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European Muslim Youth and Gender (in)Equality Discourse: Towards a More Critical Academic Inquiry

Colleen Boland

Public Law, Faculty of Law, Autonomous University of Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain; colleen.boland@uab.cat

Abstract: In Europe, gender equality can be framed as a secular value, juxtaposed against affiliation with and practice of Islam. Academic and public debate has either given special attention to the spread of religious fundamentalism in Europe, or to the way Muslim women dress, citing how both purportedly jeopardize gender equality. This is despite findings that a link between gender equality and religiosity or practice of Islam is neither inherent nor circumscribed. Moreover, it is possible to demonstrate that such discourse rests on implicitly racialized conceptualizations of the Muslim “other”. Meanwhile, Muslim youth in particular are benchmarked against these imagined standards of gender equality, as compared with non-Muslim peers. This work examines ways in which normative secular frameworks and discourses, taking ownership of gender equality narratives, have shaped Europe’s academic inquiry regarding Muslim youth. It notes what is absent in this inquiry, including intersections of race and class, which remain divorced from the limited conversation on gender and religious difference. A reflexive, intersectional approach to this discussion, conscious of the importance of embedded racial or structural inequality and what is absent in current inquiry, better serves in understanding and navigating power relations that ultimately contribute to multiple exclusion of these youth.

Keywords: European Muslims; inequalities; gender; youth of migrant origin; knowledge production



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1. Introduction

In Western Europe, academic thought, public policy and societal rhetoric largely depict secularism as characteristic of liberal democratic regimes and modern society (Mahmood 2015). Religion is argued to serve as a symbolic boundary for migrants and their descendants (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and ascription to Islam in Europe is identified as a “bright” boundary for minorities, migrant or otherwise (Alba 2005). A controversial and frequent target of the religion versus secularism binary debate includes Muslim youth of migrant origin: in both knowledge production and public debate, their religious identity and so-called “cultural behaviours” are viewed as a veritable litmus test of successful “integration”¹ policies and practices. European Muslim youth are not only a growing demographic group that faces structural disadvantages, simply as descendants of migrants; they are simultaneously the subject of othering given a perceived sociocultural divide, in that affiliation with Islam is often cast as illegitimate in a European society drawing from a Christian background and currently ostensibly in pursuit of or engaging in a secular paradigm.

The literature describes how, purportedly due to religious background, descendants of Muslim migrants have more conservative views than peers with native parents and are not positioned to engage cohesively with mainstream European societal values and norms

¹ Integration, a term employed in migration and diversity studies, among other disciplines, can refer to a concept or a policy intervention; it can generally be defined as a two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies. However, continued use of the term and concept has become hotly contested in the literature; see (Saharso 2019).

(Casanova 2006; Parekh 2006; Ribberink et al. 2017). Gender equality² is one of the most frequently cited demarcations in this perceived religious or sociocultural boundary, with public debate often depicting the precepts of Islam itself (and as part of wider religion) as a deterrent to such equality (Diehl et al. 2009; Taylor 2011). In this analysis, gender equality discourse is identified as a fundamental component in the othering of Muslim youth. In this regard, academic knowledge production influences public policies and discourses, and thus bears wider societal repercussions. Research trends have indicated, and often championed, an “individualized” approach to religion among European Muslim youth, who may not engage in traditional religious practices, and thus are presumed to more closely ascribe to secular or liberal democratic norms (Cesari 2013). Moreover, European-wide studies and questionnaires directed towards Muslim youth of migrant origin continually inquire as to gender roles and values in order to determine this group’s level of so-called “integration” into society. From the outset, there is a burden of proof on Muslim youth of migrant origin to meet certain supposed standards of gender equality, within the constraints of survey questionnaires that may even direct the participants’ answers. This reflects a broader epistemological tendency to employ a benchmark, imagined society in examining minority reference groups.

Firstly, such an approach to the study of Muslim youth rests on several debatable assumptions regarding secularism, including that it is a depoliticized, non-normative and universally embraced totalizing system of European thought or belief. Literature can often frame secularism as part of an enlightened European perspective or Western exceptionalism (Katzenstein 2006). Alternatively, in addressing Islam in Europe, some authors emphasize the Christian tradition of Europe, while others insist that Western Europe is a collective of increasingly secular societies; still others trace secularism to Christianity’s evolution in that Christianity provided an “exit from religion”, thus producing secularization (Vattimo and Girard 2010). As such, the meaning of secularism itself invokes debate, elaborated upon in this work.

Secondly, it is of note that ascription to Islam is couched in terms of the particular, as compared with the universal “European” Christian or secular concept. Of course, secular and Christian identities are conflated with cultural and national identities, as well as the policies, discourses, and societal practices surrounding them (Casanova 2006; Koenig 2007; Nexon 2006). At the same time, the growing body of literature in European diversity studies demonstrates that European populations are increasingly heterogeneous (Vertovec 2007). Meanwhile, in migration and integration studies of past decades, and even in more recent diversity studies, race as part of this heterogeneous European fabric is often absent in inquiry, as Europe remains “colour blind”, in an allegedly liberal openness to difference.

In fact, the study of “diversity” itself, especially as relates to the subject at hand, can remain limited. As Bracke points out, “diversity all too often carries the imaginary of ethnicity and ‘race’, which provides a useful starting point for a reflection on what the term does: it couches questions of ethnicity and ‘race’ within a wide horizon of different kinds of ‘differences’, without doing the critical work of thinking those together, which includes thinking the particular ways in which each of these sets of power relations work” (Bracke 2014, p. 47). This seems to be particularly the case with European Muslim youth: despite the unpacking of colonial legacies, and an increasing European canon of migration, integration and diversity studies, it still remains to be understood, as El-Tayeb (2011, p. 83) succinctly describes it, “how second- and third-generation Muslim Europeans can be

² “Gender equality” (or inequality), what exactly this entails and how to achieve it can be subject to various normative frames and perspectives, including within Europe. This paper refers to the concept as part of a larger human rights framework to which European states purportedly accede, but acknowledges it can assume varying meanings, as demonstrated by the range of approaches and understandings that could be applied in the case of the United Nations definition: “the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys.... Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration” (United Nations 2001). While in the context of European policy debates gender equality is defined as such here, the social construction of gender remains a separate and important question that does not fit into the limits of this work’s scope.

perceived as more foreign and threatening than their parents or grandparents who came to Europe from the Middle East, West Africa, or South Asia”.

Indeed, notwithstanding public discourse, the scholarship repeatedly frames inquiry into European Muslim youth in terms of the problematization of religion, the secular, and gender equality. As such, this paper first argues that knowledge production surrounding secularism versus religiosity may rest on normative assumptions and power relations that can exercise discernible effects on individuals, in this case Muslim youth. The study takes as a starting point Mahmood’s injunction to consider how religion can be subjected to a normative secular framework that provides a subjective account of religion as ideological versus material (i.e., religious difference) (Mahmood 2015). Of course, debate on what constitutes secularism has been extensively addressed, and there has been healthy critique of the broader framing of European Muslims in relation to gender equality, particularly in the public and political space (Fadil 2014). Moreover, critique from within European academia itself acknowledges gaps in the gender discussion, including in the continued discussion of intersectionality, a paradigm that points to intersecting power and privilege simultaneously at play in gender, race and class relations (Cho et al. 2013). However, there is still room for further examination or deconstruction of narratives at the intersection of religion, the secular, and gender equality as relates to the study of Muslim youth: specifically, it would be useful to trace how the epistemological terminology has developed, to assess how this may merit critiques, and to explore different or alternative framings of such studies in the future. This is a timely and salient investigative direction, as European academic approaches to Islam and gender equality can mutually affect diversity and inclusion policies, and ultimately influence power relations among European citizens.

The article is divided into theoretical framework, analysis, discussion, and conclusion. In the first section, an exploration of the place of secularism in Europe, including as a social and political project, provides the initial context for investigation into knowledge production surrounding Muslim European youth. The analysis maps out major discursive tropes in scholarly work at the intersection of the study of Muslim European youth and gender, firstly on a broader European scale and then in tracing academic inquiry in both Spain and the Netherlands. It addresses the continued focus on a gender dimension, with reference to this group’s foreign “origin,” yet limited exploration of racial and structural inequality, informed by colonial pasts and influencing this group’s differentiation and exclusion. A discussion of which questions are not asked in this inquiry, and what impact or significance may result for Muslim youth populations, is followed by a concluding summary and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework: Defining and Debating Secularism in Europe

Deconstructing the approach to the secular, and its proximity or even entanglement with modern religion, precedes a discussion of how gender equality becomes embroiled in the problematization of Islam in Europe. As briefly referenced, the concept of the secular can be defined variously. It may be key to first distinguish that “secularism” can be conceived of as part of a historical or cultural process, and essentially a political ideology in that it refers to what are understood to be various secular regimes. In this way it manifests variously: secularism can ask the state to be “neutral” regarding religion: if conducting a relationship between state law and religion, all religions must remain on the same legal footing (Ferrari and Pastorelli 2016). More strictly, a secularist approach can be defined as the separation of politics and religion, relegating religion to the private sphere (Cesari 2013). In Europe, some scholarship has observed an increasing push for the “privatization” of religion, with secularization viewed as essential to a modern society (Casanova 2006). Moreover, this secularism can be understood as the result or manifestation of modernization, with such modernization being defined as the decline of religion in political and private life (Norris and Inglehart 2011). For this reason, visible religious activity is seen as “illegitimate” in the public sphere, particularly in Europe (Foner and Alba 2008).

It would be remiss not to highlight the relevance of European Union (EU) legal configurations, or normative approaches, in this regard. Both freedom of religion and gender equality remain fundamental rights in EU legal frameworks, although freedom of religion is not an “absolute”, and is considered in relation to other rights, given the circumstance. There is no formal EU policy on religion or exclusive legal jurisdiction regarding the same, and EU laws and policies have a patchwork approach to religion based on various framings or institutional configurations. As such, [Carrera and Parkin \(2012\)](#) estimate that normative approaches to religion in EU policy can be grouped into “citizenship and fundamental rights; (ii) non-discrimination; (iii) immigration and home-affairs; (iv) social inclusion and protection; and (v) education and culture” ([Carrera and Parkin 2012](#), p. 5). These varied approaches and the distinct historical, political and social contexts of each EU Member State demonstrate how the EU or its Member States cannot claim a total neutrality in matters of religion and state. While a Member State like France, for example, may be committed to neutrality in the public sphere, there is still a debate as to, and necessity to balance, other rights to non-discrimination. Encroaching on the right to religious expression or freedom can be viewed as jeopardizing cultural evolution and liberal democracy’s attempts to accommodate individual rights ([van de Vijver 2007](#)). Whether played out in EU legislation, or as debated on the national scale when EU Member States determine the role of religion in public life, all of this points to how national identities or state ideologies become inherent to the secular.

Therefore, ideologically, concepts of privatized religion and secularized Christianity are linked to secular liberal tolerance, often within a narrative of the nation state ([Fessenden and Cady 2013](#)). At the same time, some insist that an understanding of secularism should not be construed as an inevitable result of modernity or rationalization, nor confined to a solely Western political context ([Asad 2003](#)). In fact, there is an argument for the secular reaching beyond the political. For example, rather than defining it as the separation of politics and religion, Mahmood contends that secularism can be conceived of as “transformations wrought in the domain of ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology” ([Mahmood 2010](#)). [Fuchs and Rüpke \(2015\)](#) argue that patterns of “rationalisation, secularisation and individualisation” are traceable throughout history and before the Western Renaissance, in at least Europe, Africa and Asia, outside of Western political systems with secular regimes. These observations encourage a more comprehensive consideration of what secularism is meant to signify, with an aim to step outside of normative frameworks.

This examination of the literature on European Muslim youth works from the premise that differences have already been produced or are reproduced within power relations, and these relationships between culture and power are embedded in state and society, including in knowledge production ([Gupta and Ferguson 1992](#)). In mapping the trajectory of European scholarship regarding Muslim European youth, with particular attention to the entanglement of secularism, religion and gender equality, a Foucauldian discourse analysis is employed: attention is directed not only to what is communicated in this knowledge production, but also on what is never or not said reveals ([Foucault 1972](#)). It examines the more frequently cited literature treating European Muslim youth and gender at the European level and provides an overview of the trajectory of this study in both Spain and the Netherlands. This discourse analysis portends to the more predominating knowledge regimes and policy priorities, and does not pretend to be exhaustive. Moreover, it limits the gender dimension to discourses or conceptualizations of gender (in)equality in order to contain the scope. At the same time, it seeks to highlight certain patterns and tropes before outlining steps towards a more critical, reflexive academic inquiry into a subject that is debated visibly and frequently, yet often within the same discursive boundaries.

3. Analysis

3.1. Framing the Study of European Muslim Youth: Religiosity and Gender

Again, Muslim minorities are highly visible in both the literature and political and social dialectic in discussion of gender roles and equality. It is an important consideration

as, generally, both Muslim minorities and women are not groups that are associated with hegemonic political or social power in Europe. Gender roles and the equality thereof are emphasized in the literature studying Muslim youth of migrant origin, despite feminist scholarship increasingly recognizing that both religious and secular values can shape gender inequal or equal ideologies (Nyhagen 2019). With the assertion that most religions encroach on the rights of women, the rights of European Muslim women have been the topic of debates regarding citizenship or immigration. There is a perception that Islam, as non-Western and “other”, subjects women to a unique oppression. In particular, it is argued that fundamentalist religious movements within Islam are acting in response to global or “Western” changes in gender dynamics (Koopmans 2015). With a similar logic, some studies hypothesize that lessened religiosity would mean less gender inequitable practices and indicate greater integration into secular Europe, including among second or third generation youth of migrant origin (Scheible and Fleischmann 2013). Of course, the counterargument is that this assumption is misguided, in that discriminatory practices towards women can result from enmeshed cultural practices linked to gender inequality, or a discriminatory interpretation of the religion. In Europe in particular, religious women themselves can combine varying understandings of citizenship, gender equality, women’s rights and feminism, that do not fit the secular versus religious binary highlighted in the literature that largely addresses the “perspective” of religious institutions on these issues (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016). In this sense, it is important to separate out and identify gender inequal practices regardless of ascription to religious or secular ideologies, given that presumably no society to date has achieved true gender equality (Fessenden and Cady 2013; Mahmood 2015).

The premise that greater religiosity is correlated to gender inequal practices can be linked to how Muslim youth are categorized in the literature. The most obvious example includes the observation and sometimes polarizing assertion that Muslim youth in Europe are embracing increased religiosity rather than secular values in a manner that indicates withdrawal from wider European society. Islam is argued to serve as an “oppositional identity” for Muslim youth of migrant origin, when they face rejection, discrimination or marginalization in their societies (Foner and Alba 2008, p. 373). Such reactivity can take the form of fundamentalist belief and extremist behaviour, which is argued to result in violence against Muslim women or even against all groups of women in the given society (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009). Especially in light of a rise in extremist attacks in recent years and the political discourse linking these attacks to European Muslims, alongside the various political leaders and parties throughout Europe fomenting Islamophobia, this trend of reactive identity among Muslim youth has perhaps been disproportionately emphasized.

The literature is not limited to this single typification of Muslim youth, however. The concept of Islam translating to a value system that neglects gender equality can also underly other theories regarding European Muslim youth. For example, there are observations as to a trend towards individualization of religion among Muslim youth in Europe. This individualization is understood as a privatization of faith, entailing a decrease in manifestations of traditional or outward religious practices and engagement with authoritative religious actors; instead, such “individualization” involves restricting religious belief and practice to private life. There is then a turn towards painting this religious individualism as “European Islam”, with non-traditional, privatized religious identity reflecting successful adaptation to the surrounding society—an effort to act in compatibility with European ideals (Nielsen 1997; Kashyap and Lewis 2013).

These observations must be conducted from a critical point of view, however. First of all, individualization and privatization of faith do not necessarily present a lessened version of religiosity, but rather a different form and manner of belief. In fact, Cesari finds that Muslim youth may strive towards what they understand to be a “real Islam,” separated from the cultural traditions of their parents (Cesari 2002). Apart from problematic engagement with the concepts of secularism, religion and religiosity, these categorizations and analyses of European Muslim youth demonstrate a marked vocabulary of integration.

With continual reference to fixed standards of a Western, European or national framework of secularism couched within liberal democratic societies, Muslim youth's religiosity and identity is a variable put to the test. Investigation of this population often weighs the effects of institutions, policy and society on a broader scale in assessing such integration; observations as to structural impediments or individual agency, in addressing this population (in general or specifically in relation to gender) is less systematically and comprehensively explored. In short, how the study of this population in relation to gender equality is framed becomes a highly influential and defining component in shaping any knowledge production as to the very differentiated individuals and groups broadly categorized as European Muslim youth.

3.2. *The Spanish Example: Academic Inquiry as to Islam, Gender Equality and Muslim Youth*

Within the wider European problematization, tracing the inquiry as to Muslim youth and gender equality in Spain provides specific insight. In contextualizing the Spanish case, there are claims that Islamophobia can be traced back to perceived historical conflict and the presence of the caliphate on the Iberian Peninsula from roughly 711–1492 (Corpas Aguirre 2010). In the contemporary context, Islam as the “other” continues as, with increased immigration flows beginning around the late 1970s and becoming significant at the turn of the century, the modern study of Islam in Spain has initially and largely been framed in terms of migrant minorities. In the 1990s, Spanish immigration legislation was marked by a move towards integration policies, albeit in tandem with control measures (Relaño Pastor 2004). The study of Islam in Spain through the 1990s was rather limited, often consisting of ethnographic studies and a few “Arabist” scholars, in conjunction with the study of migration from the Maghreb region and its integration. Following this, Téllez Delgado and Ramírez Fernández note that the attacks of September 11 caused a transition from terminology of “Moroccans” to that of “Muslim”, creating an “Islamization” of such migration and integration studies (Téllez Delgado and Ramírez Fernández 2018). The 11 March 2004 attacks in Madrid then led to a focus on fundamentalism and re-Islamization, reflected in wider literature throughout Europe and the world (Ibid) (Téllez Delgado and Ramírez Fernández 2018).

Spanish studies that more pointedly address gender equality or gender roles in relation to Islam in Spain at first particularly focused on examining practices of Moroccan women (Ramírez 1998). This type of approach often analysed or observed any transformations in gender roles, identity or values when these Moroccan women in particular migrated to Spain (Ramírez 1998). An emphasis on the autonomy of women being limited in the origin country, as well as practices of gender separation, could be cited as the point of comparison when investigating how Moroccan women inserted (or did not insert) their beliefs and practices upon their arrival and continued life in Spain. Researchers often identified a value shift, distinguishing differences in gender dynamics in origin countries versus host country. For example, a 2002 study of Moroccan women in Catalonia organizes observations in terms of “strategies of female cultural insertion”, or how migrant women strategically “integrate” into Catalonia into three categories: women that continue with so-called tradition, characterized by male and female segregation in certain activities; women that engage in a transition strategy and incorporate “elements of change” into their traditional roles; and finally, women who develop strategies and changes in gender roles that are good for “insertion” into a plural society (Alcalde et al. 2002, pp. 42, 43). This clearly frames gender and gender equality within the context of shedding old cultural values and adopting presumably gender equal new ones. Another example includes a study in Huelva, Spain, evaluating whether views on gender equality and education among migrant Moroccan women change based on length of residence in Spain (Bedmar and Caro 2013). The semi-structured interviews asked questions including “Do you think girls’ education should be equal to that of boys?” or “Do you believe school is important in your daughters’ education?” (Bedmar and Caro 2013). Again, the interview script implies

that gender equality would be the norm in Spain, and that the more equal the participants believe education should be, the more they manifest signs of integration.

Muslim youth of migrant origin have also been an object of study in Spain from the point of view of integrating or measuring up to host culture practices. From the migration point of view, studies of Muslim youth would approach the population as 1.5, second and third generation migrants (Portes et al. 2016). In other words, they can be studied within the context of being the children of immigrant parents that came to Spain largely from Morocco during the 1990s, and in some cases from the Levant region during the 1980s. Most empirical studies regarding second generation youth have been qualitative and relatively limited in scope, with a few exceptions. Some of the studies continue to evaluate gender with the same approach as those investigating the first generation. For example, a 2006 survey of second-generation Moroccans, Dominicans and Peruvians examines their opinion in comparison to “native” European youth, and notes that children of Moroccans tend to emphasize their importance of couples sharing the same religion, and link women with domestic tasks more so than second generation participants of a different background (Aparicio and Tornos 2006). A report published in 2012 surveying second-generation children of Maghreb migrant origin in the neighbourhood of San Cristobal, Madrid, argued that this second-generation population suffered unequal treatment, with girls restricted in public life due to Islam (Díaz López and López 2012).

Key in this outline is how public discourse, including in the media and political rhetoric, guides or influences academic investigation, and vice versa. In relation to the present topic of Muslim youth, the dangers of fundamentalism remain emphasized in the political and public sphere, with concerns as to the prevention of Moroccan origin Spanish youth and other second-generation Muslims from choosing radicalism. An example includes the public-school curriculum for religious instruction in Islam. While the right to religious education in the religion of preference is recognized in public or subsidized private schools, the availability of such instruction according to the autonomous community is limited, and there is often the complaint that the instruction is vastly disproportionate, in favour of Catholicism versus Islam.³ Moreover, as of March 2016, the Ministry of Education, with assistance from the Foundation for Pluralism and Coexistence, issued a curriculum and materials for secondary schools discussing extremism and terrorism, which Planet Contreras describes as cautioning against “‘overstepping’ in religious practice” and encouraging the study of “marriage from the perspective of rejecting misogynist violence” (Planet Contreras 2018, p. 45).

It is of note that these studies of integration or migration, which hold migrant origin Muslims to standards of wider, allegedly mainstream Spanish gender equality, posit assumptions regarding mainstream Spanish cultural or societal values that may not be black and white. A February 2018 survey by the Spanish State Centre for Sociological Investigation (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2018) found that 60.6% of Spaniards at age 16 remembered their mother as “inactive”, or engaged in unremunerated household work (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2018). Furthermore, while it would be difficult to review the entire canon of literature on gender equality in Spain, it is of note that in recent years it has been observed that post-crisis Spain has experienced austerity politics that negatively impacted gender equality legislation and institutions (Lombardo et al. 2017). Moreover, Spanish women still undertake the majority of unpaid care work

³ A 1996 Spanish law allows for religious instruction in publicly funded primary and secondary school, for those students who want to exercise their right to receive religious education (in all faiths); this law would presumably level the playing field, as some Catholic schools up until that point had received state funding. However, it is argued that funds remain unequally distributed among faiths, as in 2019, while there were 326,359 Muslim students, the community school systems throughout Spain only employed 80 professors of Islam (Andalusí 2019).

(Lombardo et al. 2017).⁴ In sum, while young Spanish Muslims of migrant origin are juxtaposed with paradigmatic gender equality expectations,⁵ and subject to implicit or explicit interrogation that can result in an alienating experience, the reality of gender (in)equality in Spain undermines this juxtaposition.

3.3. Academic Inquiry at the Intersection of Gender Equality and Muslim Youth: The Dutch Case

Dutch academic inquiry as to Muslim youth and gender presents a different context and trajectory, given that it is embedded in a distinct national context, but ultimately manifests similar patterns of knowledge production. Scholars often pointedly assess Dutch Muslims through the lens of secularism, reflecting how Islam is framed in both academic and public discourse as in opposition to Dutch liberalism, and research indicates high levels of anti-Muslim sentiment in Dutch society (de Bruijn et al. 2020). The study of Dutch Muslims began to take root in the 1980s: while Muslim-identifying migrants from Turkey and Morocco began to arrive in the 1960s, by the 1970s only a few studies addressed Islam in the Netherlands, with the term Muslim more frequently cited in early 1980s literature (de Koning and Sunier 2020).

This increased academic study paralleled the heightened public visibility of Islam: in 1983, the Dutch Constitution was amended, putting an end to formal relationships with the Protestant Church, and all religions were recognized as equal under the law via the ‘non-recognition’ principle; this provided Muslims with the opportunity for equal participation. At the same time, ‘non-recognition’ in practice could be applied by authorities in methods of non-intervention towards or exclusion of the Muslim population (de Koning and Sunier 2020). As the number of migrants with Muslim background increased throughout the 1980s, and Islam became more visible, the government began to adopt migrant integration policies. Islam was correspondingly addressed in the literature as a foreign import, from a migration perspective, despite these migrants’ permanent move to the Netherlands. At the same time, Rath et al. (1997) argue that although Muslims were called on to “integrate,” the boundaries between them and the rest of society were seen as permeable, and ultimately the integration project sought inclusion.

Koning and Sunier point to the Rushdie Affair⁶ as a turning point in discourse surrounding Islam, when both liberal and right-wing policymakers articulated the possibility of Islam or “Islamification” as incompatible with and a threat to a liberal, Dutch identity (de Koning and Sunier 2020). This coincided with a backlash against “multiculturalism” policies throughout Europe. Moreover, the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, the assassination of Pim Fortuyn by an activist that accused the Dutch politician of exploiting Muslims, as well as the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a self-professed Islamist, provided fodder for political and public rhetoric framing Islam in terms of securitization (Brouwer et al. 2017). Dutch politician Geert Wilders famously founded the far-right Freedom Party (PVV), attacking Islam openly, and continues to lead his party in Dutch Parliament as of 2021 (Moors 2009). In the past decade, right-wing

⁴ It should be noted that the majority of the literature assessed here, and studies on Spanish Muslims or Spanish Muslim youth for the most part, often examine populations in urban areas, which can differ demographically from those dwelling in rural areas of Spain; the analysis may be skewed or limited in this regard, especially in a discussion of gender equality or roles. For example, a 2006 government-sponsored report on Moroccan immigrants in Spain notes a more equal balance of Moroccan or Moroccan origin Spanish (presumably Muslim-identifying) men and women in Spanish urban areas with service sector employment, as opposed to a majority of Moroccan men in rural, agricultural-dependent areas of Spain (López García and Berriane 2006). Of course, more detailed examination is required too when examining gender in labour and employment among the wider Spanish population.

⁵ Some recent qualitative studies of Spanish Muslim youth explore identity and practices, emphasizing the current reality of a plural and diverse Spain. While empirically they may not be quantitatively significant, these more recent studies often go beyond studying this population as the children of migrants, turning towards examining identity construction in relation to a minority religion or other identification. See (Adlbi Sibai 2010; Téllez Delgado 2014) or (Mendoza Carmona 2017) for examples. In these studies, if there is reference to gender at all, there is less of an overemphasized inquiry into gender roles, or a lack of binary separation between a “Muslim” approach to gender versus that of mainstream societies, as compared with literature from previous decades. Still, the othering of Islam within the frame of gender inequality continues in the wider academic and public debate.

⁶ The Rushdie Affair here refers to the worldwide reaction of some self-identifying Muslims to the 1988 publication of Salman Rushdie’s book “The Satanic Verses”.

populist parties, if not making political gains in the Netherlands, have at least established a firm foothold as the “opposition” to main liberal parties in recent years, and continue to purportedly champion the “emancipation” of migrant or Muslim women (Cuperus 2021; Kešić and Duyvendak 2019; de Lange and Mügge 2015; Vieten 2016).

Beyond the sentiments of radical right or populist societal factions and political forces, it is argued that strong, more extensive Dutch societal criticism of what is perceived as constituting a Muslim way of life is not uncommon. Verloo and Roggeband (1996) explain how policy frames frequently employ the term “allochthonous”, to refer to Muslim youth of migrant origin or their parents, which can refer to “foreign descent” and literally means ‘different in relation to’; it is used to distinguish migrants from the ‘autochthonous’ population (2007). Meanwhile, these debates also invoke the notion of ‘Dutch exceptionalism,’ championing alleged Dutch tolerance in general, specifically as linked to securitization and sexual politics (Bracke 2011). The course of these perceptions of and narratives on Islam in the Netherlands, shifting from one of migration to one of religious threat, can impact Dutch Muslim youth of migrant origin, specifically those with Moroccan-born parents. They face exclusionary discourses, articulated in securitisation or oppression of women narratives, with their religious background cast as a threat to tolerance and liberalism (Prins et al. 2015). Korteweg and Yurdakul note an uneven public and political preoccupation with honour killings as representative of Dutch Muslim violence against women (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009).

Simultaneously, in the literature Muslim youth of migrant origin are also evaluated in terms of their religiosity and gender ideology, even if it is to evidence that this association is ill-founded: Scheible and Fleischmann determine in a 2013 study that the “prominently discussed negative association between Islamic religiosity and egalitarian gender ideology among the second generation of Turkish and Moroccan” is insignificant (p. 390). As with the Spanish case, some more recent qualitative studies of Dutch Muslim youth have offered Muslim youth accounts within this discussion. A 2018 study of Dutch Muslim girls playing football notes that while the girls are expected to participate in this activity to demonstrate their gendered integration, they are still othered in a religious, ethnic or gendered way in their lived experiences on the football field (van den Bogert 2018). Another qualitative study of digital practice of Islamic Moroccan-Dutch youth addresses “religious, ethnic, and gender positioning” in describing how boys and girls relate differently to Dutch identity or their faith. It argues that the racism they experience differs, explaining that within Dutch society, the boys are cast as criminals and girls as oppressed (Leurs et al. 2019). On the other hand, a larger study in the migration literature from 2016 remains concerned with “cultural integration” and emphasizes gender ideology among second generation Muslims in the Netherlands, noting in this regard the “intergenerational shift in the Muslim population in the Netherlands, toward socio-cultural assimilation, on the one hand and reactive ethnicity, on the other . . . the aggregate picture appears to be one of movement toward the more liberal Dutch mainstream” (Maliepaard and Alba 2016, p. 90). Indeed, heated public debate about perceived or real Muslim practices, prevalent in politics and the media, may not have been explicitly fomented by scholarship; at the same time, the approach to Islam as foreign and diametrically opposed to Dutch liberal values can shape and lead to these gendered discourses.

Meanwhile, and as can be observed also in the Spanish example, expression of egalitarian gender ideology among the wider population does not necessarily translate to gender equal behaviours throughout wider or “autochthonous” Dutch society. van de Vijver’s (2007) study notes how gender role beliefs may “differ” among “mainstreamers and immigrant groups in The Netherlands”, but that there was little difference in the division of household labour or childcare responsibilities when comparing the two groups (p. 824). Academic literature has conducted a significant number of gender policy evaluations, as Dutch policy measures have consistently sought gender equality in both rights and opportunities for several decades (Roggeband and Verloo 2007). However, as measured by the OECD, women’s employment remains unequal: in 2016, 60% of employed women

were contracted for less than 30 h a week, and a gender pay gap of 14% in the Netherlands is below the OECD average (OECD 2019). Again, as with the Spanish example, Muslim youth of migrant origin are thus being held to gender equal ideologies or practices that correspond to wider societal standards unrepresentative of real behaviours; moreover, it is often the case that ideology and practice are conflated in these imagined standards.

4. Discussion: Implications of the Literature's Reoccurring Discursive Tropes

Research focus throughout the European literature, as well as in the specific cases of Spain and the Netherlands, manifests notable patterns in the intersection between the study of Muslim youth and gender equality. European Muslim youth are often investigated from the point of view of migration studies, where a subtle "othering" can take place. Positioned from the beginning as minorities due to religious belief and presumed accompanying values, academic discussion of the gender dimension with regards to Muslim youth frequently revisits themes of either radicalization or oppression, continuously interrogating gender equal ideology or behaviours. Whether this investigation is led by or is responding to the political, public and media discourse, knowledge production's embeddedness in societal power relations equips it to exacerbate the marginalization or exclusion of this population.

Again, the youth addressed in this study, along with any migrant parents, are often examined in the way they relate to "liberal values", "secularism" or "gender equality" supposedly definitive of the European imaginary. Here, the debate as to what constitutes "liberalism" and "secularism" once again emerges, including how, as either concepts or normative systems, both may be employed as superficial or blanket markers, or even serve as a distraction, in scholarship that lacks a more thorough discussion inclusive of race and racism. In this narrative, with regards to the religion and secularism debate, "secular liberalism" is argued to be ultimately illiberal in the sense that it eliminates the freedom and rights of religious-identifying individuals (Woodhead 2013). Within this context, scholarly work then addresses how European Muslims and Muslim youth in particular can "legitimately" engage in religious practice or individualized religiosity.

At the same time, what defines "liberalism," or "liberal values" is very much nebulous and contested, and liberalism has even been critiqued as a civilizational project resting on racialized and colonialist hierarchies (Jones 2020; Lentin 2014). For example, Muslim youth are studied and understood as "integrated" (whether migrants or citizens) if their beliefs and practices conform to certain "liberal" values. Preoccupation with Muslim European women's autonomy as part of such liberal values continues, despite mounting feminist scholarship that contests the link between religion or religiosity and women's oppression, and asks for redirected attention to broader intersectional dimensions (Taramundi 2015). Essentially, in framing academic discussions in terms of religious freedom and gender equality exclusive to what is "liberal", or "European", problematic racial inequalities are side-stepped.

As Essed and Trienekens (2008) point out in the Dutch case, "people can rather easily suppress statements about race, about being white, about whiteness, about racism, exactly because there is ample space to be vocal about (perceived) cultural vices of allochtonen"—in this case, the "cultural vice" constitutes Islamic practices or identification. In exploring post-race and contemporary racisms, Valluvan (2016) notes that while categorizations as to religious or cultural difference perhaps may not name "race" as such, they are formulated in combined reference to "ethno-racial, ethno-religious, and ethno-legal", including as directed towards Muslims in Western Europe. Indeed, few studies in the discussion of gender and religion or culture include these various other dimensions related to structural inequality, in particular race. Acknowledging and exploring race and class in such an examination of European Muslim youth can fill gaps and hold knowledge production more accountable.

First of all, the power differentials and structural inequalities inherent to a post-colonial Europe marked by racial inequality can provide novel insights. For example, Eserverri's qualitative study carried out from 2010 in 2013 in Madrid signals how among

second generation or migrant origin youth in Madrid (Dominican, Ecuadorian and Moroccan origin, with the latter generally presumed by the literature as Muslim-identifying), she did not observe the separation of gender cited by studies from the United Kingdom and France, due to the economic necessity of seeking work (Eseverri Mayer 2017). Such a contribution provides a new and counter-perspective, making a distinction between the need to work versus the desire to work, an important and little explored qualification when examining gender (in)equality among European Muslim youth. This demonstrates the importance of considering inclusions and exclusions of race and class to better understand how multiple dimensions of power and structural dynamics affect gender equal norms and practices (or their investigation).

Secondly, the invisibility of race in this discussion can reflect a disconnect between lived experiences of this population under study, limiting the purported “examination” of the same. Race, or the intersection of race, religion and citizenship, is embedded in securitization and migration public and political discourse, and hierarchies of power in this regard are clearly in operation. Young Muslim Europeans are persistently the target of veiled or overt racist statements that paint them as a public threat to European values. While the literature addresses Muslims’ access to societal participation or rights such as religious freedom or personal expression, it often limits the conversation to the institutional and policy reform or intervention that could or should rectify or improve access. Investigation must further address the psychosocial effects, compounded disadvantage and wider societal repercussions such as stereotyping engenders (Moghissi and Ghorashi 2010).

For example, in the case of gender, inquiries as to the use of the Islamic veil record personal experiences of discrimination experienced by young Muslim women in the exploration of this group’s relationship with autonomy and feminism on the one hand, or institutional rights to individual expression on the other (Fokas and Richardson 2017; Halrynjo and Jonker 2016). Meanwhile, in Spain and the Netherlands, at least, there has been little work comprehensively exploring employment policies and practices within the private sector, outside of any claims regarding the legal system;⁷ in this way, discussion of gender balance and roles exclusively examines young Muslim women, overlooking other actors (beyond the state) contributing to layered inequalities or racism.

These scholarly discussions of European Muslim youth at an intersection with gender equality, or as framed in terms of gender inequality, rest on predominant knowledge regimes, or are conducted through normative, implicitly racialized approaches. Ultimately, many research questions are not neutral, because they begin with a subjective answer. Muslim youth are not asked what they perceive gender equality to mean, but are instead met with inquisitions into their practice, and judged by how they measure compared to a supposedly fixed and non-normative gender ideology paradigm. To what extent such gender equal beliefs and practices exist, especially in these European countries of study, undergoes less scrutiny; moreover, a full conversation as to the context of societal gender constructs is sometimes entirely absent. The beliefs and practices surrounding gender equality among the general, “mainstream” youth population perhaps do not go unquestioned, but certainly are significantly less questioned. This demonstrates how the repeated interrogation as to specifically European Muslim youth’s relationship with gender equality elicits scrutiny and deconstruction.

5. Conclusions: Deconstructing Hegemony and Understanding What the Unmasked Reveals

In sum, the study of European Muslim youth is notably linked to gender (in)equality and often articulated in terms of the veil and outward manifestations of religiosity as visible and identifiable markers of difference. Meanwhile, dimensions of race and class remain present, but frequently evaded, with colonial pasts merely offered a nod. In short, these themes are analysed almost in response to an allegation of “otherness,” in lieu

⁷ (Planet Contreras 2018). Discussion with Colleen Boland. 15 March 2019. Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona.

of a more neutral inquiry. Especially given the interdependent research policy nexus, those engaging in knowledge production are tasked with accountability, as demonstrated by the exclusion created in both academic narratives and public or policy discourses surrounding European Muslim youth. While critical inquiry is always emphasized, it seems exceptionally necessary and neglected in this case.

As such, firstly, how can we incorporate voices and perspectives outside of the hegemonic paradigms, particularly in the academic setting? In her essay on minorities in Dutch academia, Essed suggests financial interventions related to diversity, evening courses and language politics that are open to difference (Essed 1999). Indeed, attention to structural inequalities and room for agency could facilitate a more robust knowledge production. In fact, admittedly, even while this work criticizes the current framing of European Muslim youth within gender discourse, it still perpetuates predominant tendencies to prioritize the subject of Islam and gender in research, when perhaps other more useful, divergent and objective inquiries fall by the wayside. In this sense, simply challenging dominant knowledge regimes and policy concerns falls short of a truly reflexive project.

This leads to the second step in pursuing a more critical inquiry: understanding why these hegemonic regimes remain entrenched, apart from the more obvious dynamics of self-reconstituting power structures and relations. In particular, what is not said is evocative of how contemporary study of these debates is directed, and offers a starting point from which to critically re-evaluate the current predominant course of study. What does the construction of multiple difference through the lens of solely religious difference reveal about dominant European societal discourse and academic inquiry? Why the discomfort with articulating and problematizing race, and how can this be rectified? How can attitudes toward gender equality be studied in conjunction with real behaviours, setting aside the notion that European liberal societies or thought exclusively provide the paradigmatic example of gender equality? Ultimately, remaining open to a more nuanced debate that provides due consideration to all dimensions of power relations, including race and class in addition to religion and gender, can improve the integrity of systems of thought and knowledge production that discernibly impact European Muslim youth.

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