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## **Providing a Gender Perspective to Integration in Western Europe. Muslim Women's Agency between Multicultural and Assimilationist Policies**

*Cristina Yasmin Ghanem\**

### **Abstract**

While scholars have tried to assess the presumed increase of the civic integration approach and the failure of multiculturalism in Western Europe, little research has been conducted to uncover the ways in which these two understandings of integration could promote Muslim women's agency within their communities and in the broader national space. This analysis will address the possible implications of each model's integration policies targeting second and third generation Muslim women, taking into account the role played by religion to justify life choices with family and community members in the specific context of European Islam. A younger generation of Muslim women refers to religious identity and knowledge of 'Pure Islam' as resources to gain personal worth and respected roles within their communities. This article will first challenge the alleged backlash of Multiculturalism through a gender lens and then it will provide a framework of understanding of Muslim women's agency. To conclude, the article argues that multicultural policies rather than more assimilationist or universalist measures, could have a better impact on the promotion of Muslim women's agency. Measures such as those listed by the Multicultural Policy Index, developed by Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka at Queen's University, are more likely to provide women with the tools used to negotiate life choices and their presence in the public space.

*Keywords: Multiculturalism, Integration, Agency, Muslim Women*

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## Introduction

In the framework of the Muslim diaspora in the secular context of Western European countries, the discussion regarding the problematized image of Muslim women, seen as a contradiction to gender equality and female empowerment, has dominated the political and public discourse for almost four decades. The media representation of Islam as a threat to Western values has been gender focused since its beginning, using stereotyped and Orientalist images of Arab women to prove Islam's incompatibility with human rights and modern Western values (Phillips and Saharso 2008; Salih 2004; Salvatore 2007; Read 2007). From the discussion regarding gender roles and the religious attire of women of Islamic belief, to the issues related to the honor culture, policies of integration in Europe often focus on the need to acculturate the Muslim communities by 'saving' their women from a patriarchal culture of subordination and disempowerment (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007, 213; El Guindi 1999; Steet 2000). The image of Muslim women became a static and politicized symbol of oppression rather than a self-defined notion of identity and religious belonging.

The ongoing attempt of various countries to strip Muslim women of their pious religious attire gained the attention of multiple NGOs working in the field of Human Rights, and a number of cases of discrimination were brought in front of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The decision of countries to ban Muslim women from wearing the *hijab* and other religious symbols in public places has been criticized by scholars and advocates for violating multiple human rights instruments protecting the freedom of religion and belief, such as the 'Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief', the 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' with articles 18 and 26, the 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' with article 13 and the 'European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms', specifically article 9. In several cases, however, the ECHR (and previously the now extinct European Commission for Human Rights) tend to interpret article 9 of the European Convention relatively strictly, often ruling against the claimant (Cumper and Lewis 2008). Vakulenko (2007) tried to identify the legal obstacle to addressing the intersectional discrimination of Muslim women in cases of the *hijab* ban brought in front of the ECHR. In her argument, article 9 of the European Convention does not allow for an intersectional perspective, as the court applies a fixed misconception of what the headscarf represents, as it was in the case *Sahin vs Turkey* where the ECHR claimed that the ban was justifiable under article 9(2) due to the rise of extremism in Turkey at that

point in time (Sahin v Turkey 2004: paras 103–10; Sahin v Turkey 2005: paras 112–23). Muslim women's right to religious freedom and religious expression is therefore hindered by the static and constructed understanding of their religiously motivated choices, interpreted as either a sign of submission or extremism.

Muslim women in the West face two opposing poles claiming to understand their needs and represent their voices, a Western orientalist discourse in politics and the media and the Islamist political movements. While public opinion in Western countries paints the category of Muslim women through a post-colonial Orientalist lens, Islamist movements used gender roles as a way to stress their right to cultural and religious self-determination and to repress neo-imperialistic impulses from the global north-west (Khan 1999).

According to a qualitative study conducted by Amir-Moazami and Jouili (2006) with pious Muslim women in religious congregations in France and Germany, young Muslim women, despite the differences in their ethnic background, country of residence, level of education, life choices and degree of religious devotion, seem to find a common understanding on a few relevant notions. From stressing on the important role played by education and religious knowledge to explaining the meaning of motherhood in the Islamic world, pious Muslim women describe their religious identities and religiously motivated life choices as tools to achieve personal agency within their communities and in the broader national context (Amir-Moazami and Jouili 2006; Badran 2005 and 2008; Cesari 1994).

The integration of new arrivals and of descendent generations of Muslims immigrated to Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s with a working visa from countries such as Turkey and the Maghreb region, has been a highly debated and contentious topic for decades. Scholars and policy makers engaged in an ongoing debate over the most effective models of integration, categorizing these approaches to diversity into various large theoretical frames; among which we can find Multiculturalism, Assimilation, Individualism and Interculturalism (Modood 2007; Koopmans 2005). Cultural integration models in Europe have identified for years with historical national approaches, such as the Republican Model in France and the Differential-exclusionary model in Germany, but recently many countries which used to tend towards multiculturalism, such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the Flemish region of Belgium, started to adopt assimilationist civic integration measures (Joppke 2004; Kostakopoulou 2010; Guild, Groenendijk and Carrera 2009; Burns 2011; Doomernik 2005; Fekete 2006; Michalowski 2007; Tebble 2006; Weaver 2010).

However, despite the alleged shift towards assimilation in Western-European countries, diversity policies still remain part of the integration

package, especially when it comes to consolidated immigrant communities of second and third generation. This paper will look into the different models from a theoretical perspective in order to determine the degree to which these approaches to cultural integration can accommodate the specific needs of Muslim women of second and third generation, as expressed in the existing literature on Muslim women's agency. By using the indicators of the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP), developed by Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka (2013) at Queen's University, as a frame of reference, this article will explore whether policies which tend closer towards the multiculturalist edge of the spectrum are more effective in promoting Muslim women's agency.

### **1. From Multiculturalism to Assimilation?**

Integration as a concept has drawn the attention of scholars for the last four decades and it has been defined as a multi-staged process concerning both the immigrant and the host society. Since the notions of cultural-assimilation and nation-building have been substituted by European countries with a discourse that allows for more diversity in terms of cultural and religious accommodation, national models of migration management started to endorse integration as a two-way path of mutual change. Scholars have divided the process of integration into four stages. The most notable segmentation of integration is that done by Esser (2000), who identifies four spheres that allow for a migrant full integration into the receiving society: a phase of placement, a phase of cultural integration, a phase of identity redefinition and a phase of social interaction. Integration, therefore, takes shape through a process of inclusion and mutual accommodation in different spheres of societal life. Existing national Western European models of integration have been categorized on the bases of their approach to legal and cultural integration, or the combination of the two. Models giving particular attention to the level citizenship access have been identified as pluralist or multicultural, ethnic or differential-exclusionary, and assimilationist (Carmon 1996) while those concerned with not only the legal sphere of integration, but the cultural aspects as well, have been classified as multicultural, individualist, cosmopolitan and assimilationist (Moodod 2007). This paper will focus primarily on the cultural accommodation of migrants and will therefore examine two of the possible approaches to integration that have been largely researched and discussed: multiculturalism and assimilation. While assimilation is to be understood as the belief that migrants should adapt to the culture and life-style of the host country, and can therefore be viewed as a one-way approach to integration, multiculturalism is considered to be a two way process concerning individuals

as well as groups whose differences require ad hoc 'templates' to integration (Modood 2013; Parekh 2006).

Since the rise of terrorist attacks in Western Europe and the United States of the early 2000, multiculturalism was put into the spotlight by the media and political parties and accused to be the cause of radicalization, segregation and little integration of the Muslim communities (Mullally 2013; Salih 2004; Salvatore 2007; Read 2007). With the largely politicized backlash of multiculturalism, national models began to standardize to an integration approach shared among various member states of the European Union. This standardization took two simultaneous directions; the implementation of civic integration requirements for new arrivals and measures to combat xenophobia and discrimination which allow migrant communities to maintain a margin of cultural and ethnic diversity (Joppke 2007). Civic integration measures, first introduced by the Netherlands in the 1990s and quickly becoming a model for Europe (Michalowski 2004), are directed primarily towards newcomers and their scope ranges between the attempt to acculturate immigrants and to provide them with the tools to become full members of the receiving society (Corbett 2006; Etzioni 2007; Jacobs and Rea 2007; Joppke 2008). Certain civic integration programs in fact tend to take an assimilationist turn by trying to acculturate the migrant to a Western life-style, showing for instance images of homosexuality and nudity. Other curricula, however, are limited to a mix of useful information and core constitutional values. Civic integration, therefore, can take the form of an assimilationist policy depending on the ways in which it is implemented and the degree to which it requires migrants to assimilate in order to become active part of the receiving society (Ferris 2016).

Civic integration classes were introduced by policy makers as a response to problems allegedly caused by pre-existing communities of foreign origins, particularly Muslim groups. The common belief that, due to multiculturalism, immigrants were becoming a threat to security, women's rights and Western values quickly lead to the rise of programs aiming to acculturate newcomers (Joppke 2007). The claim that the multicultural approach had failed and that European states are returning to the assimilation and acculturation of migrants through the implementation of civic integration courses has been argued to be inaccurate and to provide a superficial understanding of the complex picture regarding integration policies (Modood 2013; Banthing and Kymlicka 2013). The MCP, or Index of Multicultural Policies, shows that in concordance to the steady rise in civic integration measures in many European countries, policies that promote diversity and prevent discrimination continue to be implemented (Banthing and Kymlicka 2013), especially targeting established ethnic and religious communities rather

than refugees and newly arrived migrants. While the standardization of integration lead to the rise of civic integration classes on one side, it also focused on anti-discrimination policies for second and third generations of migrant communities. What differentiates, however, the multicultural approach to integration from other approaches, such as assimilation, individualism or universalism and interculturalism, is that it generates group specific policies rather than generic or color blind policies targeting society at large or specific urban areas. When talking about multicultural policies, in fact, the MCP website states:

They differ, however, in the extent to which they go beyond the non-discriminatory protection of traditional individual rights of citizenship to also provide some additional form of public recognition, support or accommodation for ethno-cultural minorities to maintain and express their distinct identities and practices.<sup>1</sup>

The MCP, in fact, uses a series of fixed indicators, such as state founding of ethnic or religious schools, founding for the education of mother-tongue language, exemption from dress codes, institutionalization of multiculturalism, accommodation of religious or ethnic organizations and media representation. Therefore, policies of integration targeting existing migrant communities, just like civic integration measures for newcomers, may be more or less prone to diversity depending on a number of country-specific circumstances, including the influence of far-right political parties in the government's integration agenda (Minkenberg 2001).

This paper will use the concepts of multiculturalism and assimilation as two ideological filters through which integration policies are developed. Policies that accommodate minorities on the various aspects indicated by the Multicultural Policy Index will tend towards a differential approach, those focusing primarily on anti-discrimination measures and implementing color blind policies to achieve equality are oriented towards an integrationist method. Using the MCP indicators as a term of reference this paper will try to position Muslim women's agency on the axis of integration, between the two extremes of multiculturalism and assimilation.

## **2. The Constructed Narrative of Muslim Women in the West**

Having discussed the ongoing debate regarding integration measures and the failure of multiculturalism it is now important to introduce a gender

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<sup>1</sup> Multicultural Policy in Contemporary Democracies website, Queen's University: <http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/about/definitionsdata>

perspective to the complex concept of integration. According to the definition provided by the European Institute of Gender Equality, taking a gender perspective on a specific subject means ‘taking into account the gender-based differences when looking at any social phenomenon, policy or process’.<sup>2</sup> The gender dimension of integration policies has been for long ignored by scholars as well as policy makers, leaving unquestioned the ways in which intersectional discrimination would shape migrant women’s needs and interests. This section of the article aims at applying a gender lens to the issue of integration by discussing the ways in which Muslim women’s image has been constructed in the Western immigration and integration narrative and the ways in which the gender card has been used throughout this debate in order to legitimize politicized claims on Islam. The focus on gender equality and women’s right was often strumentalized by politicians to claim the failure of multiculturalism and the threat that religious, and particularly Muslim communities, pose to Western values and secular believes (Mirza 2013; Salih 2004; Salvatore 2007; Read 2007). The multicultural model has been target of great criticism from scholars and writers belonging to the liberal Western feminism movement, such as Susan M. Okin (1997) in her ‘Is Multiculturalism bad for women?’, for the possible frictions that this model may create by empowering patriarchic minority groups which deny women’s emancipation as these feminist movements conceptualize it (Parolari 2008). Susan Okin and more in general the Western feminist ideals she expresses have been accused to take a paternalistic and ethnocentric stand in trying to define the condition of women in minority groups (Al-Hibri 1997; Gilman 1997; Parekh 1997). Okin was also accused to define cultures as monolithic and static realities rather than semiotic concepts that are constantly changing through interactions with others (Honing 1997; Bhabha 1997), such as the concept of culture developed by Greetz (1973). In doing so she uses the rhetoric of an Us and Them, a Western liberal culture opposed to various patriarchic others, a discourse echoing Huntington’s (1997) ‘Clash of Civilization’ published just a year prior to Okin’s text. This narrative falls into the argumentative trap of Western superiority and Orientalist/Colonialist discourse. However, despite the efforts of those who criticized Okin’s view at the time, multiculturalism remained a political punching ball for decades and the question ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women?’ seems to have been answered by the public opinion with a firm ‘yes’. While Muslim women in Europe remain a symbol of a patriarchal religion and the physical representation of what white feminism and the Western liberal movements for gender equality were preaching against, little voice was actually given them to claim their specific needs and express

<sup>2</sup> EIGE’s website: <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1197>



their own definition of agency. The rhetoric that Muslim women need saving contributed to create the widely spread stereotype of both Muslim women, seen as submissive and disempowered, and of Muslim men, seen as violent and dominant (El Guindi 1999; Steet 2000, Ouali 2010; Bouteldja 2007; Guénif-Souilamas and Macé 2004, 18).

This rhetoric can be seen as a perseveration of the Orientalist discourse regarding Muslim women, which developed during colonial times and continues to influence the exotic image of the 'other' in today's approach to diversity, generally throughout Europe. Western representation of Arab women during colonialism created a stereotyped image that Bhabha (1994, 70-71) defines as a 'fixed and static construction of the other'. Through the Western lens, territories where Islam was a majority religion became solely defined by their religiosity, ignoring regional cultural and historical differences. Muslim women were therefore seen in respect to the Islamic context in which they lived and the fantasy of submissive and disempowered women became the dominant discourse of the West. This form of devaluation of Muslim women, stripped of their roles and competences by Western orientalist literature, was not the only insulting representation they endured during colonial times. The objectification of the exotic woman was another prominent discourse. From the constructed sexual availability of Arab women in comparison to the Victorian repression of carnal needs to the French colonial postcards representing un-veiled semi-nude Algerian women, the devaluation and objectification of Muslim women as an exotic fruit of pleasure contributed to the current neo-imperialistic obsession of liberating Muslim women from the sexual repression of patriarchal Islam. The modern Western interest in fighting religious symbols worn by Muslim women, such as the *hijab* or the *niqab*, in the name of gender equality and to fight patriarchy of a male dominated religion, is the evolution of a belief of Western superiority cultivated during colonialism. Western secularism is believed to be inherently better than the violent and regressive religious values of Islam, and Muslim women are thought to be the most relevant visual representation of traditional gender norms and male supremacy (Khan 1998; El Guindi 1999; Steet 2000). The persistent debate regarding the denial of Muslim women's head covering in the public sphere and in the work space (Bowen 2007; Caincar 2009), formalized in secular France and silently normalized in other EU contexts, finds its basis on three principles: that of secularity, that of neutrality and that of gender equality (Amnesty International 2012). The principle of secularity is commonly known to be the principal of national uniformity and religious blindness on which France and Turkey find the legal right to deny Muslim women's the choice to wear the veils in the public sphere. The principle of neutrality is often

used by private corporation and employers, as well as state institutions, to deny Muslim employees the right to wear religious symbols if they hold a position that represents the company to the public, stating that they should promote a religious-neutral image of the enterprise (Mohamed 2001). Finally, the principle of gender equality is another largely cited reason why states or other institutions deny women their right to religious expression. The constructed belief that all women wearing the *hijab* are forced by the men in their family to cover their heads fits perfectly in the Orientalist discourse of Muslim women's submission and victimization, as well as the superiority of Western society and secular values compared to the constructed static image of Islamic families and societal norms.

Muslim women, however, are not constructed only by the Western Orientalist discourse. Islamist movements, born as a response to imperialism and colonial ruling in the Middle-East, took for themselves the rights to control women's body image and sexuality as a form of identity politics. The image of Muslim women became a tool for political messages from both Islamist movements and Western nationalism (Khan 1998). In this spectrum of forces controlling the narrative regarding their bodies and rights, stuck in between two ends, one covering and one uncovering their heads, Muslim women lost the right to speak with their own voices.

### **3. Agency of Muslim Women through Religious Identity and Knowledge**

The predominant narrative of liberal Western feminism of the late 70s promoted a battle for women's rights that was centered on a universalist understanding of gender roles and empowerment. Through the misconception that women of color and women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities were facing the same struggle with patriarchy faced by white women, white liberal feminism often ignores the intersectional dimension of discrimination other women are subjected to and lacks to take into account their cultural specific needs to achieve empowerment (Hooks 1990, 29). As Degavre and Stoffel (2008, 8) framed it:

'To recognize that women's group is distributed along the axes social class or race/ethnicity—among others, that it is thus divided. It is already the first step towards the recognition of the fact that all women are not exposed in the same way to oppression, that they (white women) can themselves belong to the oppressor group, and that they do not have all the same interests.'

In the specific case of Muslim women, while preaching their saving from oppression, politics of liberalism in the West and the media forgot to take into account two important aspects of the struggle towards gender equality and women's empowerment. First of all, the movement often seems to misinterpret the meaning of empowerment, which has been defined as the ability to make choices and gain some degree of control over one's own life (Kabeer 2001; Garcia and Claro 1994; Batliwala 1994). In accordance to this definition of empowerment we can claim that there is not one single process of emancipation equally efficient for women living in different economic and cultural contexts. Secondly, it is important to account for the elements composing the concept of empowerment which have been recognized as resources and agency. With resources we mean both the material resources and the social capital that can allow someone to acquire both the economic sufficiency and personal network to help him/her succeed in making their own choices. With the word agency we intend the capacity to make that choice, negotiate it or bargain it, within the framework in which one's life takes place (Kabeer 1999). These two elements combined constitute what Sen (1985) defines as capabilities. The linkage between empowerment, agency and resources have been interpreted in different ways by scholars. Sen (1999), for instance, describes agency as the core essence of empowerment, stating that one needs agency to make choices and take control over the resources to achieve his or her goals. Kabeer (2001) on the other hand sees agency and resources as combining components of empowerment, viewing agency as the process of making choices and resources as the enabling condition to begin the empowering process.

When deconstructing the meaning of the word empowerment we can agree that empowerment itself may take different shapes and forms in different cultural contexts, depending on the target people want to achieve, the instruments of agency they use to achieve it and the material resources and social capital granted to different cultural minorities. This article will not focus on the resources element of empowerment, but it will analyze the tools Muslim women use to define and negotiate their choices; hence the element of agency.

Scholars have claimed that Muslim women gain agency from their religiosity in a number of different ways (Abu-Lughod 2002; Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005; Jacobsen 2011, Jouili 2011). Various studies have shown that women can find agency in concepts that do not align with those prescribed by traditional feminist expectations, such as the family and strict gender roles (Jeffery and Basu 1998; Mahmood 2005; Mohanty 1988). Mahmood (2005, 34) claims that Western liberal feminism struggles to consider religious identity and religious motivated choices as efficient tools for agency because they situate

themselves outside the framework of secular liberalism and tend towards the pious concept of submission. Agency, however, should be understood as the capacity to negotiate choices within the structure of power in which one is living. While scholars in the past have argued that religious identities and feminism can often be at odds, recent studies of female Muslim agency show that piety and female empowerment may be more interconnected than we used to believe and that we cannot just juxtapose the Western concept of gender equality to analyze Islamic gender norms (Abu-Lughod 1986; Ahmed 1992; Göle 1996; Deeb 2006; Rinaldo 2014).

In the European context, while some organizations of pious Muslim women adopt an Islamic feminist perspective and engage in reformist readings of the *Qur'ān*, others remain within more consolidated female sections of Islamic congregations and find relevant positions within their mosques and neighborhoods through Islamic education. While roles within conventional religious sites are mostly occupied by the older generations of Muslim women, newer generations tend to question traditional religious authority and have a more individualized form of Islam (Cesari 2003). They reorganized themselves into groups and organizations practicing and believing in a 'purer form' of Islam, cleaned from ethnic and cultural beliefs and founded primarily on the *Qur'ān*, and the *Hadith*. There seem to be the belief, especially among younger generations of Muslim women in Western Europe, that Islam should be founded on the sacred scriptures rather than on historical and cultural interpretations (Mandaville 2001). Young women have claimed that the Islam of their first generation parents is made less pure by the patriarchal traditions and that in the context of transnationalism, when the Muslim community came to be a minority in other countries due to migration and globalization, Islam needs to be anchored on its primary sources rather than on interpretations incompatible with the new environment and the life-style Muslims are living (Zemni 2006). The appeal that new religious leaders and organizations have on such a large number of young Muslims in Europe is the ability to address issues faced by the community while living in the West and interpret the scriptures in accordance to the needs of new generations. Among these organizations of 'new born' Muslims we can find women groups that focus on producing knowledge, such as school texts and journals of Islamic studies, re-interpret the sources and engage in inter-religious dialogues with the majority society. The curriculum of Islamic classes in public schools can be produced by Muslim female groups, such as the Die Islamische Padagogische Dienst (IPD) in Germany, which publishes edited textbooks that find strong consensus among mainstream state institutions due to their moderate tones and tolerant interpretations of sacred scriptures. Women's

groups that have been engaging in these kind of activities are often working in the premises of Muslim communities, outside the more traditional production sites. Within mosque contexts they struggle to gain support and recognition, but they seem to be a bridging force between congregations of different religions, women groups of different cultural background and, more generally, between the majority and the Islamic minorities in Western European states (Jonker 2003).

However, a large portion of Muslim women in Europe seem to be less reformist and to reject the adjective of Islamic Feminism due to the belief that Feminism is a concept of the West and it preaches individualism rather than community oriented values (Jonker 2003). Women's groups that have been engaging in re-interpreting religious scriptures have been described by some of the pious Muslim women interviewed by Amir-Moazami and Jouili as to be as to be 'pushing it too far' (Amir-Moazami and Jouili 2006). While rejecting some of the more liberal work done by reformist women's groups, pious Muslim women believe they should be allowed to pursue an education and, more specifically, that Islamic education gives them the ability to contradict gender norms and patriarchal traditions imposed on them by their parents. Furthermore, they seem to believe that through an extensive knowledge of Islam women can gain prominent positions within their community and are able to obtain a certain degree of personal agency (Fadil 2005; Duderija 2017).

Islam can therefore become a resource for empowerment if we understand agency as the element of empowerment that allows someone to make independent choices and to actively change issues that affect him or her directly. Without losing sight of the fact that faith, for pious individuals, is first of all a search for meaning other than a tool for empowerment and social or political mobilization, recent studies show that religion, in the case of Muslim women, can become the language used to define and negotiate their choices within the pre-established power structure in Muslim communities. Through religious knowledge and education, Muslim women can gain the respect of the men in their families and are able to obtain valued roles within religious institutions or organizations. With a refined knowledge of the sacred texts, women can contradict traditional gender misconceptions with a language that cannot be contested, that of the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunna* (Dwyer 1999; Khosrokhavar 1997, 57).

In a number of interviews conducted with pious Muslim women in religious communities of France and Germany, Amir-Moazami and Jouili (2006) gathered qualitative data showing that religious knowledge and general education were two elements women cited as necessary to fulfill their religious identity. While founding their arguments on religious values

and moral conducts, these women were often referring to the importance of gaining religious knowledge in order to fight strict traditional gender stereotypes and roles associated with the culture of their parents rather than with Islam itself. They used the acquired knowledge of pure Islam to contest cultural traditions such as forced marriages and to negotiate their space in the public sphere. They also referred to the importance of general and religious education for the purpose of becoming good mothers. In their discourse, motherhood gains an important connotation and could be interpreted as 'political motherhood', in the sense that it becomes a private status emerging in the public domain in a political way as it shapes the values of the future Muslim *Umma* (Werbner 1999). Being a mother is therefore not interpreted, by Muslim women, as a less relevant position compared to that of men but rather as an equally important role for the functioning of their community. Motherhood therefore, seen as the job of 'first educator', gains a public denomination. During the interviews (Amir-Moazami and Jouili 2006), Muslim women used motherhood to explain why they believed Islam preaches gender equality through strict gender norms. Being a mother is a role of great value within the Muslim community and it does not make women any less responsible or valuable than men. Gender roles, however, allow for women to be able to comply with their responsibility as mothers without the need to juggle between the public and the private sphere, as Western women do. Some Muslim women were reported saying that this is a higher form of gender equality, because in comparison to the Western system where society forces women to be both mothers and full time employed in order to be valued as highly as their male counterparts, Islamic societies recognize a woman's worth without asking her to on take two jobs at the same time (Williams and Vashi 2007; Predelli 2004).

Acquiring knowledge for the purpose of being educated mothers should therefore be understood as an important requirement in order to best conduct the role that gives them the highest value and worth in accordance to their religious identity. Knowledge, however, is not just important for the purpose of educating the children but also for other activities that grant women the respect of the Muslim community. The *da'wa*, for instance, are activities meant for the teaching of the sacred scriptures. While in Muslim majority countries *da'wa* take primarily the form of proselytism, in the West Muslim women engage in these activities for the purpose of changing the negative image of Islam and fighting discrimination by showing good examples of their spiritual lives. A form of *da'wa* may in fact consist in taking part in public intercultural dialogues about integration and religious accommodation (Jonker 2003). In addition to *da'wa*, women engage in other forms of voluntary work for the wellbeing of the community. In a study

of two women groups in South Africa it was showed that these forms of voluntary-based action for the collective good gave women a sense of self-worth and it allowed them to gain a space in the public sphere that was justified through their religiously motivated choice to give something back to the community. The women interviewed expressed the importance to have a good starting knowledge of the scriptures in order to found their work on a solid ground and to negotiate their right to conduct these activities with the male members of their families. The two Muslim women's groups taken into consideration for the study were justifying their action with their religious identities and values and their work did not only contribute to increase their self-worth as pious individuals but also their image in the public sphere. This form of religiously framed civic participation was fruitful for these women's empowerment, providing them new skills, knowledge, public recognition and self-esteem. Despite initial criticism and skepticism from their families, these women were able to finally change their husbands minds by proving their worth, the religious knowledge they acquired and by showing the importance of their work both in functional and religious terms (Zarina 2008). While contrary to Islamic Feminism these women do not reinterpret sacred scriptures, they still use the form of pure Islam as opposed to traditional or historical Islam, to gain agency and recognition within their communities. Religious knowledge works both for the purpose of becoming an authoritative figure within the family and in the community at large while at the same time allows women to be more educated mothers. The two functions that religious education has are complementary for the acquisition of agency. On the one hand, it gives women agency from the outside, allowing them to negotiate their rights with their family and other authoritative figures in their communities. On the other hand, it gives them agency from within, meaning that it shapes their perception of their own worth and value in the community, allowing them to justify their life choices through their religious identities.

#### **4. Muslim Women Agency and Integration Policies**

Having understood the complexity surrounding the acquisition of agency for Muslim women belonging to religious communities in Europe this paper will now address the ways in which existing integration models miss to address the intersectional dimension and cultural specific needs of these women. Religious knowledge and religious identity are recognized to be two forces that promote Muslim women agency from both an external and internal perception of the self. In certain cases religious reinterpretation is used to find a common ground for both religious believes and women's

rights (Charrad 2011; Rinaldo 2013; Salime 2011). The first important element to take into consideration is the way in which integration models construct the meaning of empowerment. In the debate regarding gender equality and migration, liberal feminist movements in the West have for long opposed the notion that feminism could accommodate cultural and religious specific meaning, saying that the battle for gender equality was founded on universal understanding of women's rights (Ouali 2012; Zimmerman 2015).

This view of gender equality intrinsically supports an image of empowerment that renounces gender roles and embraces various possible forms of career paths and life choices, while simultaneously making motherhood and house keeping a less valuable and prestigious option for the disenfranchised woman. In the Western discourse regarding Muslim women, the persistence of gender roles and the segregation of Muslim women within the private sphere, is seen as a limitation to empowerment and consequentially to integration (Kraler and Bonizzoni 2010).

The persistence of traditional gender roles and norms is often used as an indicators to measure the level of integration of Muslim communities in Europe. The recent analysis conducted by the IMISCOE research network of the results gathered by the TIES dataset (The Integration of European Second Generation), included a section regarding cultural practices, religiosity and the persistence of gender norms (Curl, Shneider and Lelie 2012). Cultural integration and more specifically private family choices, therefore, seems to be a matter of influence for researchers and scholars in this field. The maintenance of gender roles may still be considered an obstacle to integration if interpreted within the Western narrative of gender equality and women's empowerment. A Muslim woman's decision to remain unemployed in view of her desire to be a full time mother, role that grants her a strong sense of identity and through which she acquires personal worth according to her religious belief, will be considered a backward form of gender roles and female segregation of the Muslim community (Andrews 2006). This misunderstanding of women's path to agency and empowerment through religion may continue to push for policies of integration that strip Muslim women of their identity with the aim of westernize their life course and, in a deeper sense, their life meaning.

When it comes to analyze the impact that each integration model may have on framing Muslim women's agency is important to keep in mind that multiculturalism and assimilation are not static concepts, but rather two galaxies of policies, practices and shared experiences which may vary greatly vertically, from the national to the regional context, and horizontally, from one local context to the other.



As this paper discussed above, the so called assimilationists measures encompass a variety of policies and practices applied by EU member states which tend to silence identities while promoting a neutral model of citizenship, freed from religious or ethnic particularities. This approach limits religious expression and practice to the private sphere and avoids policies which target religious or ethnic groups directly, opting for social measures directed towards disadvantaged territorial areas (such as neighborhoods) rather than communities themselves. The French Republican model of integration could be considered an example of the assimilationist approach. Despite France's insistence in promoting a universal and individualist integration model, the *hijab* ban has been seen as a tentative of assimilating Muslim women to the standards of France's secular values rather than a policy promoting equality among all citizens. The 2004 ban on religious symbols can be considered the cornerstone of France's fight against religious identities and religious expression in the public arena, leading to the rise of controversial debates on the usage of the Islamic veil around Europe (McGoldrick 2008). On the basis of the arguments brought forward in this paper, the *hijab* debate as well as other measures preventing the manifestation of religious identities in the public sphere, can be considered counterproductive to Muslim women's agency. The narrative surrounding the *hijab* and other religious forms of veiling used by Muslim women is always one of submission rather than choice, of extremism rather than identity and personal agency. Assimilationists measures, however, go beyond the limitation of women's religious expression. The assimilationist framework restricts Muslim women's agency in other policy fields, such as funding for women's groups, religious education, media channels promoting diversity and last but not least integration programs targeting Muslim women.

In accordance to a study conducted with Muslim women in an area of the Parisian banlieue called Petit Nanterre, Shelby (2011) demonstrated that the discourse of secularism, especially subsequent to the 2003 Jacques Chirac-mandated Stasi Commission Report, and the work of feminist organization such Femmes Solidaires (FS) miss to address the real needs of Muslim women in poor suburbs of the French capital. Through a series of activities, such as theatrical plays and guest speakers, the government and FS became active participants of an integration program for newcomers, mainly directed towards Muslim women in the neighborhood. The women attending these French classes were described as uninterested in these secularist-based activities. Rather than engaging with the speakers in conversation regarding religious practices and male oppression, these women tried to change the subject of the conversation to more structural needs such as housing, healthcare and citizenship. The specific case of Petit Nanterre teaches an

important lesson; institutions and organizations promoting universality and secularism failed to understand the actual needs of Muslim women in their specific economic and cultural context. France' self-acquired title of guarantor of gender equality and the belief that the main priority of Muslim women is liberation from gender roles and male oppression continues to promote top down policies that silence their voices.

Multiculturalism, as this paper previously discussed, has suffered criticism from both scholars, the media and politicians, being accused of causing the rise of boundaries between the majority society and ethnic communities and to be responsible for the perseveration of violent gender practices, the spread of radical Islamic believes and little identification with the country of destination. In a time when multiculturalism has been accused to facilitate the 'Clash of Civilization' (Huntington 1997) and when the implementation of civic integration courses is seen as a turn towards assimilation, diversity policies face an increasing distrust among the public opinion and integrationist methods become the logical response for, among other issues, the 'liberation' of Muslim women.

The progressive multiculturalist model of scholars such as Kymlicka (1995) and Modood (2008), however, is an agglomeration of various policies at different institutional levels, from the accommodation of diversity in various governmental institutions to the existence of a body responsible for the implementation of policies in consultation with ethnic communities. As Malik (2000) suggest, the issues addressed by progressive multiculturalism are grounded on the same principles onto which feminists movements are based: the will to translate into political action the fight against institutionalized discriminations. Furthermore, according to the MCP, the multicultural integration approach would allow for more diversity in schools curricula, the inclusion of diversity in the media, exemptions from dress codes for religious or cultural attire, the access to dual citizenship, funding for ethnic or religious organizations, founding for bilingual or mother-tongue education, affirmative action and anti-discrimination measures (Banthing and Kymlicka 2013). Multiculturalism, therefore, should not be seen as the cause of ethnic and religious groups' segregation, but rather as a way to accommodate communities' requests in order to ease their integrations in all spheres of societal life.

When looking at multiculturalism from a gender perspective in order to assess its efficiency in the promotion of Muslim women's agency, a first step would be that of highlighting the forms of accommodations Muslim women may need in order to reach their objectives. First of all there seems to be the need for religious and native language teachings that could be easily accessible to girls, either in public schools, mosques or other types of

religious organizations. This would allow women to gain a better knowledge of the Arab language, formal tongue of the Islamic faith, and to develop a deeper understanding of the sacred scriptures. Religious knowledge, as we've previously seen, helps to counteract the historical and cultural Islam of first generations and gives women the tools to gain agency within their communities. Religious education in public school is generally missing in secular contexts but can be found in various historically multiculturalists societies. Furthermore, education in general is described by women as a source of empowerment, even if the final purpose of schooling, in their narrative, is often not self-focused but rather used to become an educated mother and to help the community with the acquired skills and knowledge. Policies prohibiting or discouraging religious attire in public schools are posing serious obstacles to Muslim women's education. The same can be said about companies or institutions denying vocational training to Muslim women on the base of their religious appearance in the name of neutrality (Amnesty International 2012).

Other than religious education Muslim women need a space to make this knowledge fruitful not only for their role as first educators, or mothers, but for the Muslim community at large. The *da'wa* activities are often organized by women groups and give women a space to make their knowledge and time available to others. Funding for grass-roots women's organizations based on religious self-identification allows these subjects to gain a space outside the context of mosques and their own homes, in which they can practice their religiosity while gaining organizational knowledge, acquiring different skills from other women in the group and by participating in different activities. This could be a space where religion is purified from cultural traditions and becomes a common ground among women of different ethnic backgrounds, stimulating participation, exchange of skills and pursuing activities that are meant to improve the conditions of the society at large while at the same time give women a sense of self-worth. The two Muslim women's groups of a study discussed in this paper argued that one of the main challenges faced by their organizations was access to funding to pursue their activities. Even the funding of non-female only religious organizations would be more useful than no funding at all. When religious organizations are not sponsored by state institutions they are forced to look for funding elsewhere. Some Turkish religious organizations in Germany, for instance, profess and teach a stricter and more politicized form of Islam compared to religious institutions in Sweden or in the Netherlands. While both seem to be successful in transferring religious values and identity to the next generations, the teachings of religious institutions in Germany have a more radical outcome. It is suggested in the TIES report (Crul, Schneider and

Frans 2012) that this may be connected to the institutionalization of Islam in Sweden and in the Netherlands and the weak institutionalization of Islam in Germany, which causes organizations to get funding from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other golf countries. Institutionalization of Islam and funding for new religious organizations, most likely initiated by the newer generation of European Islam, could be an important instrument to negotiate the presence of women's groups and women's participation. Funding for ethnic or religious based associations can only be collocated within a multiculturalist perspective, rather than an assimilationist one. We would expect a strong assimilationist politics, in fact, to deny funding to organizations of people based on cultural and religious belonging, especially if different from that of the majority. In Belgium, for instance, where the language communities are responsible for integration policies, the Flemish community, which follows the Netherland's multiculturalist approach, is more likely to finance bottom-up organizations and programs of ethnic and religious minorities. The French community, on the other hand, is more likely to fund color blind and universalistic programs in accordance to the French Republican model of integration (Martiniello and Rea 2004, Adam 2013).

Furthermore, as this paper previously discussed, Muslim women in Western societies struggle with the misconceptions and stereotypes regarding gender roles and religious attire. Certain Muslim women's decision to choose motherhood over a career or to wear the *hijab* outside of the walls of their houses have become largely debated topics in the mainstream media. The constructed image of submissive and victimized Muslim women loosens their agency and sense of self-worth in the public space. Through a fairer ethnic and religious media representation women's image could be re-defined, allowing them to defend their religious choices with their own voice. A more equal media representation could also show to a wider audience the vast variety of Muslim women's groups, changing the misconception that Muslim women are a static and unidimensional category. Furthermore, media representation could allow Muslim women groups involved in *ijtihad* activities (reinterpretation of sacred scriptures) to gain a platform through which they could reach directly inside women's homes. The general Muslim women's distrust in feminism is often caused by the belief that feminism is essentially a Western product based solely on secular ideals and liberalism.

If Islamic feminist movements were able to gain a wider audience these misconceptions and distrust could be reduced. Media representation is one of the indicators used by the MCP index to determine a country's implementation of diversity policies and thus falls into the orbit of the multiculturalist integration model. Muslim women's tools for agency could therefore be better accommodated by Multicultural policies rather than by

assimilationist measures which have been proved to be color blind and often opposing the strengthening of religious identities.

## Conclusions

Religious education, religious identity and religious motivated choices have been described as sources of Muslim women's agency and can therefore promote change in the gender dynamics of Muslim communities. Basing their life choices on their religious identities allows women to gain personal worth and strength, while women's organizations and Islamic education are fundamental to provide them with the tools to combat patriarchy and to negotiate their rights in their families and in their religious communities. Between the two most discussed integration models, multiculturalist or assimilationist, the promotion of diversity through the financing of identity-based programs is more likely to accommodate Muslim women's needs to achieve agency. By recognizing the legitimacy of their cultural claims, multiculturalism not only validates women's choices even if these differ from the ideal of secular liberalism but additionally provides them with the tools to develop bottom up forms of association through which they gain a voice not only within their communities but also in the broader national space.

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