well as about the role that cultural and historical components play in shaping social norms and in impacting on the effectiveness of secular legal systems (Aluffi-Beck-Peccoz 1997; Dalmasso 2007; Charrad 2001).

In most European countries, the Islamic marriage called nikah is not considered valid legally. So, Muslims who wish to marry according to this tradition are required to do a separate ceremony with the civil authorities. Although Islamic family law is not in place in European countries, it nevertheless affects the life of a number of individuals who reside in Europe and who originate from Muslim countries where such codes are in place. Individuals can be affected regardless of whether they have the status of immigrant, were born in European countries of immigrant parents, or are naturalised European citizens with double citizenship. This problem especially arises for people in this latter category and for those who decide to marry in a non-European country where Islamic law applies to the personal code.

European courts do not have full competence over marriages contracted under these conditions in foreign countries. A frequent major dilemma facing practitioners dealing with international private law in cases of marital disputes involving Islamic marriages or citizens of Muslim countries is to decide a) which law (of the two countries involved) applies to the specific case, and b) whether and how to apply a foreign law or a foreign judgement (Foblets 2003).

Even when marriages are contracted in European countries according to western civil law, the country of origin of the spouse(s) often requires its citizens to register the marriage there too, according to the national law – lest the invalidity of the act there and the impossibility to enter the country for visits etc (Foblets 2001). Thus, for instance, the Islamic personal status and family code is the legal framework that continues to be applied to personal status matters concerning people of Moroccan origin who live in European countries, even if they have taken up a different citizenship and got married abroad (Salih 2001). Although Moroccan personal status and family law (the Mudawana, cf. Vermeren 2003) went through a reform and opening in 2003, Muslim law tends to keep women in a subordinate position compared to western law, and uses principles that are not always compatible with the principles that inspired western law about human rights and fundamental liber-
ties (Foblets 2003). This means that, should controversies emerge in a Muslim couple of immigrant descent, especially the wife and children could run into discriminatory situations and other problems (cf. Hadjam 2004; Rosen 2002, ch. 8).

We will not linger any longer onto these complex legal issues that in fact would require a full investigation on its own. However, it is important to bear these questions in mind in order to better appreciate the situation and the comments of a couple of respondents in the empirical part of this study. Before moving onto analysing that material, let us have a quick look at the role of women in the production of Islamic knowledge and Islamic-inspired socio-political mobilisation.

Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic feminism, Islamic femininity?

At the beginning of the 20th century, a re-awakening of Islam in the Muslim world took place, initially in the context of the quest for modernisation and the fight for independence from Western values and colonial control. It gradually led to the involvement of many women, both in nationalist struggles, like in Algeria, in feminist movements, like in Egypt, as well as in more fully fledged Islamist groups that stressed the importance of education and of *ijtihad* (independent reading of the religious sources and reinterpretation and re-adaptation of the religious laws) for the empowerment and participation of women in their political project (Kepel 2002; Göle 2003; Jamal 2005; Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007). These examples and dynamics, accelerated by the alphabetisation and modernisation of the Muslim world in the 20th century and by the expansion of Muslim communities in the West, have caused the mushrooming of Quran reading circles for women, militant organisations, NGOs working against discrimination or violence against women (DeLong-Bas 2008), and have also led to the development of the argument that ‘it is not the Koran, but social convention of patriarchal cultures that women in Islamic countries are deprived of equal social status’ (Munir 2003; see also Badran 2005; Wilson 2006).

It is also argued that in fact an ‘ontological equality’ of man and woman is inscribed in the Quran and that they are called to share spiritual responsibilities, moral values, and religious duties, including the tasks of the imam, in building a just society (Krausen 2005; Wadud 2006). This latter claim has created a lot of controversy and opposition among Muslim communities, including on the part of those Muslim women that were brought up in a culture which taught them to see their role and fulfilment essentially within the domestic walls.

However, as Pnina Werbner (1999) has beautifully pointed out in her study of Muslim women of Asian descent in Manchester, the idea of – and expectations from – the ‘good Muslim woman’, even among affluent and educated Muslim communities settled in Europe, has been commonly associated with the context of the family and with the caring qualities of the mother figure. This has enabled Europe’s Muslim women to enter the public sphere with associations of all sorts, but especially the charitable ones, by exercising a ‘politically motherhood’ and femininity, without nevertheless adopting a ‘feminist’ discourse that may openly subvert family relations, traditions, and social order. This idea of ‘Islamic femininity’ is ever present, like a red thread, in the narrative and motivations of the most diverse female Muslim groups and intellectuals (cf. Afshar 1994, Afshar et al 2005), including (or rather, especially) the most militant ones. As a conference organised by the French-speaking European group *Presence Musulmane* in 2004 showed, even those Muslim women of the association that appeared to have embraced a feminist discourse, actually tried to re-formulate it in order to de-secularise it and legitimate their actions in Islamic terms (Collectif Presence Musulmane 2004; cf. also Commission Islam
Laïcité 2007). This does not mean, though, that other Muslim women, especially those of an older generation, have rejected feminism or have compromised their religious identity in order to undertake the battle of liberation from patriarchal structures.

On the contrary, engaged Muslim female scholars like Afshar, Al Hibri (1982), Mueller, Manji, Mernissi (1994, 2003), Moghissi (1999), El Saadawi, and Wadud, have continued and expanded, each of them in her own particular and original way, the path of feminism, both by criticising monolithic/Orientalist approaches to feminism imposed by the West, and by taking into account a new dimension of ‘difference’, that of Islam. These women are extremely diverse in their methodological approach (they include theologians, lawyers, writers, political activists) and in their ability to stimulate audiences, and they may even resent being mentioned here together. Nevertheless they have in common their passion and an outright rejection of ‘fundamentalism’, i.e. of restrictive, unidirectional, and exclusionary understandings of religion and life. They call for rationality and condemn fundamentalism, not by discharging religion, but on the contrary by adhering to and using religion as a lever (cf. Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2006).

This crucial subtlety is often un-noticed or dismissed by western commentators who prefer to side with the anger of Hirsi Ali, Necla Kelek or Chadortt Djavann, and urge Muslim women to quit their ‘backward religion’ and position of ‘oppression’ to wake up to ‘western values and rationalism’ instead. Many critics of Islam do not consider for a moment that Muslim women could feel denigrated by such an approach. Most critics dismiss altogether the possibility that change can be operated from within, that it may be more productive to invest energies in (re)discovering values of personal autonomy and dignity inside the faith of Islam. Of course this is not an easy and quick solution. As several women who are active at the community, social, or political level reported in this study and in previous research, opening the mentality of the community and getting rid of false consciousness and of practices that claim to be rooted in religion but in fact are the product of specific cultural, historical and social factors is not a straightforward job (e.g. Sinha 2003). Often the hardest opposers are found in Muslim women themselves because they have totally absorbed the socio-cultural norms of the community that have been presented in religious terms (cf. DeVoe 2002). In order to bring about significant changes in Muslim women’s lives it is crucial that society is open to ‘discussions around sensitive religious belief’, as Ghatak (2006) had noted in the context of India where, like in Europe, there is a predominant discourse of secularism, despite the presence of a multitude of strong religions in the continent.
WHO ARE MUSLIM WOMEN OF EUROPE?

MYTHS AND REALITIES

The population of Muslim women living in Europe reflects the variegated character of the broader Muslim population of Europe. Europe’s Muslims belong to a variety of religious traditions in Islam and have quite distinct backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, nationality, and personal history of relationship to Europe or to the Muslim world, from Asia to the Mediterranean. Most Muslims currently residing in Europe are of immigrant descent. However, there are also autochthonous Muslim communities, especially in South-East Europe, and the number of conversions to Islam among native Europeans is also thought to be rising, although no official figures to confirm this exist. The exact size and composition of the Muslim population of Europe is therefore unknown. They are said to be between 15 and 20 million but figures remain inaccurate because there are no official statistics about Muslims and governments and Muslim communities pretty much continue to rely on estimates that combine: counts of foreign residents coming from countries where Islam is the majority or the state religion; the numbers of those who came from those regions and have naturalised as European citizens; and the rough numbers of those attending mosques, Islamic cultural centres, and religious festivals. These inaccurate counts tend not to include converts and illegal immigrants of Islamic faith. They are also in excess of those individuals with Muslim-sounding names but who either are non-practising or have explicitly rejected their faith by converting to another religion or by becoming atheist or agnostic. Only one European country, the United Kingdom, has officially begun to collect, for the first time with the census of 2001, information about its residents’ religious affiliation. This is an important step, although it is not flawless from the viewpoint of French-style secularism, which considers it an intrusion in the private sphere; moreover, this method does not account for those who simply did not fill in the census form or those who did not want to reveal their faith to the public authorities.

Many Muslims living in Europe are nowadays technically ‘citizens’ of the countries where they reside and where their families have lived for two-three generations (as in the case of France, Belgium, and Britain). In Italy, the first generation of immigrants is beginning to naturalise only now. Therefore, the experiences and views of these Muslim citizens of Europe are quite distinct from those of new Muslim people that continue to immigrate into Europe. Nevertheless, it is still possible to say that, historically, the presence of Islam in Europe has strongly been determined by immigration flows from the Muslim world, by the consequences of decolonisation, and by specific economic and political choices made by European countries at times of economic growth or decline (Joppke 1999; Geddes 2003; Silvestri 2005). In addition, beside economic migrants, individuals from Muslim countries have reached Europe.
as political refugees or as asylum seekers, as in the case of Palestinians, Kurds, Iraqis, or people fleeing Iran after the revolution, and Somalia in the 1990s.

So, if we leave aside native Europeans that converted to Islam, the numbers and sociological stratification of Muslim men and women currently living in Europe are the consequence of a complex history – and specific paths within it – of immigration into Europe. However it is crucial to understand and to answer their ‘present’ needs in the light of their present conditions and life experiences and not through the distant lens of the past migration experience, though this dimension should not be kept out of the picture altogether.

The migration literature shows that major economic migration into Europe began in the 1960s and involved primarily men coming from Muslim countries (mainly people coming from the Sub-Indian continent, North Africa, and Turkey), although they were not perceived primarily through the religious identifier but through their nationality or ethnicity. At that stage, both the immigrants and the receiving European countries believed that this was going to be a temporary phenomenon.

The feminisation of migration

The feminisation of migration began in the mid 1970s when European countries began to close their immigration policies due to the global economic crisis of 1973 and a decline in production. It is at this stage that those immigrants who were already in Europe and the former colonial subjects who had acquired the citizenship of their host countries decided to settle in Europe for good and began to call their spouses and families into Europe. This was possible thanks to universal Human Rights provisions that protect the right to have a family. This widening and diversification of the immigrant/Muslim population impacted strongly on the welfare system of European societies because immigrants stopped being net contributors to European economies and began instead to compete with the autochthonous European population in demands concerning state schooling, social housing, and healthcare (Bommes & Geddes 2000). It is also between the 1970s and the 1980s that the first forms of Muslim associationism appeared, initially around prayer facilities and celebration of religious and national festivities (Nielsen 2004; Bistolfi & Zabball 1995; Dassetto et al 2001, Husson 2007). By the 1990s, better organised community groups emerged, mobilised around more comprehensive or more specific issues (Silvestri 2007). They also began to cater for and to involve women, for instance by organising cultural or ethnic events, skills- or language-oriented training sessions, childcare, and counselling services. Beside local forms of Muslim socio-political mobilisation, the most visible ones were often, though not always, supported either by the authorities of the countries of origin – or of other powerful Muslim states – or by transnational networks rooted in various forms of political Islam. These Islamist-oriented groups tend to organise seminars and activities for women by promoting notions of ‘empowerment’ in line with their militant message and insistence on traditional dress-code and religious practices.

As civil society awareness began to expand and advocacy groups supporting women’s and migrants’ rights, fighting discrimination and violence began to emerge in the 1990s, new outlets became available to Muslim women (and to immigrant and minority women more in general) to find practical assistance and spaces to access information, to articulate their views, and to exchange their experiences in and about European society.
At the turn of the new Millennium another sociological transformation became evident. OECD figures for 2001 showed that about half of the total number of migrants in the world (48%) happened to be women (cf. Morokvasic-Müller et al 2003, Castles & Miller 2003). At the turn of the Millennium, immigration inflows into the EU were increasingly characterised by arrivals of single females, whether unmarried, divorced, or forced to leave their family at home in order to make a living in Europe (Kofman et al 2000; Inowlocki & Lutz 2000; Caritas-Migrantes 2007; Pittau 2007). These female migrants showed very heterogeneous social profiles. In Italy, most of these women were from Eastern Europe and South America but more and more women also came from countries like Morocco, thus indicating an important shift in the causes and implications of the migration process of people coming from a Muslim region (Silvestri 2004; Caritas-Migrantes 2003).

This general transformation in the character of immigration into Europe has allowed for new inflows of Muslim women as ‘independent’ individuals, with a specific set of motivations, expectations, problems and aspirations. This picture is quite different from that of the immigrant-Muslim women of the first and second generation, who were seen essentially as ‘dependents’ of male immigrants, were not economically active (at most, Asian women from the subcontinent would have home-run sewing businesses for instance), and were more subject to male control and to the norms of the religious and ethnic community.

**Closely-knit family, economic inactivity and social exclusion**

It is interesting to note that the migration process for those women of the first generation produced a situation of isolation, exacerbated when their men began to experience difficulty in finding jobs in a shrinking European labour market in the 1980s. Compared to their home countries, where they could rely upon and move freely among large networks of family members and female friends, these women would now be trapped at home, in a foreign country, increasingly controlled and abused by their husbands, as the latter would hang around home, feeling more and more frustrated about their inability to find a job or to sustain their family as they had wished (Abdulrahim 1993; Kofman et al 2000; Phizacklea 2003). Research has also demonstrated that women in general have been particularly resilient individuals in the migration process, more able to withstand difficulties and to adapt to new environments than men (Morokvasic et al 2003; Kofman et al 2000; European Women’s Lobby 2007). This difference is likely to have caused tensions in migrant households where men felt that they were losing control of their families and ought to impose on them stricter traditions, including religious ones (Bujis 1993; Shahidian 1996; Kofman et al 2000).

These considerations suggest that tense gender and family dynamics involving Muslim immigrants in Europe might have more to do with psychological dynamics, the constraints of the new socio-economic context, and the fear to lose touch with one’s country of origin rather than with specifically religious values, prescriptions, and impositions on behalf of family, societal structures, and religious leaders. Processes of exclusion and isolation tend to affect every person in a similar situation of emigration, whether the move took place by choice or by force. This is because, as many scholars have pointed out, the experience of migration in itself, especially when geographical distance from the home country is accompanied with economic deprivation and emotional isolation, produces marginalisation (Anderson 2001). ‘Exilic life’ causes a ‘crisis of meaning and requires a restructuring of the exiles’ emotions and beliefs’ (Shahidian 1996: 47); this, in turn, may produce strengthening of religious points of reference and, potentially, further segregation, although there is also plenty of evidence that religious and ethnic-based associations can also work as bridges for the integration of foreigners in their societies of settlement.
Although official statistics about economic status, level of education, access to jobs, and degree of social mobility concerning Muslim women in Europe are not available (except for the UK), localised studies and a number of qualitative indicators by ‘ethnicity’ have shown that, quantitatively, Muslim women are lagging behind in European society (Brown 2000; Peach 2006; Le Texier et al 2006; ICG 2007; Manço 2000, Salway 2007; Dale, Shaheen, Kalra & Fieldhouse 2002). However one should not automatically derive from this that Islam, by default, prevents women from getting education and jobs, thus causing socio-economic disadvantage for the whole Muslim community. One reason is that levels of education among Europe’s Muslim women are increasing (Karic 2007: 69), although this depends on specific contexts. Moreover, at least among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in Britain, a certain ‘preference’ for ‘domestic roles’ remains (Salway 2007). Moreover, most of the studies and estimates about rates of employment among Muslim women do not take into account two crucial variables: (a) the fact that women can be employed in the informal sector by working at home, a type of activity that tends to elude statistical counts of employment levels; (b) the success stories of all those women coming from Muslim countries and who have become naturalised European citizens or who have considerably integrated into European societies (cf. Brion 2000; Inowlocki & Lutz 2000).

Anne Morelli (2000), Avtar Brah (1994) and Aleh Afshar (1994; see also Afshar et al 2005), for instance, in their studies conducted respectively in Belgium and in the UK, have highlighted the importance of the social class factor, rather than religion, in determining levels and types of female employment and children’s performance at school. Morelli (2000) critically questions whether Moroccan and Turkish children in Belgium are discriminated ‘because they are Muslim’ or simply ‘because they are poor’. In the British Muslim community, major differences in attitudes and performance have appeared between women of Bangladeshi and of Pakistani origin. The former show much lower levels of economic activity (or, if anything, employment in the low-skilled sector) and poor education (Peach 2006; Salway 2007). On the other hand, more socio-economic independence and higher employment levels were noticed among Somali women living in East London, compared to other women of South Asian descent living in the same area (Summerfield 1996).

Other factors to take into account in order to explain Muslim women economic inactivity, low political participation, and failure to integrate in European societies could also be the inability to speak the language of the European country of residence (cf. Boussetta, Gsir, Jacobs 2005), as well as to various forms of discrimination or Islamophobia that have been denounced in the context of seeking jobs and in education (EUMC 2006; Karic 2007; Choudhury 2007).

All this suggests that the scarce economic performance and political engagement of Muslim women in European and Muslim societies ought to be put down to a complexity of multi-faceted aspects, and not simply to religious teaching, as Inglehart and Norris (2003) have instead emphasised. The more nuanced approach suggested by the author of this report and other scholars does not, however, totally discard the fact that ethnic communities and their leaders, especially in the past, have drawn on religious motives in order to keep a certain status quo that is unfavourable to women. For a more detailed discussion of the issue of women’s subordination in Islam see the relevant section in this report.
From isolation to self-assertion

Nowadays, the demographic picture of Muslims in Europe is extremely variegated. It includes ‘old’ immigrants and new immigrants, as well as converts (whose numbers are said to be increasing constantly although it is impossible to bring evidence), and new generations of Muslims who are EU citizens but have an immigrant descent. So it is important to realise that increasingly issues pertaining Muslim women in Europe are less and less related to the problems of and the policy responses that are specific to ‘immigrant’ women. It is therefore helpful to start to refer to these individuals as ‘Europe’s Muslim women’ rather than Muslim women ‘in’ Europe.

Policy makers fear that the young members, especially males, of the current ‘European’ Muslim population may go down the alienation and radicalisation path that has already led to the terrorist attacks of Madrid (2004) and London (2005). In general, across Europe, unemployment figures for Muslim and ethnic minority youth are much higher than for the native white population; however, compared to the past record of the same social category, many are successfully pursuing university studies and careers. Europe’s young Muslims, both men and women, are increasingly questioning and challenging the traditions of their families and communities. Simultaneously they are also re-appropriating themselves of new, deterritorialised, interpretations of their faith, and challenging the western mindset centred around rigid ideas of secularism (Roy 2004). This is particularly evident in female reformulations of marriage and veiling practices (cf. Malik 2008; Wallach-Scott 2007; Werbner 2004; Göl 2003; Brion 2000; Gaspard & Khosrokhavar 1995).

These young Muslim generations, which include women as active agents, feel fully European and are determined to vindicate their rights although not always along the same lines, as it clearly emerged from the interviews conducted for this project with young Muslim women. In particular, it is interesting to note the fast speed with which many Muslim women have mobilised both locally and transnationally. This has happened not only in relation to the domino effect of international crises connected to the Turkish ban against the hijab, the French law of 2004 (which banned ‘conspicuous’ religious symbols in public offices), or the ‘burkini’ crisis emerged in Holland in 2007. Claims for a ‘gendered’ space and the right to be represented and listened – both by the community and by the public authorities – have taken place in various countries and communities over the past two decades, with tensions emerging especially in France, Britain and Germany (Burlet & Reid 1998; McGoldrick 2006; Amiraux 2007; Macey 2007; Sanghera Thapar-Björkert 2007; Spielhaus 2007).

However, we should also be aware that not all Muslim women have the means and the capacity to actively participate in society in this way; they may dream so, but inability to speak the language of the country of residence and lack of employment or a low education level impede their engagement and their success (cf. Bousetta, Gsir, Jacobs 2005).
SUBMISSION,
VIOLENCE,
HONOUR KILLINGS

In popular discourse, Islam is often associated with assigning to women a position of inferiority, both in relation to men, within the family, and in society more in general. Evidence is brought from certain contentious passages of the Quran that invite women to be pious and humble (see above), from the practice of veiling, as well as from the restrictions on women’s public life in societies like Saudi Arabia or Iran, or the physical violence women have are exposed to in certain parts of Asia and Africa where Islam tends to be, demographically, the prevailing religion.

However, a consensus seems also to have gradually built up, among academics, policy makers, women support networks, and Muslim individuals – and not just among feminist circles – that gender-based violence and attempts to subordinate, to ‘tame’ women exist in every society ‘throughout the life cycle, and across all socio-economic and cultural divides’ (Gill & Rehman 2004). A UN report showed for instance how physical assault on women, trafficking, genital mutilation, and ‘honour killings’ are spreadout in various regions in the world and urged to recognize these as forms of Human Rights violations (UNFPA 2000: 25). Although it acknowledges that “‘honour killings” tend to be prevalent in, but not limited to, countries with a majority Muslim population’, the report also stresses that ‘Islamic leaders have condemned the practice and say it has no religious basis’ UNFPA 2000: 30). Other studies – including BBC (2005, 2007) reports based on interviews with ethnic minority women victim of family violence – have specified that although ‘honour killings’, forced, and incompatible marriages have frequently occurred in Muslim communities, they should not be considered as a direct outcome of the teaching of the religion of Islam; instead they occur in other faith communities too and are the legacy of centuries-old views of gender relations embedded in rural societies (Ahmad 2003; Wilson 2006; Khan 2008).

Anthropologists teach us that all pre-modern societies sanctioned sexual promiscuity and that

‘public transgressions of sacred sexual taboos and norms in such societies inevitably lead to expulsion and murder, or at the very least to punitive legal consequences. This has been a salient feature of South Asian and Muslim societies in which notions of honour, shame and female sexual modesty have dominated group social relations between families and lineages’ (Werbner 2007: 162).

Like the Islamic veil, these ideas ‘are located at the point where familial politics and the politics of religion, tribe and nation meet’; this explains why their significance is ‘ambiguous, dynamic and shifting’ and why the line between ‘arranged’ (where the spouses consent) and ‘forced’ marriages is at times ‘very fine’ (Werbner 2007: 165, 168).
These practices are regarded as ‘a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women, which have historically led to domination over and discrimination against women by men’ (Gill & Rehman 2004; see also: Kandyoti 1988; Bujs 1996; Moghissi 1999; Kofman et al 2000) as well as an externalization of men’s fear of women and parents’ fear of change (De Voe 2002; Couchard 2004). Whilst pointing out that the violence upon and the oppression of women that is often apparent in Muslim communities is a product of societal and cultural norms rather than religion, most authors also acknowledge that societal structures and political leaders have legitimised their physical, legal, or psychological subordination of women in religious terms, thus ‘constructing’ a distorted imagined social reality in which Islam requires and produces the subjugation of women. Consequently, these beliefs become so much entrenched in communities to the extent that they are regarded to ‘constitute reality’ and religious leaders become unable or unwilling to challenge them (cf. El Saadawi 2007; De Voe 2002; European Women Lobby 2007: 9). Hence the need to challenge this hegemonic relation in Islamic terms, by stimulating critical access to both cultural traditions and religious knowledge, and by empowering through education not only Muslim women but the whole community of reference.

Imported brides, forced and arranged marriages

Opinion about the phenomenon of ‘imported brides’ or of ‘transantional marriages’ is quite divided, among researchers and Muslim communities (cf. Kelek 2006; Werbner 2007; Charsley 2006). Such marriages can be – but are not necessarily – ‘forced’ or ‘arranged’, as there can be quite a degree of consent to the marriage on the part of the spouses. We have to remember that Muslims are a heterogeneous group and, like all humans, tend to have a preference for marriage within the same ethnic or language community. So, where specific ethnic communities are demographically unbalanced – for instance because of a migration process that has drawn into Europe primarily males from a particular country – then their members are likely to want go back to their home country. This is because of a shortage of eligible potential wives from the same community in Europe, and not because the person at stake rejects European principles and lifestyle and has a deliberate plan to ‘Islamise’ Europe. It is also possible that Muslim men of immigrant descent opt for a wife from their home country because of a semi-conscious wish to keep alive their roots, or because they feel uncomfortable with the level of European women’s emancipation.

A recent study conducted in Belgium shows that almost three quarters of the Moroccan and Turkish communities there imported a spouse from the country of origin (Belien 2006). The UK Home Office points to ‘an influx of 15,000 prospective marriage partners (male and female) from the Indian subcontinent in 2001 alone’ (in Werbner 2007: 169). Figures about this process are rare and blurred, however existing qualitative research seems to suggest that, until recently at least in the UK, the phenomenon has concerned more men who import their wives from abroad, rather than the opposite (Samad and Eade 2003; Salway 2007). A major problem that is often brought up by the critics of this practice is that of integrating into European societies individuals who do not speak the language and are not familiar with European customs and lifestyle. Hence, the decision, in countries like Germany and Holland, to introduce ‘citizenship’ and ‘culture tests’ for immigrants.

Killings and beatings of young Muslim women at the hands of their relatives in Germany, Italy, the UK and France, over the past five years – often in connection with forced marriages and sexual behaviour considered to be shameful and to dishonour the family or the group – have triggered national and international debates over the urgent need to prevent these practices (Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office 2004; Amnesty International 2005; Belgian Government 2006; Repubblica 2006; ICG 2007; Khan 2008; European Muslim Network 2008).
However little is known about the real extent of these problems because they are seldom reported and only estimates have been produced (BBC 2007, 2008). For instance, ‘between 1000 and 2000 forced marriages a year’ are reported to occur in the UK (Werbner 2007: 169). The Muslim Women’s Helpline, which declared to have received a total of 1500 calls lasting an average of 30 minutes each, during 2005, registered an increase, in the period between 2004 and 2005, of young women’s calls relating to forced marriages. However the organization did not provide any percentage in its annual report and could not tell ‘whether ever-greater publicity has simply emboldened more women to seek help or whether the problem is genuinely on the increase despite the greater dangers faced by families of intervention’ (Muslim Women Helpline 2006).

There is extremely little evidence available about attitudes and behaviour of ethnic and religious minorities concerning arranged and forced marriages. A major difficulty encountered by researchers who tackled this subject in Britain – specifically among Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in London and Bradford – was the suspicion on the part of the respondents, who felt that the whole research project was part of an Islamophobic ‘veiled threat against arranged marriages’ (Samas and Eade 2003). In particular, the elders appeared to be in denial. Despite this generational split, the research also indicated that both the young and the older members of these minority communities are beginning to realize that arranged and forced marriages in the end ‘do not work’ (Samas and Eade 2003; cf. Werbner 2007). The report showed that parents marry their children for a combination of reasons: in respect of traditions and to prevent sinful and shameful situations their children might run into, like extra-marital sexual relations. Young Muslims of South Asian families in Britain, for their part, overall tend to comply with their parents’ plans of arranged marriages in order to avoid family discord. At the same time, however, there is also evidence that young Muslims across Europe are developing a mind of their own, in favour of ‘love marriages’, and quite a few are actually rebelling to traditional practices by fleeing home to escape forced marriages and potential honour killings (Samas and Eade 2003; Werbner 2007; European Muslim Network 2008).

Hence, one could argue that the problems of arranged and of forced marriages are particularly visible now, in the 21st century, not because there is a general increase of these practices amongst Muslim communities but because this is the time when, demographically, in Europe there are large numbers of Muslims of immigrant descent who have reached marriageable age (Samas and Eade 2003: 55). Consequently, this unprecedented situation determines a clash between generations involving traditional-versus-modern perspectives of lifestyle, social relations, and social boundaries.

What responses?

A combination of information campaigns, education, and dedicated community-based social services – like the Southall Black Sisters, SPIOR in the Netherlands, or the Muslim Women Helpline in London – seem the best avenues to find solutions to these complex problems. Legal measures alone – despite exerting a strong symbolic power – can lead to a breach of trust between public authorities and ethnic and faith communities; feeling criminalized, the members of these communities would be unwilling to testify (cf. Dustin 2004; Werbner 2007: 164).

Identifying the best ways to protect and empower these women before they reach the hospital or sheltered housing seems a difficult task. One reason is the fact that many women appear unwilling, unprepared, or unable to denounce potential situations of violence because they are trapped in a complexity of inhibiting fac-
tors: from sense of shame, to fear of revenge on the part of the perpetrators of violence; to fear of being cut off, once and for all, from their family and children; to the persistence of genuine beliefs in the righteousness of certain cultural norms and the roles women should play in the family; to the fear of being misunderstood or derided by a western mentality that considers itself superior. So, obtaining their trust is the first challenge that needs to be overcome.

Evidence from empirical (academic and journalistic) research and from activities of advocacy, counseling, and support groups working with women escaping from violence, discrimination, and from forced marriages, in Europe and in other parts of the world, indicates that the best strategy to empower these women consists in a very nuanced approach. Blaming or deriding their culture or religion of reference, in an attempt to condemn dangerous practices or the restrictive mentality Muslim women have been exposed to, does not seem to be effective. On the contrary, this approach could actually produce a sense of frustration and alienation in the victim who feels vilified twice, by her own community and by the western system that cannot understand her culture of origin. Fighting from ‘within the system’ therefore appears a more appropriate strategy. This includes ‘negotiating’ with the patriarchal mentality; recognising the diversity of factors that affect female victims of violence, from economic conditions, to level of education, to class, to ethnicity, to religious upbringing, to experiences of migration and psychological trauma; and, last but not least, taking the courage to deal with the religious dimension, regardless of the taboos of the secular mentality (Dwyer 1999; Sinha 2003; Gill and Rehman 2004; Mumtaz 2005; Seckinelgin 2006; Ghatak 2006).

The Muslim Women Helpline (2006) lamented the lack of funds and of human resources that would enable the organization to provide fuller and more appropriate response to certain cases. The Helpline also pointed to the crucial importance to offer services for and to sensitise men, when dealing with marriage breakdown. The necessity to include male perceptions and to engage with Muslim men in order to find solutions to the problems of Muslim women was echoed by other voices of practitioners and researchers (Samad and Eade 2003; Bano 2007; Rohe 2008) and was definitely a clear outcome of the interviews conducted with Muslim women for this research.

Finally, it is important to note that even the most outspoken voices of Muslim women who condemn the inferior role ascribed to women in ‘Muslim societies’ and family or societal ‘imposition’ of specific Islamic practices (e.g. the veil) – like French authors Fadela Amara (2006) and Samira Bellil (2003), Italian-Moroccan activist Souad Sbai, or Egyptian Nawad El Saadawi (2007) – do not reject their own Islamic faith altogether. Rather, they call for the ability and the right to choose within the faith. However, reciprocal suspicion remains high between these activists who reclaim women’s independence and ability to practice their faith from a secular perspective, and those women who seek to achieve a similar societal transformation but working totally within an Islamic discourse, such as the conferences of Malika Hamidi, the work of the European Forum of Muslim Women, or the publications of Aziza Al Hibri (although these three examples, in turn, present huge divergences in approach, motivation, and outcomes).
A variety of perspectives and positions among the Muslim women of Europe are now emerging, driven by a mix of charismatic individuals, formal networks, and informal movements. It is impossible within the remit of this research to provide a full list and a quantitative analysis of formal and informal associations run by and for Muslim women in Europe. Nevertheless it is useful to provide some qualitative snapshots of this extremely colourful and variegated picture of the involvement of Muslim women in the European public sphere. Broadly speaking it includes the following trends:

- **Most Islamic centres and mosques nowadays tend to have women’s groups**, where women meet to learn the faith and also get involved in charitable work, children’s educational programme, social activities, and festivities. In the current context of globalisation, Muslims are more and more exposed to a variety of views and experiences about religion; so, many are likely to go to the mosque to attend prayer, or Quran classes, or Arabic courses, whilst at the same time being aware of or attending other initiatives elsewhere. Such fluid reality is also applicable to women. However, those Muslim women who tend to have a rather domestic, localised life and who are maybe only affiliated to a women’s groups in a community where there is a particular concentration of a single conservative Islamic tradition or ethnicity, and do not interact with the plurality of Muslim voices and initiatives, may end up with a more parochial conception of Islam and of the role women, compared to Muslim women who are more mobile and more in touch with the diverse facets of Islam in European society.

- **Transnational Islamist voices and movements of various origin**, from the Muslim Brothers, to the Jamaat-i-Islami, to the Turkish Justice and Development Party and Gülen Movement (all groups that want to reform the Muslim mindset while staying within tradition) have developed strategies of political engagement which openly rely on the education and involvement of women, and encourage them to take up positions of responsibility, although men tend to still be in charge of the top roles.

- **There are groups that privilege maintaining cultural traditions only**. They promote artistic forms of the country origin beyond the religious dimension. One example is the newly established Daarkom or ‘maison de culture maroco-flamande’, a Moroccan cultural centre sponsored by the Flemish authorities in the centre of Brussels and run by a woman of Moroccan descent. Daarkom is a grass-root organisation. However, countries like France and Spain have also created cultural and research centres devoted
to the promotion of the cultures and the study of socio-political issues of particular regions of the world that have a Muslim tradition, like the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris and the *Casa Arabe* and International Institute for Arab Studies and the Muslim World in Madrid and Cordoba.

- There are a number of feminist groups that involve people of Muslim background but that are mobilised primarily in secular terms, like the French network *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (neither whores nor submitted) and, to a certain extent, the Association of Moroccan women in Italy (ACMID).

- **Muslim advocacy networks**, campaigning in particular against ethnic, racial and religious-based discrimination, include the Brussels-based European Forum of Muslim Women (EFMW); the London-based *Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism* (FAIR), a service open to all genders and ages but which up to 2004 was run by two very dynamic young women; the Flemish *Vereniging voor Ontwikkeling en Emancipatie van Moslims* (VOEM, organization for the development and emancipation of Muslims). There are also non-denominational advocacy groups where women of Muslim background are involved. These include for instance the *National Assembly Against Racism* (NAAR, UK) and *SOS Racisme* (France).

- **Counselling services for women who experienced violence, discrimination or hardship** are numerous in Europe. Some are run by city councils, some by grassroots organisations. Although finances and adequate numbers of staff are often a problem for them, community groups operating at a micro level seem particularly successful because they are in direct touch with the local dimension and can easily earn the trust of the potential users. Among the organisations that are run specifically with and for women of a particular regional or ethnic background we can mention the Italian association of Moroccan women ACMID, the London-based *Newham Asian Women’s Project*, the *Southall Black Sisters*, and the umbrella group *Women Resource Centre*. But there are also specific services by and for Muslim women, like the *Muslim Women Helpline* in London, the German *Zentrum fur Islamische Frauenforschung* (Islamic Women’s Center for Research and Encouragement). There are also various local services run by NGOs or public authorities in many European cities and where Muslim women are actively involved as members or customers.

- Muslim women are involved in ethnic or language-based community services for women that provide space and occasion to socialise and share female interests and concerns, care for children needs, organise children play-groups, language classes, and mothers gatherings (e.g. *Hassania* Moroccan Women Centre).

- Healthcare and social services in many European countries, as well as community groups are increasingly attentive to the religious concerns of Muslim women in need of healthcare. Female Muslim professionals working as medical doctors or in the social services are involved either in launching specific initiatives or to act as first ports of call.

- **Very active entrepreneurial Muslim women** have founded or are involved in centres specifically dedicated to offering language courses, managerial, and professional training, as well as further education in Islam to women of various ages and nationalities (examples include *Alma Terra* in Turin, *An Nisa* in London, the *Fatima* network in Leicester, the *Zentrum fur Islamische Frauenforschung* and its sister organisations in Germany). Others devote their energies to providing additional and very original forms of Islamic education specifically for Muslim children, (like the Saturday School and the Montessori-Olive Arabic School of City Circle in London).
Muslim intellectuals and female-run groups focused on public relations are actively engaged in breaking stereotypes and promoting a positive image of Muslim women. They organise academic seminars and public discussion about the role of women in Islam and of Muslim women in western society. In this category we should include the Femmes Musulmanes de Belgique, the Associazione Donne Musulmane d’Italia, the EMWN, and many student-run Islamic societies in British, French, and German cities and universities. In France, sociologist Dounia Bouzar – former member of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman – and Saïda Kada – activist of the network Femmes françaises et musulmanes engagées – have been two important, though quite diverse, voices of female autonomy within the Muslim community (cf. Bouzar and Kada 2003).

Two obvious dimensions of the public sphere, politics and the media, have also demonstrated to be important platforms for Muslim women to assert themselves in Europe, as independent Muslim women, thinking on their own feet and able to challenge both western and Muslim traditions, stereotypes and expectations about women and Islam. Prominent women in Muslim media, which are mainly concentrated in the UK, include: Sara Joseph, a convert, first woman to become the editor of a British Muslim magazine, Trends, and founder and current editor of the Muslim lifestyle monthly Emel; the outspoken editor of the independent Muslim magazine Q News, Fareena Alam; and another British convert, controversial journalist Yvonne Ridley, who used to host a popular talk show on the conservative tv network ‘Islam TV Channel’. In France and in Germany, prominent female Muslim figures have emerged within the networks Hawwa and Huda. Female Muslim academics in the UK, like Mona Siddiqui or Maleiha Malik, are also increasingly invited to put forth their vibrant opinions and comments in the secular media, thus tearing down many stereotypes and assumptions about submission, veiling and the status of women in Islam.

The example of women of Muslim background who have reached high profile political positions outside the Islamic/community context, without rejecting their identity, is the proof that there are success stories among the Muslim population of Europe. This is important to show that integration is possible, and to encourage young Muslim women to have confidence in themselves and in society and to undertake ambitious careers too. Important role model figures in this sense are current Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Emine Bozkurt (a Socialist of Dutch-Turkish background), the present French minister for Justice Rachida Dati (of the centre-right party UMP, born to North African parents), and the former French MEP Alima Boumédienne-Thiéry (Greens, also of North African origins). Some veryassertive, though quite divergent, voices of female Muslim politicians in Britain, are: the Birmingham City Councillor Salma Yaqoob (Respect party); Baroness Pola Manzila Uddin (Labour); Baroness Kishwer Falkner (Liberal Democrats). In Italy, the first culturally Muslim Member of Parliament, the Italian-Moroccan woman Souad Sbai was elected with the Popolo della Libertà (the Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition) in the April 2008 elections.

The UK based European campaign group ProHijab is the example of an issue-specific organisation that is located in the middle between traditional conservatism and ultra-modernity. Although it vigorously reclaims emancipation and independent agency for Muslim women, it de facto promotes, in modern fashion, a sort of fundamentalist (a term employed here to mean ‘exclusionary’ and ‘prescriptive’) approach to Islam for women. Although leading activists of the group maintain that they are not dismissing the theological and exegetical nuances of the purpose and possibilities of veiling, that they are simply campaigning for the ‘right’ to wear the scarf, and that they are supported by non-veiled Muslim women, nevertheless the discourse and the materials produced in the ProHijab campaigns seem to implicitly suggest that wearing the hijab is in fact what is expected of a good Muslim. The group is extremely modern in its methods of communication and mobilisation and makes a clever use of the most effective avenues of democratic political participation at the civil society level.
• Muslim women who have pursued an intellectual critical reflection on their faith have begun to propose a 'feminine' rather than 'feminist' view of Islam. This consists in a re-appropriation and re-affirmation of their own identity and autonomy that passes through their personal experience, and internalisation, of faith. This discourse is primarily emerging in France and Belgium, at the intersection between the traditional feminist approach – which is rejected for its secular stance – and the aspiration to reform and renewal that is the imprint of Islamist movements.

• In all the countries observed, many Muslim girls volunteer in Muslim charities and students associations and are at the fore front of grass-root activism, to the point that they seem more engaged and more curious about current affairs than their male counterparts.

• Progressive female Muslim theologians and scholars stress the spiritual dimension of 'modesty' and 'chastity' rather than dress codes in Islam. These voices are very rare, but here are some powerful examples. The German converts Halima Krausen and Rabeya Mueller, two theologians who individually promote Muslim women's empowerment through a 'Protestant-style' reading and interpreting of the Holy Scriptures. The US-based scholar of Lebanese origin Aziza al Hibri has founded the international women network Karama (from Arabic: ‘dignity’). With her lectures around the world – including several in major European cities, over the past few years – she seeks to promote Muslim women's critical awareness of their own faith and engagement with the multiplicity of Islamic sources of authority and legal scholarship. Another Muslim intellectual, Indian-Canadian writer Irshad Manji, calls for a rational waking up of Muslims across the world (cf. Manji 2005). She has been widely acclaimed, especially by non-Muslims in western countries, as a courageous woman that has challenged patriarchal structures and traditions and in particular those who want to control and restrict knowledge of Islam. However, her message does not seem to filter through very easily in mainstream Muslim communities. It is not well accepted by the average Muslim woman, or man, who may resent Manji’s aggressive approach and personal lifestyle, and who would question her authority to make bold statements that challenge traditional beliefs and are considered offensive.

• Last but not least, there are also female intellectuals of Muslim background who have totally condemned and rejected their Muslim religion and culture and have engaged in a veritable crusade against Islam, Islamism, and cultural practices that refer to Islam. Chahdortt Djavann, with her book Bas les voiles (2003) attacked the veil as a tool of female submission on the agenda of the Islamists. But the most vitriolic attack against Islam by a woman of Muslim background so far has been that of Somali-Dutch Hirsi Ali. Her discourse is acclaimed by many in Europe and America but totally alienates mainstream Muslim audiences who feel under attack and accuse her of having betrayed her faith and community.
ISSUES EMERGED FROM THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

What matters to Europe’s Muslim women? The questions of this research were formulated in a broad way, sufficient to evince a lot of information about their personal biographies, relationship to their faith, as well as about their attitudes to and perceptions of controversial or debated issues, like citizenship and integration, although these two words were never explicitly mentioned in the research questions. From the interviews and questionnaires conducted we can deduct the following trends.

**Relationship to faith**

Most of the interviewees described the essence of their religion and the reason why they felt attracted to it in terms of ‘love’, ‘peace’ and ‘happiness’; they found in it rigour accompanied by ‘simplicity’. We are not reproducing here many quotations because the answers were almost identical. The respondents repeatedly expressed absolute ‘love’ for their faith and categorically rejected the possibility that there could be something negative or wrong about the religion of Islam:

‘When you practice your faith with your heart and love it is difficult to find something you do not like [...] I think you cannot limit religion to things you like and dislike. I think it’s something deeper than that’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 24).

‘I love in Islam the freedom of conscience. Even if one says “everything is written”, there is a sort of libero arbitrio and one has to go beyond what is written and obligatory. I love tolerance in Islam towards all human beings, both Muslim and non Muslim. Even if some think that Islam is intolerant it is good to remember that Islam is tolerant. It is the mission/vocation we all have to show that Islam is tolerant. I also like – and this is the practice – prayer, the fact that five time a day [...] I can meet with God’ (Belgian originally from Chad, 27).

Two other recurrent positive aspects of the religion that were highlighted were that it provides the foundation for ‘morality’ and sense of ‘unity’. It is a source of ‘help’ and ‘solidarity’ for the community.

However, many felt disturbed by lack of scholarship in the religious leaders and the misuse of religion for power games and political reasons, as it appears from the answers below, where the respondents were asked to mention three things they like and three things they dislike about their faith:
'I love [the fact that] the basic things it [Islam] preaches are simple and universal – peace, love, kindness, respect; there are scientific examples that illustrate the Quran’s truth; it’s written and recited in a beautiful language. I dislike... I do not dislike anything about the religion of Islam – even if there are things I dislike doing or not doing I accept that there is reasoning behind the rules. What I do dislike are the misinterpretations of the rules and verses [...] and the] many misconceptions. Many so-called imams and preachers sometimes confuse traditions, culture and religion and produce a very narrow and un-knowledgeable portrayal [of Islam]’ (British-Pakistani, 28).

'I like: that it [Islam] is perfect, and that it shows you how to follow life in every way. I like that there are not "ifs" and "buts" and that it is straightforward without loopholes. So you can either do it the right way or not follow it at all. I like that no matter what country you are in you can follow Islam. I dislike [that] preachers are often radical, especially in this country. They preach fear from western ideals – which is wrong – and culture associated with religion. I dislike: That people who preach or follow Islam, tend to not study it for themselves. Especially in this country where people have the ability to study their religion, many still fail to educate themselves and rather listen to others who are mistaken’ (British-Asian student, 20).

'[I love:] respect, the philosophy of acceptance, the refusal to commit illegitimate actions only to obtain a material benefit, and social justice. [I hate:] extremism, macho culture, arrogance’ (Moroccan-Italian cultural mediator, 39, Italy).

'I tell you one thing: the religion I like it very much; in the whole Muslim religion there is no negative aspect [...] But some people in power use it for their own needs and this is another matter, understood? Because it is not written anywhere...’ (Moroccan student, 21, Italy).

Only a Moroccan-Belgian woman in her 40s expressed dislike of polygamy, whilst speaking of the pros and cons of her faith: ‘God forgive me [...] It’s something I cannot accept. It is in the Quran but I can’t accept it’, she said. Other respondents, despite being very positive about any aspect of their faith, were nevertheless ready to condemn the mentality of their ‘communities of practice’. A 23-year old British-Pakistani student for instance criticised the tendency of the religious community ‘to hold onto outdated traditions such as marrying within family’ and a British-Pakistani middle-aged widow said she was against ‘forced marriages and young marriages’. Another British-Pakistani girl aged 25 disliked the ‘status of women’ in her religio-ethnic community, which she also described as ‘ignorant’ and ‘static’.
Learning and adhering to the faith

In terms of religious education and daily and personal religious practices, all women had a very personalised trajectory, where family members – especially mothers, but also fathers and grandparents – had played an important role in laying down the foundations of their faith. One respondent even mentioned her husband as an important figure who revived her faith. Occasionally, religious teachers and institutions like mosques were mentioned beside parents in answer to the question: ‘Where did you learn your faith? Has any particular person played a special role in teaching the faith and passing traditions on to you?’:

‘I was born a Muslim and we had sporadic periods of teaching by an imam who came to teach us and read the Quran; my mum would lecture us and sometimes we would go to a weekly community gathering where different topics were covered. I now read the Quran myself and go to conferences (e.g. Global Peace Conference) and watch the Islam Channel’ (British-Pakistani, 28).

‘Since my birth, as my parents are Muslim […] I think my mother has played a central role since she taught me to pray. After all, parents are there to teach you certain principles’ (Belgian from Chad, 27).

‘Family, teachers, and al Khitab [the Book of the Quran]. [An important figure has been] a teacher who studied in Saudi, lived in Australia, runs here now and then’ (British-Bangladeshi student in her late teens-early 20s).

‘The faith, I learnt it when I was very little, when I saw my grand-father pray. For me, he was handsome, he was generous, he was strong. He was very spiritual, he was very clean. I saw this in my mother too. She gave us a good education. Faith, that is. I learnt it in my family but also when I was in the meetings of the Islamic centre. I attend their conferences and courses. We have prayers in common. We meet young women’ (Belgian, Moroccan origin, 49).

‘My husband too has played a role in my faith. When you get married, you have a life project and religion takes an important place’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 24).

The Moroccan and Egyptian respondents based in Italy, regardless of their particular socio-economic conditions or family composition, tended to mention ‘society’ as a general shaper of attachment to faith and religiosity. At the same time, they all proudly stated to believe ‘freely’, ‘out of personal conviction’, implying that there was no external imposition or family pressure. It is interesting to note that they felt the need to stress their personal autonomy in relation to their faith. The reason for making such an assertion could be attributed to a deliberate attempt of the respondents to counter the image – widespread in Europe – of Muslim women as ‘submitted’. Alternatively, another less optimistic explanation could be related to actual experiences of such pressure possibly experienced by some of the respondents in the past.

Beside older family members, ‘friends’ of the same age were considered as influential figures, especially by the girls of different ethnic backgrounds that were approached in Britain. Still in reply to the question about the path through which the respondents had learnt their faith, significant answers such as the following ones emerged:

‘At home, amongst family. My best friend, she encourages me & teaches me’ (British Bengali, 23).
"Mainly at home but also from college and university friend etc, and mosque (as child). Father, friends (and teachers at mosque when younger)" (student, 18, British-Indian).

"At home, college and university, [through] my friends, my parents and my family" (student, British-Somali, late teens-early 20s).

"[At] university, home, [through] relatives, talks [at university Islamic societies] and local mosques. Parents and friends [played a special role]" (British Pakistani, 18).

"In the family, … at school, we had Islamic education. I also attended the religion class because we had a teacher that spoke about all religions" (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).

"Through my parents, followed by the mosque. In my association. In my family [and] at the association and with some friends. Some at the ‘assisse’ [study circle], nobody in particular [influenced me]” (Belgian, Moroccan origin, 20).

Unfortunately the sample did not include many interviews with Muslim women in France. However, informal observation conducted by the author of this report as well as the work of French sociologists point to similar dynamics of socialisation into Islam through networks of friendship among young French Muslims too. This is because, in addition to the impact of their upbringing, for the younger Muslim generations of Europe, crucial moments of self-discovery and of inquiry into their faith are connected with mixing with a diverse environment in a non Muslim country such as making friends, joining students’ societies, and participation in faith-based associations.

"In this country, through my own experiences. [No-one played a special role] I asked about my own faith (Islam) and researched it to find out more about it’ (British-Turkish Cypriot, 23)

The answer above, and in general many of the quotations in this chapter, shows how the awareness of being part of a religious (and most of the time also) ethnic minority and the difficulties and the very experience of diaspora can be very important triggers of rapprochement to or reconsideration of religion under a different light. The surrounding non-Muslim European environment proves to be a challenge for some and a resource for others. Europe can be the space where Muslim women can freely choose whether and how to practice their faith. At the same time, faith can become an element that facilitates friendship and the creation of safe spaces where sense of belonging to a transnational minority community (the global ummah) and adherence to religious practices and tradition are continued and explored under new conditions and new geographies:

"Yes [I adhere to Islam]. I think it is crucial for me to be a Muslim and to live this faith here in Belgium and to live it the best possible way’ (Moroccan living in Belgium, 37).

"I follow my faith because I actually believe in being a Muslim and try to do as much as I can, I try to do my regular prayers and keep within my Islamic boundaries’ (British-Pakistani, 23).

1) In Italy the Catholic faith is taught by default in schools so it appears that this teacher made an exception by talking about all faiths in her/his lessons.
'I follow my faith to the best I can within a western society. I keep my faith pretty private so I mainly practice at home’ (British-Kenyan-Pakistani, 26).

'We who live in Europe, we have many difficulties compared to those who live in the countries of origin, which are Islamic’ (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).

Different – even drastically opposed – approaches to religion gradually become visible between different generations, also within the same ethnic group. In particular, many of the young Muslim women that were reached for this project declared to have begun a process of ‘self-teaching’ Islam. This appears to accompany and gradually overtake traditional paths of religious instruction where the elders of the family or the religious authorities prevail. Consequently, a reverse process starts whereby these born-again young Muslims begin to re-instruct their Muslim parents in the faith, enter in a dialogue about the meaning of religion with them, or push them into adhering to old practices in a more conscious, more critical, and more autonomous way, as these examples show:

‘I was born into a Muslim family. So my parents socialised me as such. But my son has become more religious and encouraged me to learn more and practice correct religious traditions rather than blindly following tradition’ (Pakistani, 57, UK).

‘[I learnt the faith] alone, and with many booklets. There has been a time when I was soul-searching. My parents’ answers to my questions – simple persons from the working class but great people – were not enough. So I bought many books and this has inspired me [...] Myself I would remind my mother about some elements of our religion. She would give me her explanations, I can say that my person of reference is my mother’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 42).

‘[My faith has been] an integral part of my life. My mother [taught me], then as I got older and became more inquisitive I used resources such as the Quran/ hadiths and other publications’ (British-Pakistani, 25).

‘[I learnt Islam at home, through] mother, self taught’ (British Pakistani, 29).

‘[I learnt my faith from] my parents, classes, by reading books, school’ (student, British-Asian, 20).

From several of the cases that we encountered in this study as well as through similar observations previously conducted by other researchers, it emerges that young Muslims (boys and girls) in Europe increasingly look for further knowledge in Islam beyond the family and mosque circle. They are in search for specific answers to their lives as ‘young European Muslims’, aware of embodying these three dimensions: to be young, to be Muslim, and to be citizens (or residents) of European countries. Whereas this phenomenon of re-Islamisation of the young Muslim generations of Europe had been observed in general terms before, no sufficient attention has been paid to the active process of self-education in Islam that is spreading among Muslim women.
‘Islam is an integral part of my life’. This concise but powerful statement of a 25-year old British-Pakistani woman was very much mirrored by other assertive answers emerged from the empirical dataset collected across the three countries, despite the different personal life experiences and ethnic backgrounds of the respondents. The following statements convey this conviction in an especially striking way:

‘For me it [Islam] is important because I believe in it, it is part of my daily life...You no longer ask yourself this question, as it’s so much part of your life’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 24).

‘[I follow Islamic practices] because it [Islam]’s part of my daily life. I cannot put it aside because it means a lot to me and my surroundings, and it is something I would like to transmit to my children’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 42).

‘[Islam is a] way of life for me, intertwined with my cultural background’ (British-Pakistani, 32).

‘[I practice] out of personal belief, I pray and observe fasting during the month of Ramadan. I am very religious and think that religion is the most important thing of my life’ (Egyptian with headscarf, Italy, 33).

‘I follow my faith as I believe that it is the correct and most fulfilling way of life for me. I feel that it has a positive effect on my life and sometimes gives me answers to certain problems I may face’ (British-Pakistani, 25).

‘I believe Islam is a good way to live life, it gives my life a purpose and meaning’ (British Bengali, 23).

Not only is faith consistently described as an important and all-encompassing aspect of a person’s life, the ‘right way’ and a ‘purpose for life’, but also it is clear that religious practices have the purpose to visibly externalise both spirituality and identity on a daily basis. This is perceived to be all the more important in the European context where Islam is a minority religion. It is interesting to note, both in the quotations reproduced below and in the previous paragraphs, how the notions of ‘boundary’ and ‘socialisation’ are used, in a positive sense, to describe the need to define a community of emotions and affection and to mark the moral space of Islam in a person’s life. From many answers to the questions ‘where did you learn your faith?’ and ‘why and to what extent do you adhere to your faith?’, a vivid desire emerged of coming closer to Islam, both intellectually (as shown in the above section on self-teaching and the search for religious knowledge) and through physical experiences connected to the practices of praying, fasting, and veiling. Across the whole set of respondents, a determination often appeared to adhere to the faith through pursuing education and by making visible efforts and sacrifices driven by personal conviction:

‘I follow my faith well, and I do so because I know faith is very important in life, it teaches you the values of life. It disciplines us, therefore I will follow it throughout my life and pass on my faith to my children. At present, [I don’t wear the hijab], when I am older, I most likely will’ (student, 20, British-Pakistani).

‘I pray and fast during Ramadan. I do this freely because I believe in my religion’ (Moroccan-Italian housewife with hijab, 38).

‘Religion is very important for me, I am practising out of personal belief/choice’ (Egyptian, married unemployed with hijab, 25, Italy).
'Being a Muslim is not past-time, it’s who you are from within. I study politics because I care about current affairs and how Muslims are portrayed as terrorists. I follow my religion strongly, I pray, I don’t drink, [don’t] have sex or drugs, however I don’t wear the hijab just yet – but I intend to in the future. I cover myself, don’t wear revealing clothes’ (British-Indian, 18).

'Yes, [I follow] everything, everything, and then I fast also on Mondays and Thursdays. Not always, but in those days for us the doors of heaven are open and sins are forgiven. The Prophet used to do it and we are Sunni and we do it. In the summer I did not manage, I tried three-four times but in the end I could not manage with the heat and the sunset came at 8.30pm’ (Moroccan student with hijab, 21, Italy).

'[the way I practice] is the same as I was before I wore the hijab’ (British-Bangladeshi student).

Veiling and religiosity

As shown by the above answers, the broad question about the extent to which people practice their faith allowed the respondents to expand upon the meaning and motivation of their sense of religiosity and adherence to the faith of Islam. Many were also able to amply reflect upon veiling – provided that they considered it to be a central feature of ‘religious practice’. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that not all of the women who did wear a hijab actually mentioned their adherence to the Islamic dress-code in their answers to the issue of practising. This may be interpreted as a simple omission but in fact could also indicate that these women – in the way they perceive their religion – clearly distinguish the ‘optional’ practice of veiling from the ‘core’ aspects of Islam that are embodied by the five pillars. It is also interesting to note that those who do not wear the hijab stressed that they were nevertheless trying to adhere to the Islamic principle of ‘modesty’.

This research did also include a separate simple question asking whether people wore or not the hijab. However, it was deliberately formulated in those terms and underplayed in the structure of the research. It was listed among the final questions and women were not asked to explain the meaning of the scarf or the reasons why they chose to wear it or not. This was done for three reasons: in order not to fossilise the conversation on an issue that has polarised people and provoked animosities throughout the world; to allow the respondents to feel more relaxed in sharing their experiences with the researchers; and to allow the issue of the hijab to come up spontaneously in their personal narratives whenever the respondents thought it was relevant.

Religiosity – the sentiment and the intensity of a person’s adherence to the faith – appeared translated into quite different spiritual and bodily experiences if we compare the respondent’s views about adhering to and practising Islam. For some (see the quotes in the section immediately above and below), following strict, conservative norms was seen as the key, ultimate expression of one’s faith, independence and freedom:

'=[I] try [to] follow it as best as I can, [by being] conservative! [I wear] full Islamic dress […] Really, ever since I started practising my religion, [at] 17 years of age, and wearing the hijab, never felt more liberated’ (British-Somali, 19).

'I have read the Quran a number of times and fear God. I try to incorporate all compulsory rules into every day life. I am a fully practicing Muslim and aspire to be as conservative as possible’ (Pakistani, 57, UK).
'I try to follow my faith as closely as possible, and try to pray as much as possible on time. I wear a hijab, and am able to read Quranic Arabic' (British Pakistani, 29).

'I try to pray five times a day, I read the Quran, and try to follow the five pillars to the best of my ability, including fasting’ (British-Asian student, 20).

For others, such as the voices reproduced below, religiosity was perceived essentially as an internalised experience, relatively disconnected from – or at least flexible in relation to – visible practices like veiling:

'I don’t pray and don’t wear the veil but observe Ramadan. The five pillars of Islam are of fundamental importance’ (Moroccan, Italy, 23).

'[I follow my faith] out of personal conviction, I pray, and fast during Ramadan. […] Sometimes I wear the veil in the mosque or when I go back to Morocco’ (Moroccan-Italian, 39).

'I do not wear a hijab however I do pray and try to do most good things that make me a modest person’ (British Bengali, 23).

'I do not wear a headscarf and sometimes lapse on my daily prayers but I augmented [possible rephrasing: ‘have given priority to’] the main principles as part of my life’ (British-Pakistani, 25).

'There is a preacher that I like a lot, his name is Kharadawi, he is Egyptian and is trying to facilitate this [the experience of Muslims in Europe] as it is better to have people who do half of the things [i.e. following Islamic precepts] than to have people who do not do anything. So he tried to facilitate for people those things that are difficult. For instance, he says that if a woman that is wearing the veil cannot find work at all, and could risk dying of hunger and has children, she can take it off to go to work. For other people this is a sin, but it can’t be this, he [Kharadawi] speaks from a logical point of view. Religion is made to be interpreted according to the needs of people, you cannot think something and apply it blindly. I hate [the fact] that someone may apply a religion blindly, it is not right; also, I hate prejudices of the kind “I am practicing, you are not, so I am better than you”, I hate this’ (Moroccan student, 24, Italy.)

It is also striking to note the flexible position of Muslim girls who stated that, although at present they have decided not to wear the veil, they do not exclude this possibility for the future, once they are married and older. Some even expressed a ‘wish’ to put on a hijab, soon or later. This was evident in two of the quotations reproduced above as well as in this passage:

'No, [I do not wear the scarf] I would like to but till I get married…[...] And then, to have a boyfriend, to do certain things, to kiss […], I think it is not right, it’s disrespectful towards the religion. […] There are certain things that are more serious if you do not do them, like prayer. […] For us God is the only one who has the faculty to judge human beings. A person must first judge him/herself before being able to judge me or not. So I believe [the choice to put the veil] is something very personal’ (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).

It remains unclear whether this hypothesising about veiling in the future is a sign of a genuine ultimate assertion of personal freedom or entails a hidden awareness that soon or later even rebellious spirits have to give in to societal norms and expectations. In general, it is evident that there is a range of ways in which Muslim
women relate to their faith and decide to prioritise certain rather than other practices. The differences seem to be related to the different cultures and countries of reference – from the Arab to the Asian world – as well as to individual reactions to the experience and awareness of being a minority in non-Muslim region of the world.

To the question ‘Have you had any problems at work or in the environment where you live?’ most women replied with positive experiences, but the voices of the Belgian women seemed more critical and mentioned suspicion and discrimination in relation to the Muslim scarf:

‘I used to work as a nurse in a university hospital. At that point I did not use to wear the veil and then when I wanted to wear it, it bothered me to take it off before the door. I did not feel well at the level of my faith. When I became pregnant, I spoke with my husband and I decided to stop working temporarily. Since I stopped working, I have felt better with my faith because I can go out freely with my veil and be myself. [...] Despite I was known in my profession, the day I put my veil it has generated many problems. [...] With my veil I had become for the others a submitted woman, which is not the case. [...] My big wish is that girls with the scarf are accepted at work, that we stop putting them aside. This is my big dream’ (Moroccan living in Belgium, 37).

‘Yes, [I encountered problems] especially at school. When I wanted to register the eldest [child] they did not want to because I had the scarf. It was a good school. And my son had good marks’ (Belgian of Moroccan descent, 49).

‘Young women are attracted [to our association] because we are an answer to their needs. Young women in Belgium are really strong but the way they are talked about in the media is really bad and often they are very sad because women talked about as stupid, without freedom, [as if they were] only sitting at home in the kitchen. Really, we need to correct this image in the media and show who they really are. These days it’s difficult, they [the Muslim women] don’t get the same chance [as everybody else]. It is felt [by society] that they do not have potential at all. They need to get the same rights as everybody everyone else. On paper, Belgian law speaks of equal chances but the reality is different; Muslim women more and more are studying and working twice [as hard] as autochthonous women, in order to be accepted. This is also difficult for Muslim men but for Muslims women it’s sometimes harder because of them wearing the veil. There are so few places where you can wear the veil [though] it’s a practice, not a law. Employers are choosing not to allow to work women with the veil. They are the oppressors. The biggest need for Muslim women is to have the same opportunities and free choice. [So the] message behind is "I do not have freedom of choice". Most women look for another job rather than taking off the veil [and renouncing to the right of religious freedom]. Some do take off their veil but it really hurts. There is a feeling [among Muslim women] that they are accepting the situation, that they do no have any choice [...] The discussion about the veil cuts across all ages but people are diverse. Most older women don’t see Belgium as their home country because they were not born here and raised here. The younger women come up for their rights more easily, those who were born and educated here, who work and pay their taxes. The older ones do not feel to belong to the country. The young see the three dimensions of the veil: they see it as part of their identity, as well as of culture and religion, whereas the older ones just see the cultural and religious aspect’ (active member, Flemish Muslim women association).

Organisations like the latter are involved in campaigns for the rights of women and in particular for the respect of the hijab in terms of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. They specify the political aspect of their gesture, thus confirming the findings of various researchers (see part 3.3. above) that the veil does not simply signify submission to family and to religious duty but also implies political agency. A similar line was expressed by a female member of the European Muslim Network:
"We [Muslim women] can live in Europe with our faith, our dreams, our challenges. It is important to give these [Muslim women] their dreams [...] education [...] [because] if the woman has not expanded herself [her knowledge, soul, skills] she cannot give [herself fully and a proper education] to her children. She needs a recognition, her motherly one [role] is no longer sufficient. Our women who are in Europe have their own mentality. [So] it is important to help Muslim women but while leaving them alone in peace. [...] We have the same dreams, the same targets [as other women] in terms of job opportunities, being happy in marriage, have children [...] [It is important to create/educate] a generation of women who feel, who perceive themselves as fully Muslim and European and that the construction of their identity is both European and Muslim'.

Living in Europe: rights and freedoms

Beside the negative experiences described in the above section by some Muslim women based in Belgium, most of the respondents from Britain and Italy and other women living in Belgium declared to have been treated equally and with respect in Europe. Some even contrasted the freedoms and the rights enjoyed in European democracies with the restrictions suffered in their countries of origin. In general, all acknowledged to have benefited from educational and professional opportunities in Europe. Cases of discrimination also emerged but were put down more to ignorance than to intentional Islamophobia. Overall, the respondents were satisfied to live in this part of the world because of the equality between genders, democracy, respect of diversity, and the freedom of movement and of expression. They were also quite objective in evaluating the limits of the effective application of these principles in Europe and in considering their own experiences in relation to those of other (non-Muslim) women in general. For instance, when asked the questions 'What is your experience of being a woman in this country?' and 'Tell me three things that you like and three that you dislike about your country' these answers came out:

'[Of this country I like the] good quality of life; equal opportunities; mixture of cultures. I hate: double standards in foreign policy; anti-Islamic media; [the assumption that] women’s liberty depends on how a woman dresses...as it is assumed a woman who wears a headscarf is oppressed, which I believe not to be true’ (British-Pakistani, 23).

'When I arrived here, I was very little and it went well. I have some good memories of the 1970s. [It is good] that we try to push for laws favourable to women, for more equality, something that unfortunately I cannot find for us Muslim women’ (Moroccan living in Belgium, 37).

'Generally the country itself has produced good opportunities for me. There are universal problems of being a woman such as the image/ conscience [in] society and you are vulnerable in certain situations’ (British-Pakistani, 28).

'I find that a woman is never equal in any field concerning the world of work. I have encountered sexism by both white and Asian men’ (British-Pakistani, 25).

2) NB: although she appeared to defend the right to wear the veil, this woman did not wear it herself.
The last two answers show awareness of the inequalities faced by women globally, beyond the specific lens of religion. This gender dimension has often been disregarded and was only recently highlighted as an important angle from which the situation of Muslim women in the West should be analysed (cf. Malik 2008).

In general, most respondents felt the need to emphasise their independence and to counter stereotypes about the submission of women in Islam. This was evident in the section above, where a girl – incidentally without a hijab herself – expressed her uneasiness with the general assumption that a woman’s liberty depends on how she dresses. The statement of a 19-year old British-Somali wearing the jilbab was a powerful attack on the objectification of women in consumerist western society:

’They say we are oppressed but “praise be to God” in not standing naked in front of a bill board for the world to view, just to be recognised and heard!’

Along these lines, a British-Pakistani girl aged 18 also said: ‘Women have freedom to do anything they like but sometimes this needs restrictions’. Later on, she stated that ’Being a Muslim is fine and it’s easy to carry out my religion’. However, this assertion sounded quite in contradiction with the experience of a slightly older woman, also of Pakistani background and also living in Britain, who experienced discrimination both on the basis of race and of religion:

’Being an Asian woman I have found over the years that within a working environment you have to work twice as hard to prove yourself. Also when mentioned that you are a Muslim, a quick judgement is made (of a negative nature). I find it sad that I have to explain myself in simple things of my faith at work, such as fasting, to the same people again and again. But I don’t mind as it confirms by beliefs more. But it does make me think what women who wear the hijab would have to face’ (British-Kenyan-Pakistani, 26).

The difference in views between the two women might be attributed to the fact that the younger girl had probably always lived within the protected space of the ethnic-religious community, thus developing a rather naive view about her ability to express her religious identity without problems. We have to remember, in fact, that in certain areas of Britain the concentration of Muslim-Asian minorities is so high that people can remain ‘within the community’ also when they move outside the family, because also at school, in the shops, and at university it is easily possible to be surrounded only or primarily by people of the same minority group. On the contrary, the other girl, aged 26, had probably been more often and for longer in touch with a mixed non-Muslim environment thanks to a job that catapulted her into a space outside the boundaries of the ethno-religious community of origin.

In France and in francophone Belgium, where society is less likely to be organised along the multicultural idea of communities and where interaction between ethnic, religious and linguistic groups happens on a daily basis, Muslim women have been very active in re-claiming their space and their freedom, both in relation to the communities and to the secular society. The Forum of European Muslim Women is one of the numerous organisations run by European Muslim women who want to fight stigma and promote their participation in European society and politics, as one of the members explained:

’[One of our projects was]: “the role of women in the promotion of a culture of dialogue and peace”. It is necessary that she [the Muslim woman] is able to study, work, without being judged. […] We want to tell Europe: “let us work”, we do not want just to show that we are around. The woman is often a victim both from the inside and
the outside. [...] We need to educate adult Muslims. [...] there is a little bit of resistance on the part of men but now it is better than some years ago. [...] We take our inspiration from Khadija. [...] If you are really a Muslim you must follow tradition. [...] [We also want to show that] we [Muslim women] can live in Europe with our faith, our dreams, our challenges. [...] Our plan is to take Muslim women to visit the European Parliament in Strasbourg (because we are Muslim but now [also European] citizens [and this is] not only a conviction but a reality) and to contact their MEPs. Awareness of Europe [is important]. I want Muslim women to know and see what is happening. [...] There are other Muslim women working [on similar issues], we can collaborate but we can disagree. [...] [The reason why we] want to work at the European level is because we have [common European] problems; we want to unite the work of all associations because we want to share experiences’.

Other answers show how different personal narratives, types of qualifications, age, and the status of ‘married’ or ‘single’ can shape opposite perceptions of the same situation, even among people coming from the same country of origin or who have moved to the same city. For instance, a 39-year old Moroccan-Italian living in Turin found that ‘as a divorcée it is easier to live in Italy’, whereas a Moroccan-Italian housewife with children, settled in the same town and of a similar age (38), said that she found living in Italy ‘more difficult’ than living in Morocco. Another 23-year old Moroccan woman based in Italy, who is single, works as a night carer, and is active in immigrants associations said:

’[In Italy] it’s easier because there is more respect [...] I am satisfied with my situation but as far as immigrants are concerned I think the absolute priority is to teach them Italian’.

The diversity of opinions is also illustrated here:

‘This country has provided me with an easier life’ (Pakistani, 57, UK).

‘More difficult, also to find a job’ (Egyptian, 33, Italy).3

‘It depends on your parents. In my opinion I have been lucky to have parents with whom I have no problems. In Italian society I find myself very well, there are no problems’ (Moroccan student, 21, Italy).

’[I have experienced] freedom, but culture and religion and tradition restrict me – but not in a bad sense’ (British-Indian, 18).

’I’m free! Not oppressed. I can do what I want’ (British-Indian, full veil wearing student, 18).

As these quotes show, especially those women who had actually lived, before, in a Muslim country (e.g. Morocco or Pakistan) seemed to appreciate European society for the fact that it is democratic and protects and promotes values like respect of the individual and gender equality. In general, all the respondents also valued the European welfare system, with its free health service, free schooling, and income support schemes.

Despite having occasionally experienced situations of misunderstanding, overt racism, stereotyping, or discrimination, the respondents (especially those based in the UK) expressed appreciation of Europe’s freedoms and sense of safety, openness to cultural diversity, and the possibility to interact with people from different backgrounds:

3) She is married, with children, has a degree from Egypt but cannot find a job appropriate to her qualification.
[QUESTIONS: 1) Tell me 3 thinks that you like and 3 things that you dislike about the country where you live, 2) What has this country given to you and what have you given to it?]

‘Love: [Britain is a] democratic country, [with] law and order, freedom of speech. Dislike: drinking culture amongst young people, no respect for elderly in this country, tension towards immigrants’ (British-Pakistani, 32).

‘Love: freedom to travel and move around alone; access to education; quality of facilities. Hate: despite its rich multi-cultural composition there is still so much ignorance (not just racism but stereotypes and misconceptions about other cultures); the weather; expensive country and low wages within the public sector’ (British-Pakistani, 28).

A similar mixed picture came from these answers, which highlight positive characteristics like extensive freedoms and educational and job opportunities alongside negative things like lack of attention to family values and solidarity, and persistence of discrimination and racism due to ‘ignorance’:

‘I like here: job, if you look for work you can work. Schooling, we are taught here, not like in other countries. You can succeed if you have the possibility. What I dislike […] is being unable to keep the scarf at work and at school. What I also dislike is the weather’ (Belgian of Moroccan descent, 20).

‘Things I like about this country are that there are plenty of opportunities for work, better studies and a mix of cultures working and living together. Things I dislike are the ignorance in a few people towards other culture, discrimination against minorities in a work environment, and the weather’ (British-Kenyan-Pakistani, 26).


‘[I like] that I can practice my religion freely, although lately with terrorism there is growing Islamophobia’ (British-Indian, 18).

‘I do not like the constitution, the Belgian political system because it is hypocritical, especially with regard to the sans-papiers (irregular immigrants) and, soon, retired people. The weather I cannot say I dislike it because it is God who gives it. […] In Belgium I do not like youth violence. […] What is missing is solidarity. […] What I love in this country is schooling. Everybody has the right to education’ (Belgian-Moroccan, 42).

This answer only looked at the downsides of living in Europe and again complained about ‘ignorance’:

‘Dislike 1: That there is still a lot of ignorance within the country in terms of understanding cultures, religions etc.; Dislike 2: That everything and everyone has to fit a label. Asian British, Pakistani British etc.; Dislike 3: That people are afraid to speak, and ask questions in fear of political correctness etc.’ (student, 20, British-Asian).

It is interesting that in their analysis these women pointed to the issue of ‘ignorance’, rather than hate or intentional discrimination, as a cause for racist attitudes. This shows that they are not homogenising European society and have developed strong resilience to situations of discrimination. This resilience is particularly visible in these words:
'As I am still young I may not know about much, however being in university has opened my eyes, I don't dwell on people perceptions of Muslims, instead I look forward, and aim to prove people wrong by becoming successful in life, and I shall do this by utilising the opportunities Britain gives' (British-Pakistani student, 20).

These voices expressed predominantly positive experience in Europe:

'I like: one side of the freedom of expression, Brussels, my borough, and especially the diversity in certain quarters' (Belgian of Turkish origin, 25).

'Peace of mind: there is high crime in Pakistan. In general I find the people of this country kind and civilised' (Pakistani, 57, UK).

'The positive thing this country has given me is that it allows me to express myself, that I can exert my rights. What I have contributed is [providing] help, social work, support for people' (Belgo-Moroccan, 42).

Appreciation of the European culture of 'respect' and independence was a key feature in most of the answers. This was also the opinion of the following two women, who nevertheless still admitted to experiencing some sort of veiled discrimination:

'[I like:] respect, democracy, independence. I don't like certain looks I receive now and then, and am annoyed by too much freedom (e.g. public effusions, kissing, etc.)' (Moroccan, 23, Italy).

'I like public services, the greater respect of men towards women, and the beauty of the country. I do not like laws that keep changing, the narrow-mindedness of some people, and the weather of Northern Italy' (Moroccan-Italian, cultural mediator, 39, Italy).

Some women underlined the discrepancy between the way they felt (as 'normal women' in a country that they feel as 'their own') and the way they are treated by non-Muslim individuals. These are not situations of 'discrimination' proper but of 'distance' and, again, 'ignorance':

'I am a woman like everybody else, I do not see any difference. An example, a few years ago, I was at the cinema with my children and a Belgian lady told me it was the first time she saw a woman with the scarf at the cinema. I understood what she was saying but did not see the sense. For me I was a woman like others. And I see that now, things have well changed. Mothers are present in many activities' (Belgo-Moroccan, 42).

'I have never lived anywhere else, this is where I was born. My experience is, I'm sure, similar to the experience of other British women. My experience as a Muslim woman has been that of facing a lot of ignorance about my levels of literacy, and also having to unpick the preconceived ideas that people have that I will be a meek feeble individual who lacks confidence and is inarticulate' (British-Pakistani, 29).

For Muslim women born and bred in European countries their 'home' is there and no-where else. Europe is the place where many of their dreams have become true. Hence it should not be surprising that their appreciation of the opportunities received in the European countries of residence is accompanied by a proud expression of identity, belonging, and gratitude:
'This country has given me my education, my language, the way I think' (Belgo-Moroccan, 24).

'This country has given me the chance to live in a democratic country, not in a dictatorship. The possibility to be with a family, not to be alone. The chance to organise parties and to go to school' (Belgian of Moroccan descent, 20).

'Good, I am very lucky [to be in this country], I can live my life how I want to and feel very proud to be a British Bengali Muslim' (British Bengali, 23).

'I have given my love [...] In my religion the love of the patrie is part of the faith. When Muslims can live in peace they can love much. To be a good Muslim is to be a good citizen, you cannot lie, steal, betray. [...] The more I work for my country, the more I can work for my faith. [...] I do all this as a volunteer, not expecting a salary. I just want to contribute because my faith pushes me to. [...] In France I have security, we can practice [our faith] we are not in a dictatorial country, we live in good conditions. [This country] has given me the capacity to speak about myself, even with the problem of the law [such as prohibiting religious symbols]. We need a lot of time and confidence [...] that sometime peace will come. [...] Europe has given me the possibility to dream, to move (e.g. with Schengen). [...] I love France, it is there where I voted for the first time. I did my duty [to vote] in France, not in Tunisia, I felt that I was in a democratic country. [...] I came to France to study. [...] I love France because it has welcomed me with open arms, it is the country of [the origin of] human rights' (French activist, Tunisian origin, late 20s- early 30s).

'The most beautiful thing this country has given me is that it allowed me to study [...] it has given me a future for which I have decided to quit my country' (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).

'The first thing [I like] is the Italian school [system]. [...] I liked this a lot because I received a lot of help. In fact I often say that, especially my Italian teachers they have done everything they could [for me]. [...] I am sad that there is no collaboration on the part of the pupils... they don't realise, I am very very sorry, they don't realise that now it's too late. [...] However in most places where I have been [in Italy] I have felt myself at ease, maybe because of my character. [It is a pity that] people who have the power do not do anything for this country and they could do many things. There is a lot [of difference] if you compare Italy with France, and Spain. [...] For instance one day, when I went for the citizenship application, at 11.30 (the office was closing at 12) there was a bloke who did not want to let me in. He thought I could not speak Italian and saw I had the veil [...] I told him: this is my country. [...] I grew up here and so I am Italian; even if I go [back] to my country [of origin], I am more able to integrate here than there'. [...] In general I like] Italy as a people, but as a [political] system, I am sorry, zero, really zero’ (Moroccan student, 21, Italy).

These women have internalised their experience of being ‘in’ and ‘of’ Europe in a very profound way: they feel that the European countries where they have settled are in their hearts, their thoughts, and in the way they behave. As various answers in the above section show, these women are not passively living in Europe. They feel protected and empowered and, as the quotations below show, are doing their best to integrate and to be seen as integrated. They value democracy and the rule of law, are interested in – and occasionally complain about – political issues. These women are actively countering, with their own lifestyle, European stereotypes about immigrants and Islam in Europe. Simultaneously, they condemn those members of the same minority community who, by not integrating and not respecting the law, jeopardise the reputation and the possibilities to succeed of the whole group. Between the lines one understands that these women aspire to participate
fully in European society. It is therefore pertinent here to read the respondents’ answers to the question ‘what have you given to this country?’. This question, which is an implicit way to inquire about their level of participation and integration in Europe, was asked in conjunction with the question ‘what has this country given to you?’, whose answers were partly reproduced above.

‘So far I have given nothing, I am sorry, because I am still studying, however I give a good impression, speak Italian well. [...] I’d like to give more because this country deserves much, the only thing is the system does not function, let’s hope it starts to work as soon as possible because it cannot continue like this [...]. The country has given to my parents – who have been here for a while – and to myself, of course, a place where you find yourself at ease, live well, what else more?’ (Moroccan student, 21, Italy).

‘[I have given] my labour, my tax. [I have received] the opportunity to better myself’ (British-Pakistani, 25).

‘I have worked in the civil service all throughout my career, because I am not cash driven and would prefer to work somewhere where I can help people, albeit indirectly. I have never lived anywhere else, this is where I was born. The UK has given me what it gives anyone else who is British’ (British-Pakistani, 29).

‘What good thing I have given...I hope [to be able] to give, but I have not given anything [so far]. I give my blood when it is a matter of helping people. The association I Ponti [The Bridges] allows us to give another image of ourselves, but it is a big word to give something to a country, and I don’t think that till now I have done [something]; I intend to’ (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).

‘Through my work I have contributed to improving the life of many immigrants, especially women; being in Italy has given me the possibility to make my situation of divorcee and opportunity and not a limitation’ (Moroccan-Italian, 39, Italy).

‘This country has given me the freedom to express myself, to study; there are rights that women have here. What I have contributed, yes, it is bringing up five children’ (Belgian of Moroccan origin, housewife, 49).

A sense of being part of society and a desire to serve the common good clearly emerges from the quotations reproduced above. Differently from those respondents, the next five female voices indicated their culture of origin and religious traditions and worldview as their major contribution to the society of residence:

‘I try to give this country knowledge of Islaam [sic], [the] country gives me knowledge too ([my university] degree)’ (British-Indian student, 18).

‘[I have] spread the religion of truth (ISLAM!) [I have received] education’ (British Pakistani student).

‘I have given an example and a portrayal of a Muslim girl who has grown up in this country. This country has given me welfare in all aspects’ (British-Somali, 19).

‘I have given another vision of Chad. Belgium has given me education, access to training, and an open mind’ (Belgian from Chad, 27).
'Brought my own culture with me yet mixed with theirs. Country has given me security and freedom’ (British-Pakistani middle-aged widow)

The last quotation, which is from an older woman, appears qualitatively different from the previous ones. Whereas those four girls seemed totally absorbed in their Muslim identity, the older woman sees her culture as integrated with the rest of society. In general, however, it is important to note that all women appear actively engaged in breaking stereotypes about Muslim women and in projecting a positive image through their personal example.

**Rational individuals between two worlds**

In relation to their views of their countries of origin and of the minority community to which they belong, most women valued greatly the sense of unity and solidarity. On the other hand, they also resented the ignorance, narrow-mindedness, gossip, and exploitative mentality of the ethnic community of origin, as the following quotations show:

'I love [that] there is a closeness about the community. They act as a second family and additional support unit [when you] experience highs and lows; there is a rich and colourful culture that is highly enjoyable (music, language, food, costume) with large and fun social gatherings; a large ethnic community within this country also means that there is greater access to facilities such as halal [permitted] butchers, religious education, etc. I dislike [that] there can be gossiping/ backbiting/ judgement among the communities; as a younger person, I was trying to hide things from my parents and the wider community [with] extra "eyes and ears" around town’ (British-Pakistani, 28).

'Love: respect for elders; looking after your family and friends. Dislike: rigid in their beliefs and traditions, not very open minded; a lot of cultural beliefs mixed with religious beliefs; judging other people, negative stereotyping’ (British-Pakistani, 32).

'[The community] is not cohesive, is not frank. And punctuality… I detest being late. What I like is solidarity amongst women especially when there is a celebration. They are super, they come to help you, no problem. At the religious level, grand-mothers are anxious about their grand-children. They help, they advise children about religion’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 42).

'I like: close community that shares the burden of problems; large social gatherings with rich cultures; similar backgrounds mean we have more in common. I dislike gossip, back-biting, not much else’ (Pakistani, 57, UK)

'We are very helpful among ourselves, something which lacks in the western community. We have good food, we can count upon each other. [Things] I don’t like: I think we could do more of an effort in terms of contacts, and have stronger ties with people from other communities, we are too closed’ (Belgo-Moroccan, 24).

'Dislike: there is a lot of "judging” within communities based on tradition’ (British-Pakistani).
Whereas solidarity and respect of family values and family structure are considered to be very valuable features of the culture and community of origin, there is a strong awareness that this sense of closeness is often damaged and fractured by internal rumours and petty rivalries. Especially the respondents based in Italy and in Belgium condemned those members of the community who behave too traditionally, do not integrate in the receiving society and, worse, do not respect the law. The women thought that such attitudes not only impede the personal improvement (cultural and economic) of the individuals at stake but also damage the image of every member of the community. Hence the resentment, and occasional distance of some respondents vis-à-vis the community:

’I have no contacts with my community. I can’t stand that because of some drug-pushers and delinquents the reputation of all Moroccans is continuously damaged. Moreover, I don’t like to see that some refuse to integrate’ (Moroccan, Italy, 23).

’I like everything, except I can’t bear those who live and behave here as if they were in Egypt, going around wearing traditional dresses and without socks even in December’ (Egyptian, Italy, 33).

’I don’t like that they are too ghettoised. They make no effort of integration, they are communitarian [... But I like] the intergenerational links’ (Belgian of Turkish origin, 25).

’I can’t stand men who refuse integration and lock their wives and children at home; on the contrary, I appreciate those who make efforts to integrate them’ (Moroccan-Italian, 39).

’I dislike: Egyptians coming from the countryside who are rough, uneducated and not very clean. Their behaviour impacts negatively on all those who make efforts to integrate’ (Egyptian, married & unemployed, 25, Italy).

’[The members of my community] can do – and should do – more to better themselves, e.g. put more focus on education; children are not guided properly to fulfil their potentials. [I dislike about those living there:] people living in England are perceived as being ‘rich’ and earning ‘easy money’ when in fact life is harder here than it is out there. [Like:] Both people living here and those back at home have strong family values; people are taught to respect their elders; people are warm, even when they do not know each other’ (British-Turkish Cypriot, 23).

’There are more things I dislike than I like. [...] I like young people, students who are ambitious [...] try to go ahead, to adapt and to integrate. [...] I do not like some people who do certain things, do not think about the others, because when someone is abroad it is as if s/he was an ambassador for his/her own country; every act that s/he does, positive or negative, reflect what is his/her community, and if one sees him/her, s/he will say that all Moroccans are like that... So if someone does not think this before acting, then I call this carelessness and I hate carelessness. Second, I hate people who come here and want to earn money in whatever way. The third thing I hate are those who say that Italians are racist; when you see them, it’s them who are racist, not the Italians, they are racist first and above everything among themselves. [...] We are in a [foreign] country, so let’s at least try to be compact, to love each other, at least this is what your religion incites you to do, it says that Muslims must be compact, like a wall. But they not, they want to destroy each other [...] and this really hurts’ (Moroccan student, 24, Italy).
Answers that highlight satisfactions about family life, about the experience of living in the country of residence, or about personal aspirations for the future are strong indicators of the level (or lack) of integration for these women. In general they all shared similar down-to-earth aspirations about finding a good job, getting a decent qualification, getting married, finding a good school for their children, and educating them in the faith of Islam. Other recurring ‘dreams’ were: an end to the ban on the veil and in general discrimination for people with a Muslim background; peace, tranquillity and integration for the future generations. We are not reproducing here the answers word by word because they were very similar and all along these lines.

The objective of ‘being a good Muslim’ and of bringing up devout children was more evident among the respondents living in the UK than those based in other countries. In the Belgian context, it was disheartening to observe the tense level that the debate about the veil has reached: Belgian Muslim women interacting in a blog were considering renouncing to employment and education opportunities in order to avoid being abused in those contexts. The Belgian authorities should do everything they can to restore channels of communication with these women that have lost trust in the institutions.

The replies to the three sets of questions about the pros and cons of 1) their countries of residence, 2) the country and community of origin, 3) and about their own religious leaders were also extremely interesting and telling. Regardless of the age, national background or country of residence, almost no-body expressed negative feelings about the religion. It even seemed that some respondents felt offended for being asked such a question. Quite a few, however, condemned those individuals who manipulate religious terms for violent purposes or personal gain. They also complained about the lack of scholarship and unsuitability of existing religious leaders.

Critical remarks about the scarce level of education of the imams are interesting especially in the light of the high position that education enjoys in the South Asian mentality and, in general, given that most of the respondents seemed to concur on the fact that education is the recipe for upward social mobility. Education, access to European languages, and religious knowledge can be the way forward for the elaboration of new conceptualisations of Islamic identity – and potentially also activism – that is compatible with democratic values. However, this could also lead the way to the re-adopt of conservative practices in an ultra-modern light. Many young Muslim girls are absolutely thirsty to find their own way, to experience and understand Islam, intellectually, spiritually and bodily. So they should be facilitated in this process but not left alone. They should be exposed to a range of views that exist within Islamic knowledge and religious traditions, to avoid the risk that they are captured by narrow-minded exclusivist discourses. Sometimes, for fear of trampling on someone else’s religious and for fear of being accused of discrimination no-one dares to explore the needs and the religious traditions of these people and to guide them, leaving them exposed to simplistic messages that are damaging even if they are not about terrorism.

Only a couple of respondents had the courage to talk about personal or family problems. In general, given the sensitivity of these issues and the complex and long dynamics that need to take place before a researcher is granted the necessary degree of confidence on the part of the interviewee, it was not possible to explore this ambit very much. However, the few who did manage to speak – often in side off-the-record conversation, before or after the interview – showed that women are still the victims of family violence and of injustices, including those caused by the marriages stipulated across borders. None of the respondents was particularly angry about something and most were made their considerations in a balanced way, looking at the part that both society and Muslim individuals should have in solving potential problems that have a common source, are not one-sided.
Racism and discrimination remain persistent problems, whereas explicitly ‘Islamophobic’ attitudes seemed more rare and concentrated on the stereotype Muslim-terrorism and on the practice of veiling (but this was perceived as a major difficulty only in certain countries). However it was interesting to note the resilience and humour of the women who are trying to find strategies to cope with and overcome it. Quite a few are able to maintain enough lucidity to put down the causes to ignorance of particular people and not of the whole society. Most respondents complained about the widespread assumption that Muslim women are oppressed and appeared to be actively engaged in demonstrating the opposite through the example of their own lives.

The respondents were objective in listing the pros and cons of their experience in Europe. Among the things they liked they put together trivial matters, like food and clothing (which are nevertheless quite telling of the level of integration), with more complex concepts such as democracy, freedom and the rule of law. Especially when comparing, in a critical way, the benefits and the limitations of their own communities of origin with the country of residence it emerged that a lot of incomprehension and problems can actually come from misunderstandings inside the community. All seemed to agree that in the home country and in their own community there is more of a sense of belonging to a family and a lot of mutual support, compared to normal life in Western society. However, none of them, except for a Moroccan woman with personal problems, expressed the desire to go and live in their country of origin. All seemed to value very highly the freedoms, the rights, and the political system of the western countries where they reside, even in spite of some policies or legislation with which they disagreed.

Throughout the responses a high level of personal and sincere attachment to the country of residence appeared and some interviewees even showed disappointment that the questions had been formulated by clearly putting markers of difference such as ‘community of origin’, ‘country of residence’, ‘native white people’. Most women felt to belong to the country and did not even question it. Some also showed a determination to work to improve conditions in the country of residence.

In general the interviewees perceived their problems and those of the societies where they live in terms of lack of communication, and lack of education, both among the community of origin and in the larger society of reference. All are dreaming of a future marked by peace and solidarity. It is important that the problems and misunderstandings, including the controversy about the veil, were not seen in terms of polarised or irreconcilable religious differences. They did not bring in the religious factor except for the question about their religious practices and about their own and their children’s future. Many women were just happy to be able to have a say without being called to speak in defence of something (e.g the veil), or to declare their rejection of terrorism.
CONCLUSIONS

‘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.’ (Bouzar 2004)

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 observed 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, to fully cover the wide and complex topic of Europe’s Muslim women from a quantitative or geographical perspective, the present report 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 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.

The context

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:

1) **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.

2) **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.
3) 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 they all said to ‘love’, 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.

4) 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 society, 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 Europe is the natural platform where 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 seen as an obstacle to living in Europe but, on the contrary, often serves as an inspiration to be better citizens and responsible parents.

5) 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 individu-
als. Although Muslim women sense and fear discrimination on the part of secular society they have also developed the capacity to be resilient. They want to fully 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.

6) 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; 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 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.

7) '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 the 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.
8) **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 submitted 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 popu-
lation 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 worldlist 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.

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 till Muslim men are not involved in the reconsideration of the link between sacred and fixed Islamic values and more fluid societal habits and cultural traditions.
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References


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Please address any questions you may have to us at info@kbs-frb.be or call us on +32 (0)70-233 728.

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