Incomplete lives: experiences of Islamophobia as governmentality in education and employment in Flanders, Belgium.

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Abstract

This paper discusses Muslim experiences of differential treatment in Flanders, Belgium, and builds on theories of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism and a form of governmentality. I argue that Islamophobia understood as historically and structurally embedded, residing in social institutions rather than personal intentions or actions, operates in coercive and subtle ways to steer, structure and limit Muslim life courses. The analysis draws from forty semi-structured life story interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 with mainly second and third-generation immigrants. Education and employment are prime domains where differential treatment restricts life aspirations and effectively governs Muslims' life choices. Female respondents view a headscarf ban in education and job offerings conditional on veil removal as 'a rejection of the (Muslim) self', at times leading to veil decision fatigue. Respondents offered mixed prospects for the future, with some expressing a desire to leave Belgium in search of better opportunities for self-realisation.

Key words: Islamophobia, racialization and racism, discrimination, Muslims in Europe, governmentality, hijab

Introduction

Amid a public debate on the crisis of employment in education and the high number of teaching positions left vacant in secondary schools, Flemish Minister of Education and Training, Ben Weyts, declared in parliament, 'You could question [these] teachers' motivation [and ask] whether they are only willing to teach while wearing a headscarf. Apparently, they must have a higher calling than being a teacher' (Struys 20 october 2021). His statement on headscarves not belonging in the classroom expressed a widely shared sentiment among Flemish nationalists and wider segments of society identifying as liberal and secular. In Belgium, the Muslim headscarf is often considered a matter belonging to the private sphere and not aligning with the exigencies of neutrality in the public sector. Muslim women's religious dress has been the subject of legislation, including bans on headscarves, the face-veil, and body-covering swimwear, following the leading example of France (Open Society Justice Initiative 2022, 13). Interestingly, in the most prominent ruling to date, the Belgian Council of State declared a ban on headscarves in Flemish public schools discriminatory and incompatible with the right to freedom of religion (Belgian Council of State 14 October 2014). This ruling, however, did not change the policy of the public school network that imposed the general ban. Headscarves remain banned for teachers and pupils in local school regulations, an 'extremely

rare' defiance of Belgium's highest administrative court (Brems 2020, 103). This case illustrates the widespread intolerance of religious signs at school and at work.

The study of Islamophobia has expanded significantly in recent decades. The number of state and civil society initiatives that manage the reporting and documenting of violent and non-violent incidents has evenly increased in countries across Europe (e.g. Open Society Justice Initiative 2022, Šeta 2016, Van de Graaf 2021). Overall, awareness of Islamophobia as racism has risen and the use of the concept has become more commonly accepted within and outside of academia. The rise in legislation banning Muslim religious dress and the increase in reported incidents of discrimination cannot be understood outside the overall political climate. Right-wing actors across Europe have been pushing mainstream political parties to embrace racist discourse, lending 'an unfortunate "legitimacy" to xenophobic positions' (Hammerberg 2010, 11). The study of Islamophobia in all its direct and indirect forms and shapes remains, therefore, urgent and necessary.

Respondents disclosed several experiences of explicit racism and Islamophobia, such as being harassed and intimidated by strangers, teachers, and employers, in some cases including violent actions. This paper, however, does not detail cases of violence and discrimination but focuses on more subtle forms of differential treatment. I discuss Belgian Muslim experiences with education and employment through the central lens of limitations, foreclosures and curtailment of life opportunities, which I analyse in this paper as mechanisms of Islamophobic governmentality. I build on Salman Sayyid's insight that Islamophobia ultimately indicates 'an undermining of the ability of Muslims as Muslims, to project themselves into the future' (Sayyid 2014, 14). In the Flemish Minister of Education's view, wearing a hijab is incompatible with a teaching career. In my respondents' view, their life options are limited and governed by political decision-making that is over-determined by the symbolic powers of the veil (Al-Saji 2010). The continuous exposure to supposedly contradictory life choices fit within an overall problematisation of Muslim presence in society.

This paper addresses both individual experience and the larger structures operative in society. I build on Foucauldian approaches to anti-Muslim racism (e.g. Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2021, Mondon and Winter 2017), critical work on secularism's governing dimensions over what constitutes religion and Islam (e.g. Fernando 2014, Asad 2003) and, work that theorises Islamophobia as a form of governmentality (Sayyid 2014, Kaya 2015, Finlay and Hopkins 2020, Zuhri 2021, Kaya 2011, Birt 2010, Nabi 2011, Kumar 2012). Against this background and drawing from forty interviews with Belgian Muslims conducted between 2020 and 2022, I argue that lived Islamophobia in Belgium is best understood as the governance of and limitations on Muslim life courses, particularly in terms of education and employment opportunities and prospects of the future.

The first section of this paper details my understanding of and approach to Islamophobia. The discussion of findings is organised in three parts: 1) curtailed life aspirations by being structurally underrated in education and tracked away from school trajectories that lead to higher, tertiary education; 2) restrictions on job opportunities, including the false dichotomy of having to choose between work or career on one hand and religion or wearing a headscarf on the other; and 3) prospects of the future and particularly, the desire to leave Belgium.

Anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia as governmentality

I understand contemporary Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism that is embedded in European colonial histories and Orientalism, in which the concepts of race and religion are intertwined (e.g. Anidjar 2003). Scholar of religious studies Anya Topolski refers to the race-religion constellation to show how processes of racialisation have been entangled with views of the religious Other since the sixteenth century (Topolski 2018). Others advance the notion of 'the Muslim

Question' to connect to the Jewish Question and European histories of national exclusion (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2021). Bracke and Hernandez Aguilar focus on the Muslim Question to understand how nation-states create mechanisms of exclusion through a Foucauldian biopolitics that produces Muslim minorities as an eternal internal/external 'alien' body that ought to be integrated or assimilated, and whose demographic growth ought to be kept in check. Others have similarly demonstrated the importance of religion and secularism in addition to race for understanding Islamophobia. Racialization combines with secularism to shape and govern dominant understandings of religion, and Islam in particular (e.g. Asad 2003, Jouili 2015). Islamophobia is most of all a contemporary form of racism that is modulated and connected to the workings of the current neoliberal and secular state.

It has been commonly agreed that Islamophobia is not a phenomenon with a clearly circumscribed essence but can be best understood in the context of the variety and multiplicity of its articulations and expressions, similar to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance (Klug 2012, Garner and Selod 2015, Sayyid 2014). We can understand Islamophobia best through a 'series of overlapping elements that constitute a coherence' (Sayyid 2014, 14). By being exposed to several sorts of remarks, incidences, and questions, one starts to see patterns and understand that all are connected by a 'unity of the gaze', lumping different groups of people together (Garner and Selod 2015, 5-6). Through a broad and diverse range of practices and discourses, one understands the meanings of Islamophobic thought and action. Sayyid describes five 'clusters' that make up the 'repertoire of Islamophobia', starting with physical, violent attacks as a first cluster. A much more subtle fourth cluster refers to when Muslims 'receive less favourable treatment than their peers in comparable positions within the same organisations' (Sayyid 2014, 15-6). This includes receiving less favourable performance assessments at school, in job applications, and at work, which will be discussed empirically in this paper.

This paper discusses how Islamophobia, understood as a range of articulations with a common family resemblance, impacts Muslim life in Europe by its governing effects. Conceiving Islamophobia as a form of governmentality means considering how Muslim life is managed and regulated by recognisable institutionalised powers and in less tangible and obvious ways. While previously mentioned scholars have a general Foucauldian approach, only a few attempted to theorise Islamophobia explicitly as a form of governmentality. Anthropologist Yahya Birt developed a detailed, schematic conceptualisation of expressions of Islamophobia globally (Birt 2010). In this scheme, political control of Muslims is operationalised through different 'applications' (collectivities – individuals) and 'domains' (national – global) (Birt 2010, 118-122). Additionally, it is articulated through three different 'modalities', referring to Foucault's techniques of state governance to direct behaviour: sovereignty, discipline, and governmentality. The third level, governmentality, concerns us most for this discussion, as it includes the 'autonomous "deep" subject of choice and self-identity' (p. 118). At this individual level, the subject internalises practices and discourses by self-regulation and self-disciplining.

Similarly, Finlay and Hopkins conceptualised Islamophobia as comprising institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of governmentality (Finlay and Hopkins 2020). Institutionalised forms mainly refer to policy, dominant media discourse and educational centres that exclude, marginalise or discriminate against Muslim populations. Institutionalised Islamophobia is characterised by the exertion of power by state and state-associated social institutions, while non-institutionalised islamophobia is distinguished by a generalised type of power exercised by non-state actors, civil society and the general public (Finlay and Hopkins 2020, 7-8). In other words, the latter includes everyday experiences and refers to individuals regulating and disciplining each other. Political

scientist Ayhan Kaya summarises the conceptualisation of Islamophobia as governmentality as 'a discourse that travels between state, civil society, and citizens, that produces and organises subjects, and that is used by subjects to govern themselves' (Kaya 2011, 24). Thus, Islamophobia operates under different guises and results in the (self-)management, (self-)disciplining and (self-)regulating of Muslim populations.

Methodology

The qualitative research for this project forms part of a larger international qualitative research project, 'Islam-ophob-ism', investigating Muslim attitudes and experiences in the Netherlands, Germany, France and Belgium, and was funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant[1]. The project aimed to investigate European Muslim experiences of marginalisation and alienation in light of migration and globalisation. The author was part of the research team and conducted all research in Belgium. In Belgium, 7,6% of the 11,3 million population is Muslim (Brems 2020, 66). Although the Belgian Muslim population is very diverse, the two largest groups have migration roots in Morocco and Turkey because of the labour migration treaties these countries signed with Belgium in the 1960s (Fadil, El Asri, and Bracke 2015, 224). All but two interviews were conducted with second- or third-generation migrants with Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds. One interview was conducted with a respondent with an Armenian background and another with a convert to Islam.

Inclusion criteria included being a 1) Belgian national, 2) self-identified Muslim 3) between the ages of 18 and 35, and 4) interested in sharing experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and Islamophobia. One-fourth of respondents were recruited through a snowball method in which participants invited others from their networks, friends, colleagues and family circles. The remaining part of respondents were recruited through social media calls for participants. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted about two hours on average. They were all conducted by the author in Dutch or French, which were the languages that both the author and interviewees had proficiency in or was their native language. Interviews started with open biographical questions. The question guide included 17 questions, divided into four blocks of topics. The first block aimed to gather life story and biographic information; the second explored the immediate environment (e.g. local neighbourhood life, school and educational experiences); the third concerned respondents' views of the political, economic and social issues in their country; and the fourth block broadly discussed their perceptions of global issues.

For ethical and methodological reasons, the interviews were not audio recorded, but I took written notes which were subsequently used for elaborate interview transcripts that use original wording as much as possible. The use of written field notes taken either during an interview or immediately afterwards has been reported as superior to the exclusive use of verbatim transcripts of audio recordings (Wengraf 2001). Audio recordings carry the risk of identification (Cychosz et al. 2020), and loss of confidentiality would have consequences for our sample profile. We wanted to ensure that respondents were fully anonymous and could freely express beliefs and experiences they would otherwise hide in the research setting. Respondents were offered access to the interview transcripts and invited to change their responses. Only two respondents made use of this opportunity but did not want to make any changes. In sum, not recording the interviews supported our efforts to gain access to individuals, who are often sceptical and resistant to establish contact with researchers, but also created a reflexive alliance between researchers and interlocutors.

[1] The necessary ethic approval was granted by the evaluating Horizon 2020 committee.

Notes were taken in Dutch and translated into English while writing the transcripts. Data coding and thematic analysis were performed manually by the author. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during the entire course of data collection, all but three interviews took place online via different communication platforms. All participants were given an information sheet detailing the research project's aims and objectives. Research aims, procedures, and ethical guidelines were verbally presented to all respondents before starting the interview, after which consent was obtained. All names referred to in the paper are pseudonyms. Finally, I have been conscious of the possible impact my positionality as a non-racialised and non-Muslim researcher might have had on the respondents. A few factors may have mediated gaining access to and obtaining agreement from participants. My personal research history and commitment to particular research agendas and my participation in civil society organisations that support Muslim minority rights may have contributed to creating rapport. The PI of this project being Muslim, racialised and having a non-Belgian ethnic background may have been another factor that helped in gaining access. Finally, the invitation to explicitly discuss experiences of racism, discrimination and Islamophobia in the calls for participation signalled openness and created a safe space for narratives showing personal vulnerability to racialisation and social exclusion.

Table with demographics of interviewees:

	Ethnic background	Gender	Age
1	Turkish	Male	26
2	Moroccan	Male	19
3	Turkish	Male	29
4	Turkish	Female (wears hijab)	21
5	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	23
6	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	20
7	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	25
8	Turkish	Female (wears hijab)	25
9	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	23
10	Turkish	Male	26
11	Moroccan	Male	24
12	Turkish	Female (does not wear hijab)	29
13	Turkish	Male	26
14	Turkish	Male	29
15	Moroccan	Female (does not wear hijab)	24
16	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	27

17	Turkish	Male	27
18	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	30
19	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	24
20	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	26
21	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	24
22	Moroccan	Male	30
23	Converted native Belgian	Male	24
24	Macedonia	Male	28
25	Moroccan	Female (does not wear hijab)	27
26	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	23
27	Moroccan	Female (does not wear hijab)	24
28	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	23
29	Moroccan	Male	29
30	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	30
31	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	30
32	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	34
33	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	33
34	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	29
35	Turkish	Female (does not wear hijab)	30
36	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	28
37	Converted native Belgian	Female (does not wear hijab)	35
38	Moroccan	Female (wears hijab)	35
39	Turkish	Female (wears hijab)	26
40	Moroccan	Female (does not wear hijab)	35

Education: Islamophobia as the governance and structuring of life aspirations

This section focuses on early life experiences of being treated differently. For many respondents, school life was a period in which their lives took an unintended and unexpected direction. One

crucial factor shaping this experience is the structural organisation of the Belgian educational system that relies on early tracking. The Belgian educational system has been widely criticised for reproducing socio-economic and ethnic inequalities (Van Praag et al. 2019, Van Praag, Stevens, and Van Houtte 2014). In Belgium, the difference in school outcomes between ethnic minority and majority students has typically been the largest within Western Europe (e.g. D'Hondt 2016). Secondary school pupils with lower socio-economic status and migration backgrounds are underrepresented in study tracks that lead to tertiary education (Van Praag, Stevens, and Van Houtte 2014)[2]. Muslim minorities are often advised to start in technical or vocational tracks even when showing interest in the general track. A large majority of respondents shared this experience, as Najim explains:

> Everyone in school told me - and all of my cousins and relatives - to start secondary school in BSO [vocational track]. We all got advised to BSO in my family with no exception. We had to fight against that advice and the prejudices and do what we wanted against their wishes. Yet, one cousin became a doctor, my sister became a lawyer, my other sister graduated from interior design architecture. We did what we wanted to achieve eventually and this proves that we are much better than what they think we are. (Najim, age 29)

Najim's frustration about being advised to study in the vocational track resonates with most respondents. In an earlier study, Belgian Muslim student respondents identified several actors as important for educational success: parents, teachers, and counsellors from the Pupil Advisory Center [CLB, *Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding*], which is decisive on study and tracking orientation. Respondents indicated that these actors could play positive as well as negative roles but mentioned CLB counsellors as playing a more inhibiting than facilitating role in obtaining educational success (Timmerman and Vanderwaeren 2008, 33). My respondents expressed very similar sentiments. Najim and others experienced a form of microaggression called 'being ascribed intelligence by ethnicity', meaning 'assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of colour based on their race' (Sue 2010, 278). Ascription of intelligence to minorities entails the misevaluation and misjudgement of pupils' capacities and has possible life-long consequences. The great majority of my respondents explained how these early moments in their educational career impacted their life trajectories and were regarded as a 'major lifetime discrimination', theorised by Kessler et al. (1999, 213) as single events or moments of discrimination that affect one's life course and social mobility, such as being 'discouraged by a teacher from seeking higher education'.

Najim knows that Muslim minorities are being structurally advised to enter so-called lower tracks that do not prepare students for higher education. The knowledge that his experience is shared by others in his family and immediate surroundings angers him and leads to a feeling of structural injustice. Sayyid indicated 'receiving less favourable treatment than peers in comparable positions', such as performance assessments at school as one 'cluster' of subtle forms of Islamophobia (Sayyid 2014, 15-6). Without aiming to qualify *personal* intentions and behaviours of pupil counsellors and teachers as racist or Islamophobic, my respondents' collective experience points to the *structural* occurrence of misevaluation and misorientation in secondary schools. As such, this social

[2] The academic performance gap between disadvantaged and higher socio-economic status pupils is among the largest in Europe (PISA 2018). Members of ethnic and religious minorities are overrepresented in the group of students with lower socio-economic status. The schooling system is characterised by an early tracking system or ability grouping from the first grade in secondary school onwards, at the age of twelve. Pupils are not allocated to tracks but select one on the basis of prior achievement and advice from school counsellors and teachers. The general/academic track is given a higher status than technical and vocational tracks by teachers, parents and pupils. Pupils who start in the general track and fail have to change tracks which is perceived as 'moving downwards'. This system is commonly known and referred to as a 'cascade' (Van Praag et al. 2019, 162).

phenomenon has been widely documented for the Black American and Latino population in the US, where pupils report similar feelings of 'invisibility', 'pejorative teacher attitudes', and 'the subtle process of being academically tracked out of educational opportunities' (Allen 2010, 127, Avilés et al. 1999). The policy of tracking in particular has been criticised as a form of racialisation and for reproducing inequalities in the US (e.g. Moller and Stearns 2012, Tyson 2011).

Unlike Najim, other respondents were less aware of the structural nature of receiving tracking advice away from higher education and perceived it as a personal matter when it unfolded in their lives. Esma assumed she had received appropriate track advice for technical education. She registered at a university college with much hesitation and caution, doubting whether she would succeed. She graduated from the university college and continued with a university master's program, only learning in the process that her early study orientation was mismatched with her intellectual capacities and interests. Esma's experience reflects those of several respondents who were underestimated in school and had internalised negative beliefs about their skills and capacities.

Belgian Muslim minority students often feel discouraged rather than motivated to achieve and report a lack of teacher support and having their questions ignored (Colak, Van Praag, and Nicaise 2020, 7-8). Naoual, a 30-year-old social worker, reflects on her school trajectory, feeling underestimated, not valued, and confronted with low expectations about her abilities or ambitions:

> Teachers at school treated me as if I would not have been able to do that [take higher education] anyway. The accountancy teacher said things like 'You won't manage to pull that off', the Dutch teacher claimed that I did not do my exercises while in reality I had done them perfectly well. It was a very white school. Teachers showed interest in white kids' aspirations for the future and higher education but simply curtailed mine. The German teacher asked 'are the answers perhaps included in the book' as a response to me when I told them the right answer. This happened more than once and with more than one teacher, so you grow up feeling a particular way, that you always have to prove yourself more than others. (Naoual, age 30)

Naoual's dream was to study medicine and work as a general practitioner, but after being ridiculed about this dream by the school's principal, she gave up. Interestingly, teachers and counsellors' low expectations do not correspond to the high aspirations that minority students often set for themselves, as studies with ethnic minority youth in Belgium and US indicate (Teney, Devleeshouwer, and Hanquinet 2013, Cavazos et al. 2009, 8-9). Naoual encountered a discordance between her ambitions and social expectations at school. While previous studies demonstrate the differential treatment and discouragement that young people encounter in education, its life-long impact on how people view themselves and what they expect from a professional career and envision for their futures have been largely left unattended. My respondents' life story narratives show a clear coherence between early experiences with differential treatment and an emerging need to position themselves vis-à-vis these limitations and restrictions in determining their life course. In the case of Najim, the structural nature of his experience told him that '[Muslim minorities] had to fight…to do what [they] wanted against [majority society's] wishes'. Esma only gradually understood that she could break through the limited expectations set for her. For Naoual, those memories continue to echo and haunt her, influencing her well-being at work and setting limits to her professional life.

More than being treated differently and discouraged, most respondents' lives were already socially envisioned to follow a particular course with which they did not identify. Such circumstances resulted in feeling fixed in a pre-scripted life course. Ayse works as a civil servant:

> I wanted to become a teacher in order to make a difference and to do better than what I had experienced. I have only known two teachers who really saw everyone as they were. All other teachers had their judgements ready. They had already imagined and perceived our futures in a certain way and treated you according to their imaginations. But only two of them actually saw me, Ayse, as an individual. (Ayse, age 30)

Being tracked away from higher education and having to fight counsellors' advice, Ayse deplored that her future was already perceived in a certain way, being 'treated according to their imaginations', in which she, as a Muslim pupil with a Turkish background, did not belong in higher education. Similarly, in the UK, Muslim pupils are underrepresented in universities and face an attainment or awarding gap (Gholami 2021, 322). In this context, Shaida-Raffat Nabi analysed the racialisation of some British Muslim students as 'space invaders' following Nirmal Puwar's theorisation of 'black' racialised bodies entering 'white' institutions (Nabi 2011, 165-179). My respondents' common experiences resonate with the idea of their bodies (and minds) being misplaced, unsuitable or not fitting in higher education institutions. Again, I do not argue that Flemish teachers orchestrate their actions to block Muslims from higher education, but rather that Muslim experiences with education point to common assumptions that result in structural observable tendencies. Through the intangible nature of discourse and perceptions of Muslim pupils, Islamophobia as governmentality operates in educational centres (Finlay and Hopkins 2020, Kaya 2011) and effectively structures Belgian Muslims' educational prospects and life aspirations.

Employment: gendered Islamophobia as governmentality

The lack of recognition as an individual that Ayse experienced in high school meant that she wanted to become a teacher herself to serve as a role model for new generations. She did not pursue this dream, however, because of the difficulties in finding employment as a teacher wearing a headscarf. Respondents continued to encounter a narrowing down of life options when entering the job market. The general headscarf ban put in place by the network of public schools of the Flemish Community (Go!) affects primary and secondary pupils and teachers, except for teachers of Islam. The private school network left the decision to allow religious signs to the discretion of school authorities (Brems 2020, 77). In practice, this significantly limits opportunities for Muslim women wearing headscarves to find employment as a teacher. Although the Belgian Council of State found that the general ban violates human rights in two judgements in 2014, the network of public schools did not change its policy. This case illustrates the multiple and interweaving levels at which Islamophobia operates as a form of governmentality. The general ban illustrates institutionalised Islamophobia, condemned by scholars of law and the Belgian Council of State (Brems 2020). Defying Belgian Council of State rulings is 'extremely rare' according to legal scholar Brems (Brems 2020, 103). Yet the network can uphold the ban, as it feels politically and socially supported by non-institutionalised Islamophobia expressed by the widespread intolerance of religious – Islamic – signs in the public sphere (Brems 2020, 77-81, Benfquih and Ould Chaib 2014). On a third level, Muslim women reposition themselves vis-à-vis growing restrictions and review available options (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik 2011, 1) while feeling tremendous pressure to remove the headscarf when seeking employment. Respondents not wearing the headscarf are well aware of its consequences through family and friends. Zeynep works at her husband's business:

> My sister wears the veil and I used to want to wear it, but as time passes, I don't think I can anymore. It is very difficult to wear the veil. My sister wears it and at some point, she had received a job offer. She turned out to be the best candidate during the vacancy procedure,

> but she only got the job on the condition that she would remove the veil. This was a job in the public sector almost ten years ago. She refused to do this. It was a very tough episode for her. She is a very sensitive person and she really struggled with this situation. I don't know if would be able to do this and have the guts to deal with such decisions. (Zeynep, age 29)

Zeynep illustrates the personal ethical challenges accompanying the decision to wear or remove the veil to comply with employers' demands. She witnessed how her sister was confronted with this dilemma and realised the amount of self-scrutiny that such decision-making took for her. She observed the 'ethical work' and self-questioning her sister engaged in (Fadil 2011). Other respondents expressed their views on being personally confronted with the request to remove the veil. Some explained how they experience a 'veil-decision fatigue' in the face of entering multiple veil regimes per day. Amal studies to become a nurse:

> I was obligated to take it off in secondary school and during internships. But since I am going to university college, I am allowed to wear it again. So my own practice of wearing it or not has been flexible and changing. I honestly got a bit tired of it. Wearing it and taking it off again multiple times a day, it is tiring. (Amal, age 23)

Similarly, Siham is a 27-year-old teacher in primary school who has stopped wearing the veil altogether because she 'started to feel schizophrenic while taking it off and putting it on again multiple times a day for activities where it is not allowed or allowed'. If it were generally allowed, she would not hesitate to wear it consistently. Siham uses the expression 'feeling schizophrenic' to describe the habit of changing religious dress daily to comply with the demands of schools and employers. Intending it as a form of metaphorical exaggeration, she refers to a crucial element at play. Being asked to change religious dress continuously makes her feel as if she is splitting between multiple personalities depending on the requirements of the situation. She must detach from one part of her – the one that shows her Muslimness – to fulfil tasks at work. Moving between the veiled and non-veiled version of herself is highly uncomfortable because it requires her 'to leave a part of [her] behind'.

The pressure to remove the veil is often experienced as a forced choice between work or building a career and keeping one's integrity. Karima is unemployed and engages in almost full-time volunteering. One of the reasons she volunteers is that she struggles to find employment wearing a headscarf. She explains:

> With a veil, you do get treated differently. I applied to do my volunteering work at a different school. They let me work for two days and then told me I was welcome to stay if I removed my headscarf, while this was not even an official position. I felt a strong internal dilemma. One part of me is very compliant in nature and full of understanding. Another part of me, that more recently has risen, says that this is ridiculous and that it is not okay to be refused for this reason. I don't want to betray myself ['mezelf tekort doen']. This is a refusal because of who I am. […] This entire event gave me short-circuit in the brain. I am allowed to work, but only without my scarf. This is not right for me. (Karima, age 30)

Karima adds different layers to feeling 'schizophrenic' by describing the request to remove the veil as a request to 'betray oneself'. Wearing the veil is an integral part of Karima's sense of self. More than an outward indicator signalling Muslim identity, it is deeply interwoven with their self and self-worth. The experience feels like a 'short-circuit in the brain'. Several respondents regarded such conditional job offerings as a rejection of the self.

Hanane works as an administrative assistant and has consciously accepted to work below her capacities, skills and ambitions because jobs that valued her competency were not accessible while wearing a hijab full-time. She regarded the demand to remove the hijab as 'a rejection of who you are'. She compromised in accepting a job for which she must remove the veil when meeting with clients but could wear it otherwise. She accepted this regime but expressed deep dissatisfaction: 'I feel like I have to play some role as in a film, that I cannot be myself. I cannot function well for the full 100% when I cannot be myself. […] When I can be myself, I am better able to perform on a higher level' (Hanane, age 30).

As others have pointed out, Islamophobic discourse considers signs of Muslimness as 'necessarily transgressive and illegitimate' (Nabi 2011, 35), particularly for women. Islamophobia affects women differently because women struggle 'within the discursive parameters of faith, community and nation' (Zine 2006, 250), referring to Orientalist, racialised or Islamophobic discourses as well as 'the conservative status-quo interpretations of gender issues in Islam' (Zine 2006, 248). Discussion of Muslim subject women's positions in Europe has been primarily shaped by the limits set by liberal and secular moral regimes. States set direct restrictions (e.g. Jouili 2009, Fernando 2014), engage in programs to transform and change Muslim gender normative regimes (Amir-Moazami 2011), and liberal political parties enter complex relations with Islamophobic discourse (Mondon and Winter 2017). In this context, studies often focused on women's available options in terms of 'cultivating pious or secular sensibilities' (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen, and Malik 2011, 1-2) and the religious and ethical struggle in veiling or unveiling (e.g. Fadil 2011).

This analysis emphasised the pragmatics of the availability of life options in a highly restrictive socio-political environment. The analysis shows that wearing the hijab can be understood as resistance in the face of structural (institutionalised), culturally hegemonic (non-institutionalised) and interpersonal forms of gendered Islamophobia (Alimahomed-Wilson 2020). Islamophobic discourse operates as a form of governmentality through an institutionalised headscarf ban in education, job market discrimination and self-governance by personal adjustment. Choosing to continue wearing the hijab often means facing unemployment, commuting long hours for work, working below one's capacities, not being recognised at the correct hierarchical level within a professional organisation (especially when working in a leadership position), accepting multiple hijab regimes per day leading to feelings of 'self-betrayal' and 'veil decision fatigue', and running the risk of facing personal remarks, insults or questioning.

Incomplete lives: mixed prospects for the future

The above sections demonstrated how Muslim minorities are racialised in Flanders, Belgium, by having their individuality disregarded in education and signs of Muslimness rejected in education and employment, in the process generating collective experiences for Muslims as a unified group (Garner and Selod 2015). When asked about their prospects, out of forty respondents, nine spontaneously mentioned contemplating leaving Belgium. Samir, a 26-year-old social worker of Moroccan origin living in Brussels, reported the following:

> I sometimes think of moving to the Middle East or North Africa, but I need to work longer to be able to do that. It would be nice to live in a place where you don't face any aggression. I don't like the debate on religion all the time, here they make a very big deal out of it. […] I think I may open up and blossom more in such conditions, but these are just some thoughts I entertain, not much more. (Samir, age 26)

Societies in which religion is not problematised could be a space for greater personal development, thinks Samir, and allow him to 'open up and blossom'. The feeling of not being valued and lacking opportunities for self-realisation results in a desire to leave Belgium. Fouad is a 30-year-old Belgian-Moroccan writer who left Belgium in his early twenties after being disappointed with his university philosophy curriculum. He spent several years living in different countries in the Middle East and North Africa, searching for intellectual development. He studied Islamic theology and philosophy at several universities across the region. He states that 'There is so much human potential [among Muslims] present in [Belgian] society that would be possible to grow and develop, but this potential is not being seen and fed.' In his view, Muslims are limited in their religious expression in Belgium, leading to experiences of alienation.

> Because religious symbols are problematised in society, Muslims in Belgium are alienated from themselves and their identity. By forcibly making religious symbols disappear, people are forced to live their religion in alternative ways. (Fouad, age 30)

The problematisation of Muslim life and Islamic religious symbols is experienced as harmful. In his view, it distorts religious experience and erases opportunities for human growth and fulfilment. Fouad criticised that non-European philosophy or theology (and Islamic philosophy in particular) is not recognised in Belgian university curricula. This lack of recognition can be seen as an extension of the place that Islamic belief and thought occupy in European society generally. Islamophobia occurs through the 'regulation and disciplining of Muslims by reference to a Westernizing horizon' (Sayyid 2014, 19). Indeed, in Fouad's account, the intertwinement of the political and epistemological nature of Islamophobia is highlighted. In practice, this results in the loss of human potential and feelings of incompleteness in Western societies. Fouad's search for intellectual and spiritual development could be seen as an example of *hijra,* i.e. when Muslims from minority contexts migrate to Muslim-majority countries to seek a better and religiously more fulfilling life (Fadil, Moors, and Arnaut 2021). While he did not refer to *hijra* explicitly, his emigration from Belgium was motivated by a desire for self-realisation and a hope of finding a 'renewed sense of freedom and dignity in a place where he can be at peace as a Muslim' (Fadil, Moors, and Arnaut 2021, 2). The idea that life in Muslim-majority societies would be liberating or offer relief from racism and aggression was present among those respondents who expressed thoughts of leaving Belgium.

Emre is a 27-year-old entrepreneur of Turkish descent who feels held back by business networks. Although he is a formal member of relevant networks, he feels excluded from the benefits and thinks this exclusion stops him from growing and expanding his business. He explains that he does 'not see a future for [him]self in this country':

> If I had an opportunity in Qatar or Dubai, I would be gone already. There you don't feel as if you are an alien. You feel welcome, and this is not the case here. Here you remain an outsider. And they don't want to share power. (Emre, age 27)

The ethnic- and race-based exclusion Erne experiences in seeking employment contracts make him consider leaving Belgium. He feels 'sidelined' and sees his 'skills and competencies not valued', similar to others who have eventually decided to emigrate (Arnaut et al. 2020, 4). Bouchra is a 29-year-old social worker and fashion designer who wishes to offer her children better conditions to grow up in:

> I find people in Belgium in general not very pleasant. I actually would like to leave this city and country. I often feel stared at and watched, and this is different in other places. I know [this] because I travel a lot and have family in the Netherlands. It feels much more normal and okay in other places. This has to do with the headscarf. I just know that here people will never accept

> me for a full 100%. I also told my husband that I cannot imagine staying here for the rest of my life. My wish to live abroad also has to do with my wish that my children would get all chances and not need to operate like I have. I had to consider limited options and choose and exclude certain professions because I knew that I would not get accepted because of my religion. I want it to be different for them.

In contrast, several respondents vacillate between hope and pessimism or have an outspoken optimistic view of the future. Some believe that younger generations have grown more vocal in demanding their rights and making political claims. They contrast this increasing assertiveness with previous generations who were, in their view, more tolerant of racism, which is a widespread sentiment (Ouali 2000). For them, a sense of growing minority empowerment instils hope for the future. Having experiences of successfully crafting personal space and opportunities for self-realisation are also a source of optimism. Faisa, for instance, graduated in biomedical sciences and married soon thereafter. A few years later, she realised that her life was not moving in a direction that fulfilled her, and she decided to divorce her husband and return to school to study arts. Feeling satisfied with her ability to redraw her life course, she is equally optimistic about societal change and states, "I know that I can become a powerful woman. I want to inspire and motivate people in an honest way" (Faisa, age 25). Thus, personal experiences of self-realisation seem crucial for having positive prospects.

Conclusion

The racialisation of Muslims, Islamophobia and 'the Muslim Question' in Europe have received considerable attention in recent decades. This research takes individual experiences of Muslims in Flanders, Belgium, as a starting point to gain more insight into the meanings, nature and consequences of Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism and exclusion. I understand Islamophobia as a broad social phenomenon that must be situated in histories of racism and Orientalism. While Islamophobia is often presented as a new form of racism, or 'cultural racism', the mixture of cultural, religious and phenotypical characteristics was also present in so-called 'old racisms' or biological racism (Modood 2005, 28-9). This paper builds on theories of Islamophobia as the result of racialisation processes that amalgamate individuals as one group. Despite differences in ethnicity, skin tone, and religious and cultural practices, 'a unity of the gaze' lumps diverse groups of people together (Garner and Selod 2015, 5-6). For these reasons, Islamophobia manifests in various 'clusters', i.e. discourses and practices ranging from violent attacks to unfavourable and differential treatment (Sayyid 2014), historically and structurally embedded in social institutions.

This paper focuses on Muslim experiences with education and employment in Belgium to explore personal narratives and what this means in terms of societal racialisation. Respondents shared a collective experience of being treated differently at school and feeling discouraged from pursuing higher education. Often perceived as less motivated and interested in higher education by teachers and counsellors, Muslim students received academic advice that conflicted with their skills and aspirations. Statistics show the underrepresentation of minorities in secondary school tracks preparing for higher education. This paper engages with respondents' experiences of having their life aspirations curtailed at a young age and how this affected their possible life courses. The analysis showed the different ways in which respondents experience and respond to such structural limitations. While many were well aware of these limitations' collective nature, others internalised messages of being less intelligent and incapable of succeeding in higher education.

In education and employment, signs of Muslimness are perceived as unwelcome and problematised in Belgium. The headscarf ban by the network of public schools and the request by employers to

remove the headscarf as part of job offerings effectively structure Muslim respondents' choices of which schools to attend and which jobs to take. The headscarf ban is a form of institutionalised Islamophobia. Despite being condemned by the Belgian Council of State rulings, the network can uphold the ban and rely on widespread political and social intolerance of signs of Muslimness in the public sphere. In other words, Islamophobia as governmentality works through multiple levels of institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of anti-Muslim sentiment and successfully governs Muslims' life choices by foreclosure, limitation or forced adjustment. Female respondents understood job offerings on the condition of hijab removal as a 'rejection of the self' and accepting such offers as 'self-betrayal'. Still, many respondents accepted a hybrid hijab-wearing regime in which they would alternate wearing a hijab at some parts of the job and removing it for others. Others refused to self-govern and adjust themselves to societal demands and expectations. Finally, about one-fourth of respondents spontaneously mentioned contemplating leaving Belgium for a place where being Muslim is accepted, and religion is normalised. For these respondents, the structural limitations to crafting a life as a Muslim in Belgium were significant.

Acknowledgements

This article was prepared in the scope of the EU-funded research for the 'Islam-ophob-ism' project conducted under the supervision of the Principal Investigator, Prof. Dr Ayhan Kaya, and funded by the European Research Council with Agreement Number 785934. I want to thank Ayhan Kaya and the two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this manuscript for their constructive comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to my co-researchers and team members for the opportunity to share thoughts and support during this project: Metin Koca, Ayşenur Benevento, Max-Valentin Robert, Melanie Weißenberg, Merel Zuurbier and Lalla Amina Drhimeur.

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