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Perceptions of Discrimination of Muslim Women in Belgium: A Study of Discriminatory Incidents Across Public and Private Organizations Reported to the National Equality Body

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ABSTRACT: In Belgium, Muslims have been affected by an increasingly hostile climate in which Islamophobia prospers. The need for further research into the gendered dynamics of Islamophobia in a Belgian context has been flagged, as the majority of complaints are made by women. In this contribution, the focus lies on to the narratives of the women who encounter this in their daily lives. Twenty-two Muslim women who decided to report their discriminatory experience to the national equality body were interviewed. Based on their lived experiences, this qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth description of the way in which Muslim women encounter discrimination in order to establish which “treatment, circumstances and behavior are perceived as discriminatory.”

Keywords: Perceived Discrimination, Discrimination Complaints, Muslim women, Islamophobia, headscarf

INTRODUCTION

On the June 14, 2020, after the Constitutional Court upheld a ban on students wearing headgear that represents a political, philosophical, or religious opinion or conviction in higher education,¹ Belgian higher education institutions were called out with a tweet demanding that they clarify where they stand on a headscarf ban.² Their response was predominantly against such a ban and, thus, in favor of the liberty to wear a headscarf if one so pleases—with references to terms such as “pluralism,” “inclusion,” and “diversity.”³ However, this accepting stance on religious diversity is the exception rather than the rule in Belgian society. Oftentimes, Muslim women⁴ who want to visible express their religious belonging are the targets of institutionalized Islamophobia: when applying for a job, when trying to graduate from secondary school or even when going for a dip in a local swimming pool.⁵ In other cases, Islamophobia is not institutionalized, yet it remains equally present in everyday interactions.

There is a wide array of discriminations that Muslim women in Belgium are subjected to. Yet, research focusing on the lived experiences of women is scarce. More often, the accordance of an experience with a specific discrimination framework is investigated. In this qualitative study, the aim is to shift the focus back to their narratives. Not to say that the group of women that were interviewed for this study is monolithic. However, what they all have in common is that they either witnessed or experienced discrimination based on religion and they had a strong desire to rectify it. Thus, they contacted the Belgian National Equality Body (NEB) to report this perceived discrimination.

The need for further research into the gendered dynamics of Islamophobia in a Belgian context has been flagged,⁶ as well as the need for further research into microaggressions toward religious minority groups, especially Muslims.⁷ The central objective of this descriptive qualitative study is to provide an in-depth description of the way in which Muslim women encounter

discrimination in their daily lives in order to establish which “treatment, circumstances and behavior are perceived as discriminatory.”⁸ As such, why and how a person decides that discrimination has occurred remains largely under-researched. In this study, using semi-structured interviews, the collected narratives of 22 Muslim women are approached through the framework of perceived discrimination.

CONTEXTUALIZING MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN BELGIAN SOCIETY

The studied experiences of Belgian Muslim women do not occur in a vacuum. They take place in Belgian society in which Islamophobia often surfaces. It defines the context in which interviewees “interact with and interpret their social world.”⁹ How and why this occurs in Belgium, as well as throughout the Western world, will be clarified briefly. As this study focuses on Muslim women, the particular impact and tone of an Islamophobic discourse on and toward this group will also be discussed.

Islamophobia in Belgium

One way to define Islamophobia¹⁰ is as “prejudice against, hatred towards, or fear of the religion of Islam or towards Muslims.”¹¹ An earlier definition equates Islamophobia to maintaining “closed views of Islam.”¹² Islam and Muslims are viewed as a “single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities,” separate and different from other cultures, “inferior to the West,” violent and threatening and as “a political ideology.”¹³ In other definitions, the focus also lies on negative attributions ascribed to Muslims that lead to hate speech, hate crimes and discrimination.¹⁴

In the public debate in Belgium, Islam is often framed as a problem and Muslims are represented as a threat to society.¹⁵ In this understanding, “Muslims’ unsuitable cultural and religious background” is held responsible for patterns of economic exclusion as well as marginalization.¹⁶ This discourse is clearly Islamophobic. Fear of radical Islam has been present in Belgium since the 1980s.¹⁷ Yet, it was exacerbated by the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, after which Islam was positioned as a contradiction of European values.¹⁸ This “unease over Islam” was sharpened again by—highly publicized—examples of radicalized Belgian youngsters departing for Syria as foreign fighters for ISIS¹⁹ at the beginning of 2012 as well as by the terrorist attacks of March 2016 in the Brussels metro and at Brussels airport.²⁰

Islamophobia is conveyed in a number of manners. Often, the focus is placed on the degree of deviance in lifestyle and family constellations of Muslim families compared to “normative Western middle class families.”²¹ Acts of discrimination are linked to their identification as the cultural and religious other.²² What is paradoxical in this process is that it exactly occurs as Muslim migrants “integrate [into] Belgian society.”²³ It is precisely the “manifest or latent hostility towards the growing visibility of Muslims”²⁴ that hinders constructive engagement. An idea that is often advanced in this context is that Muslims need to adapt to “our” values and principles. Muslims are framed as non-Western and thus there is always a “cultural gap”²⁵ between them and society, in which a negotiation process between the Muslim world and the Western world takes place. If “they” do not manage to integrate, “their” culture of Islam is to blame for this.²⁶

Besides othering “the Muslim community,” Islamophobia often reveals itself in the viewing of Islam and Muslims as a threat. In the public debate in Belgium, we find that Islam is often framed as a problem for “the liberal political order.”²⁷ First, Muslims are depicted as a threat to “the Western way of living” as well as a demographic threat.²⁸ Second, it is depicted

as a violent religion that—through the Quran—will eventually pit all Muslims against non-Muslims.²⁹ Again, in processes such as the radicalization of Belgian youth, headlines in leading newspapers such as “Can one deradicalise a Muslim?”³⁰ appear to suggest that Muslims are inherently threatening to non-Muslims.

The Contours of Gendered Islamophobia

It is known that discrimination often does not rely on one ground only, rather the opposite. In the case of Muslim women, this is especially clear: the nature of Islamophobia in Belgium is increasingly gendered.³¹ Both quantitative and qualitative data provides evidence that a large majority³² of complaints about Islamophobia were made by women.³³ An intersectional approach to discrimination signals that women belonging to a religious minority can face multiple forms of discrimination related to gender, religion, and ethnic origin and class.³⁴ Different intersectional identities may result in different types of microaggressions.³⁵

Although it has been found that wearing religious clothing only seems to have a marginal effect on instances of discrimination,³⁶ this is not the experience of Belgian Muslim women.³⁷ In Belgium, we can find several examples of legislation in place that prohibits religious symbols in the public space,³⁸ seeking to reduce exactly the growing visibility of Muslim women. The more a person is identifiable with a certain religion, the more they are targeted. It is easier to single them out and identify them as the other, where the hijab is used as a symbol of otherness.³⁹ Thus, Muslim women who wear a hijab experience more negative or discriminatory incidents than Muslim women who dress in a more “Western” fashion.⁴⁰ A returning narrative is that the veil cannot be reconciled with Western values.⁴¹

Women wearing a hijab are presumed to do this because they are victims of patriarchal power structures, oppressed by either their fathers or their husbands.⁴² This is part of a rhetoric in Western societies of Muslim women as victims that need saving and the veil as “the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom.”⁴³ Abu-Lughod argues that saving someone implies both that one is saving her from something but also *to* something, with a sense of superiority linked to the latter way of being. In this rhetoric, veiling is inaccurately associated with a lack of agency on behalf of the person wearing the veil.⁴⁴ Acts of unveiling Muslim women can emerge “as a sign of integration revealing a challenged imperialist paradigm.”⁴⁵ As such, these acts are also a means to “normalize” what are considered to be deviant practices perpetuated by “their culture,” in which there is no such thing as gender equality.⁴⁶

WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS DISCRIMINATION?

In this section, I will briefly discuss the theoretical framework I apply to the experiences of the interviewed Muslim women. I will discuss valuable insights from previous studies into perceived discrimination.

Perceived discrimination can be presented on a spectrum. Where it seems that every-day incidents have minimal impact when approached by themselves, repeated incidents can build up “feelings of distrust, anxiety and alienation on part of its victims.”⁴⁷ Kessler and others distinguish between two types of discrimination. First, there are the “minor” day-to-day experiences of discrimination that take the form of “character assaults.”⁴⁸ Examples could include being treated with diminished respect compared to others or as someone who is dishonest or inferior.

Second, there are instances of discrimination that constitute “major” lifetime events.⁴⁹ Examples include not getting a job, a scholarship, a loan to start a business or buy a house and

so on. They differ from the first group in that they necessarily interfere with persons' socioeconomic advancement. The first category of "minor" experiences of discrimination could also involve such interference, but it is not necessarily the case. Another term that is used in this context is "spiritual microaggressions."⁵⁰ Microaggressions are defined as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."⁵¹ These messages are implicitly harmful and legitimize negative ideas about a particular targeted group.⁵² Yet, they are often very pervasive in daily interactions and delivered unconsciously.⁵³ What is perceived as an innocent singular uttering that does minimal harm, even when "the well-intentioned person" is confronted with the impact thereof, can actually contribute to major harm for the recipient.⁵⁴ One refers to spiritual microaggressions when these messages are based on people's membership of a certain religion or—in the broader sense—a spiritual group.⁵⁵ Nadal's theoretical taxonomy of microaggressions against Muslims includes endorsing negative stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists, the pathology of Islam, assuming religious homogeneity, exoticization, mocking language, and perceiving Muslims as aliens in their own land.⁵⁶

In a study into discrimination of minorities by public institutions, Bursell has arrived at a categorization of incidents of perceived discrimination into six distinct types.⁵⁷ These types are founded on the type of treatment Muslims or presumed Muslims received at the hands of street-level bureaucrats:⁵⁸ they are neglected, obstructed, more harshly judged, distrusted and harassed. To neglect a person is a "subtly performed exclusion strategy that involves a low degree of . . . agency" on behalf of the actor involved, whereas in a case of obstruction this exclusion is perpetuated more actively.⁵⁹ Due to its subtle nature, neglect is not as easy to spot as other types of perceived discrimination.⁶⁰ In the category of "more harshly judged," Bursell includes perceptions of being denied certain opportunities because the persons in question are judged more harshly than others. Oftentimes, persons are aware of comparable cases that have not been evaluated as rigorously.⁶¹

Bursell identified two expressions of distrust in members of minority groups. On the one hand, she found examples of members being over-scrutinized as free riders. On the other hand, they were distrusted in association with "negative societal stereotypes about minority culture."⁶² This idea of distrust coincides with a category Ross, Lypson, and Kumagai identified as "assuming the worst" or situations in which well-known stereotypes enter into encounters.⁶³ Another example is research that has shown that in African Americans' interactions with health providers, for instance, the stereotype of being free riders "faking illnesses" would surface. Harassment includes speaking in a derogatory manner to persons,⁶⁴ as a manner to reassert the "feeling of superiority"⁶⁵ by members of the dominant—and thus majority—group. In the case of Muslim women, this often involves stereotypes, both the stereotype of the Muslim woman as a victim and that of her as a threat.⁶⁶

An additional category is rule-driven discrimination which occurs when one perceives an institutional rule directly or indirectly as discriminatory.⁶⁷ Islamophobia may, as such, be "encouraged and legitimized" through "discriminatory legislation."⁶⁸ Rules and procedures—for example, neutrality—will often "reflect a dominant cultural ethos" that can hinder those who do not share that dominant cultural ethos.⁶⁹ In these cases, the perceived discrimination does not depend on the words or actions of a street-level bureaucrat but on the institutional rule.⁷⁰ Although, in some instances, even with a discriminatory institutional rule in place, it is possible for them to deviate from it or apply it less stringently.⁷¹ It is important to add that perceptions of discrimination do not always depend on verbal communication or certain actions. Regularly, discrimination is also perceived to be present in nonverbal behaviors.⁷²

METHODOLOGY

In this section, the methodological choices made in the present study will be clarified briefly. The main issues addressed in this section are the manner in which the interviewees were selected, why open-ended interviews were selected as the method of choice and how they were conducted and analyzed.

Selection of Interviewees

The interviewees⁷³ for this study were recruited through the database of the Belgian National Equality Body, Unia.⁷⁴ As a national equality body, Unia deals with complaints about discrimination and hate speech based on several prohibited characteristics.⁷⁵ The women who were interviewed for this study either faced or witnessed religion-based or ethnicity-based discrimination.⁷⁶ They contacted Unia because they wanted to report something they experienced or obtain information on the legality of said experience. Unia's privacy standards did not allow for the persons who reported to be contacted directly. Instead, they were contacted by an Unia employee to inquire into whether they would be interested in participating in the study. Only when they agreed to participate was it allowed to contact them personally.

All interviewees are Muslim women between the ages of 17 and 58 years old. The experiences they reported stretch across a variety of areas. The four recurrent areas are employment, education, healthcare, and leisure. The prevalence of employment cases (one case in two) concurs with the distribution ratio of new reports of discrimination based on religious or philosophical beliefs across the different areas.⁷⁷

Interviews as Windows Into Lived Experiences

As Sander stated, it is important to find out how persons experience "various reactions towards them from the majority society, without trying to prove or disprove the correctness of these experiences,"⁷⁸ as people base their attitudes on what they believe to be true, rather than on what is necessarily true.⁷⁹ Rather, these experiences should be approached through the "experiential reality" of the voices that are often ignored and oppressed.⁸⁰

A qualitative phenomenological approach was taken to study Flemish Muslim women's lived experiences. The use of open-ended interviews appeared ideal for collecting information about how Flemish Muslim women subjectively experienced whether a process was discriminatory or not. Interviewees were asked to describe the experience they decided to report to Unia in as much detail as they could remember. The format was deliberately kept open in order to encourage a thorough exploration of the interviewees' perspectives.

Interviews would take between 30 minutes and 90 minutes, depending on how talkative the interviewee was and how many additional questions the interviewer would have. The location of the interview was chosen in accordance with participants' convenience, with attention to the avoidance of background noise and the protection of participants' privacy. Except for one interviewee, all participants consented to the recording of the interview.

The interviews took place in Dutch and were transcribed in Dutch. Translations in English are done by the author, with minimal linguistic corrections. A qualitative descriptive study of the interviewees' narratives took place by making use of a thematic analysis, whereby patterns were approached both inductively and deductively.⁸¹ Especially for the designation of categories, existing concepts from perceived discrimination literature were used. As social phenomena are context-bound, insights on Islamophobia were relevant in this analysis as well.

*BELGIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF
DISCRIMINATION IN THEIR DAILY LIVES*

The overall objective of this study was to identify which treatment, circumstances, and behavior are perceived as discriminatory through the eyes of Belgian Muslim women who have reported these experiences to the national equality body. The accounts of the interviewees provide critical insights for this identification process. The intention was not to verify the existence of discrimination of Muslim women in Flanders but rather to provide a window into their perceptions and lived experiences.

Rather than presenting results and analysis separately, both elements are merged in order to enhance readability. The analysis is structured along Bursell's five incident types that were described above. Yet, most interviewees would refer to multiple types within one incident. In other cases, they would refer to separate incidents in which they would feel similar discriminatory behavior has taken place. As such, Bursell's incident types are not used as binding categories in which the interviews' experiences need to be molded, but rather as a means for coherent presentation of the patterns that were identified across interviews.

Rule-Driven Discrimination

Results

In several interviews, reference is made to rule-driven discrimination. These include instances where there is regulation in place that is directly or indirectly perceived as discriminatory.

Leisure

One interviewee was asked to leave the swimming pool when she wanted to swim in body-covering swimwear. The swimming pool operated through a public–private cooperation and its internal regulation prohibited the wearing of the so-called “burkini” in the swimming pool. By paying the entrance fee, she had—in their opinion—consented to the conditions imposed on visitors. Thus, she was removed and the paid entrance fee was not refunded.

Education

Many of the interviewed women perceived rule-driven discrimination in an education context. An interviewee attended a celebration at her former secondary school as an invited alumna when she was asked to either take off her headscarf or leave. The reason for this request was the fact that the school regulations prohibited students from wearing a headscarf in school. Yet, at that point in time, she was no longer a student bound by the school regulation. When a friend of hers referred to this unpleasant experience on the event's Facebook page, the person managing the official school account responded that when the person (behind the account) went to Morocco with her daughters, they were asked to cover up as well, adding: “we did not make a big deal out of that, we adapted to the local norms and values.”

A college student had to entertain children during after-school activities, as part of a mandatory internship. When entering the school in which these activities took place, the vice principal ran up to the interviewee and told her she could not enter the school with a headscarf because “those are the rules.” In this case, as in the previous one, the interviewee was an alumna

of the school in question. Afterwards, it appeared that “the rules” only applied to pupils of the school in question and not to external staff.

In another case, a young woman was set to teach the Islamic religion in a public secondary school. This was a mandatory placement during her college training to become a teacher of history and Islamic religion at the secondary level. When she met the principal of the school to sign her placement contract, she told her that she found it difficult to remove her headscarf. The principal said she understood, but that external signs of a person’s religion were prohibited in the school. She then asked if it would be okay to wear a hat when she was outside the classroom⁸² but still on school grounds, and the principal said she would not object to that. One interviewee explained how her daughter—who had never objected to removing her headscarf inside the school grounds—felt really uncomfortable without her headscarf in public spaces. However, during a mandatory work placement outside of school, she was told to remove her headscarf as well, as school regulation forbade her from wearing a head covering.

Work

An interviewed woman had applied for a job through an interim office with a resume that included a picture of herself wearing a headscarf. After going through an entire process she was told she got the job and was invited to come over to sign her contract. The evening before, she was telephoned and told that “other Moroccan ladies take off their headscarves before they come into the workplace.” When she informed the representative of the company she was not planning on doing that, she was told it was part of the company policy. This policy stated that the external signs of a person’s religion were not allowed in the workplace.

One interviewee had started her first working day as a seamstress when, after working several hours, she was told by the manager that she would have to start early the next day. A while later, another person came by and told her that if she wanted to continue working there she would have to remove her headscarf. When inquiring into the reason for this demand, she was told it was “for safety reasons.” She added that this happened during winter, and other women were working there with chunky scarves around their necks.

One of the college students I interviewed had to observe lectures in a secondary school as part of a mandatory assignment. When she arrived at the school, she was told she could not do the observation while wearing the headscarf because neither teachers nor students were allowed to. Upon inquiring into the reason for this, the principal stated that, in the past, there were some female students who were forced to wear the headscarf by their fathers and their brothers. So to do them a favor and improve their situation, the school decided to prohibit the headscarf for all students.

One interviewee had applied for a student job and was selected as the best candidate for an administrative position after a preliminary screening by an employment agency. On her first working day, she was called away by an employee from the agency who told her that a mistake had been made and she could not work there with her headscarf.

Another interviewee participated in the selection process for a governmental human resources position and came out as the best candidate for the vacancy. In one of the questionnaires, she inquired into the possibility of wearing a headscarf during the job. At one of the final interviews, she repeated this question to the jury members again and they stated that this would not work because some colleagues have an issue with that. Later on, in an e-mail, she was informed that religious symbols (referring to her headscarf) were not allowed when in contact with citizens, as civil servants are required to be neutral.

One of the interview participants had offered her services as a volunteer in a retirement home. She was told they needed a lot of help in the kitchen. There, she would have to remove her headscarf because they have a neutrality policy and also in the interest of hygiene. Afterwards, the manager called her up to tell her she had asked the management again and stated that the real reason behind the rule was hygiene.

One interviewee applied for a summer job as a monitor in a summer camp for newcomers who speak a foreign language. During the process, the person responsible argued that she could not wear the headscarf because they expect neutrality of their monitors.

One interviewee submitted a report to Unia. Her daughter had been accepted to start a summer job at a supermarket chain. On the first working day, in a group of new employees, the job instructions were explained extensively when, in the end, the person in charge informed them about the uniform they needed to wear and told the girl she would have to remove her headscarf.

Discussion

In these interviews, reference is made to rule-driven discrimination. These include instances where there is regulation in place that is directly or indirectly perceived as discriminatory. The interviewees were often already aware of or were reminded of these institutional rules. Most references included here are examples of indirectly discriminatory institutional regulation of which supranational and national jurisprudence has confirmed the acceptability. This has occurred in several contexts, whether it is the job someone applies for,⁸³ the school someone studies at⁸⁴ or the swimming pool someone takes her child.⁸⁵

Many of these lived experiences include instances where Muslim women are asked and—very often—assumed to remove their headscarf in order to qualify for a certain opportunity. In these cases, perceived discrimination resulted from a discriminatory policy or regulation in place at a company, public institution, or school. Grohs, Adam, and Knill argued that this is less expected in the public sector than it is in the private sector, stating “institutional discrimination should hardly be a feature of public organizations.”⁸⁶ These authors presumed that when discrimination does occur in public administration, this would result from the discriminatory intentions of a specific civil servant, rather than be engrained in the administration’s internal regulation or practice. The narrated experiences deviated considerably from their presumption.

In some cases, the person who has to convey this message of institutionalized discrimination felt uncomfortable making this request and explicitly stated that they do not agree with the policy in place or that they find it difficult to ask a woman to remove her headscarf. In other cases, the personal impact of demanding someone to unveil is completely lost on the person in question. This can be deducted from how such requests are just casually made when discussing the uniform for a job or some last details about an entry badge. There are also instances where the actor in charge is aware of what they are asking but feels that he or she is just there to apply the rules that are established at a higher level.

In the specific cases of a power imbalance, young Muslim women run into interactions where it is pointed out to them that they either are aware or they ought to have been aware that wearing a headscarf is not allowed. Women wearing the hijab by choice are perceived as backward⁸⁷ and in need of protection. This is exemplified in the school’s decision to prohibit the headscarf for all students to relieve them from the pressure of their fathers and brothers. One interviewee stated in this regard: “Who is oppressing me now? Normally, you say it is the husband. I don’t have one. Normally, you say society. I don’t have a lot of contact with society. It is me who wants to wear it.”

Recurrent references to neutrality are present throughout the experiences. One interviewee stated: "Someone without a headscarf is not per definition neutral. Someone with a headscarf does not automatically lack neutrality." Another woman discussed this as well: "The bogus of neutrality. They just invented this to allow them to discriminate." She argued that if everyone would be naked, then we would actually approximate neutrality. Discussing the validity of the neutrality argument is outside of the scope of this contribution. Yet, it is clear that this understanding of neutrality is already a reflection of "dominant cultural ethos."⁸⁸ As one is perceived to be more deviant from the dominant culture, one's (professional) development is allowed to suffer because of this understanding.

Statements of how one adapts when traveling to Morocco clearly illustrated what was earlier stated about a negotiation process between the Western world and "the Muslim world." When a Westerner goes there, they need to adapt too. Yet, the interviewee is not on a trip as a tourist. This experience constitutes a spiritual microaggression of being treated as an "Alien in Own Land."⁸⁹ References to other—often Muslim—countries communicate that interviewee does not belong here.

In an apologetic conversation with the school, after the alumna was asked to leave the celebration, the principal stated "that they were not racist because the school worked with a Moroccan cleaning company." This can be understood as a denial of spiritual prejudice.⁹⁰ It is a spiritual micro-invalidating that discounts systematic Islamophobia and invalidates the experience of the interviewee, as it communicates that the "speaker's understanding of the victim's lived reality is superior to the victim's understanding of . . . her own reality."⁹¹

Harassed

Results

The incident previously discussed where a college student was denied access to the school where her internship took place can also be seen as harassment. The vice principal confronted her at the main school entrance while other teachers, as well as pupils and their parents, were present, stating: "she cannot come in here like that" and "the children cannot see her like that."

An interviewee was present at her sister-in-law's appointment with a gynecologist because her knowledge of Dutch did not suffice to discuss her complex health issue. When she wanted to start translating, the specialist brutally and abruptly stopped her and demanded that her sister-in-law explained the problem herself. When she was not able to do this, the gynecologist "barked" at the woman that "she should know this." Then, she stated: "I know more Turkish than she knows Dutch," "all these issues in the world are caused by people who don't know the language" and "all these wars are caused by religion and by language." She said that this incident left her feeling humiliated.

When a student refused to remove her headscarf at her work placement, her placement supervisor visited her there. She threatened to give her the lowest grade possible if she would continue to refuse to remove her headscarf. Unia confirmed to her mother that the school could not force her to remove her headscarf outside of school premises. When her daughter informed the placement supervisor of this, she told her that "she was extremely disappointed in her." At her second placement, she removed her headscarf in the shop to avoid a similar situation. When her supervisor came to check on her, she said she "looked very beautiful" and "that she was proud of her." A similar thing occurred when a student contacted Unia about the forced removal of her headscarf during a mandatory placement during her college training. Unia confirmed that this demand by the school was not legal. When the student e-mailed this information to

the principal, she replied with an e-mail—and put her college placement supervisor on copy—stating that if she would continue down this path that the success of her placement would depend on it.

In one case, a neighborhood health center employee made a formal inquiry about whether she would be allowed to wear a headscarf. She had been working there for three months at that point. The board of directors decided she would be allowed to do so. After obtaining their permission, a doctor at the center told her that if she would act upon the decision of the board, it would not take long before she was out of a job. She was told: “The choice is yours, but I will make it so difficult for you here that you will quit yourself.”

Discussion

In these cases, interviewees were harassed or witnessed harassment. This took place either in one-time interaction or in interactions with persons with which they had repeated contact.⁹² What is common to all these experiences is that the women in question were talked down to and belittled by someone who clearly felt some sense of superiority over them. The actors in question are people in a position of power, such as doctors and school principals.

This feeling of superiority appears to warrant proper intimidation in some cases. Women are intimidated into removing their headscarf at the threat of losing their job or not receiving a proper grade for their work placements, in some cases, even being denied access to a building. These acts can be interpreted as a reassertion of the superior position of the dominant group to members of the minority group.⁹³ This is especially clear in the interaction of the gynecologist, where the patient is placed below her because she does not speak sufficient Dutch.

In many of these examples, it seems as if the fact that the Muslim woman in question decided to find out whether the interaction she experienced as discriminatory was actually a prohibited form of discrimination seemed to trigger more negative responses in some persons. As if their militancy was something to be discouraged. Whereas every move to a more Western way of dressing was seen as something that needs to be encouraged.

Distrusted: Free Riders or Cultural Threat

Results

One of the interviewees was working as a cleaner in a large company when she visited a doctor for continuous pain in her knees and back. While she was explaining the issue to the doctor, she was asked: “do you even want to work?” The same thing happened in a personalized trajectory at her city’s Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW), for which she needed to appear before the council of the PCSW. There, she was scolded by the president about refusing to take off her headscarf which was interpreted by him as “refusing to work.”

In another case, a woman of Turkish descent who worked as a cultural mediator in a hospital was asked to interpret for a Turkish woman. During the examination by the doctor, she witnessed how he asked a patient a number of questions unrelated to the consult, such as how long she has been in Belgium and whether she had a job. After the consult, the cultural mediator was asked whether—in her position of cultural mediator—she was not ashamed that she had to interpret “for such people.” When she replied she was only doing her job, he stated that “they should go back to Erdogan-land.”

In another case, a 16-year-old girl went to the doctor with her mother. When they walked in, the doctor stated: “oh, you know Dutch at least, this won’t be as bad then.” When

the girl explained her health issues, the doctor stated that overweight was normal in their culture as well as “You are 16. Is that not the age at which you Moroccan people have children?” When she told the doctor that she throws up often, he connected that to “your Moroccan food is pretty fatty and unhealthy.” When her mum clarified she cooked mostly Belgian dishes, the doctor dismissed that, stating, “yeah, probably fries all the time.”

During a team meeting at the bank she worked at, an interviewee was asked to brainstorm on how to keep the “immigrant road workers” (mostly men of Turkish and Moroccan descent at that time) out of the waiting room, as the wife of the local doctor had said she felt threatened “to stand next to those black people.”⁹⁴ Her father and husband were road workers of Turkish descent. She stated: “It was so hurtful. How do I keep my own father out of the bank?” It touched me. When she discussed the incident with colleagues belonging to the majority group—with whom she had always had great relations—they encouraged her to let go. To them it was just a small and trivial incident, much like the “minimal harm”—dilemma Sue describes.⁹⁵ In the context of an internship mandatory for her college degree, an interviewee was teaching Islamic religion in a public school. During her lectures, she was allowed to wear her headscarf but in the halls of the school she was supposed to wear a hat instead. While waiting for her students in the hallway in front of the classroom, another teacher approached her stating that she could not be in contact with other students while wearing her headscarf. The interviewee felt that this statement suggested that “other students” needed to be protected from someone like her. A similar statement was made by the principal of the school towards an external intern—in charge of a municipal after-school project taking place at the school. The principal stated: “the children cannot see her like that.”

During a course at the university, a professor stated in front of a full auditorium—which included students with headscarves—that a headscarf is a symbol of the oppression of women. He also added that Islam was fundamentally incompatible with the rule of law.⁹⁶ Another interviewee mentioned how her manager at work asked her whether she reads the Quran as it is “the language of ISIS.” Another statement by the same woman was that “all the refugees coming here from Syria should just be put into gas chambers as they arrive.” One interviewee mentioned a friend of hers wanting to switch her religious courses in secondary school to Islam, a change for which permission of parents is needed. Her parents supported her interest in other religions and granted her permission. The student was invited into the office of the student guidance counselor because they feared she had “radicalized.” The fact that she had “a migrant boyfriend” coupled with an expressed interest in Islam led them to this conclusion.

Discussion

The two types of distrust that Bursell identified can be found in the narratives of the interviewees. There is this distrust of a certain person based on the fact that they are assumed to belong to a particular group. Both of Bursell’s types depend on negative stereotypes about members of these minority groups. On the one hand, the worst is assumed based on a stereotype of being free riders or faking illnesses. A woman who is asked whether she does not want to work and a young woman’s health issues are blamed on her family’s supposedly unhealthy lifestyle. We find that there are expressions of distrust toward these women when they turn to a medical official for help. This kind of discourse was also used against an interviewee by a civil servant. The fact that she did not want to remove her headscarf was interpreted as her not wanting to work. In this understanding, “Muslims’ unsuitable cultural and religious background” is held responsible for patterns of economic exclusion as well as marginalization.⁹⁷

On the other hand, interviewees also experience expressions of distrust from members of the majority that are related to negative stereotypes about minority culture. It is clear that negative stereotypes of people of Moroccan descent took a central place in the doctor's judgment of the girl's health issues. The doctor in question was more preoccupied with pointing out the degree of deviance in lifestyle between the patient's Moroccan family and a Western middle class family than he was with looking into the patient's health issues. He referred to the stereotypical assumption that girls would have children at the age of 16. The fact that she is congratulated for speaking Dutch communicates an insulting message about the minority group she is a member of: typically that they are not as well-spoken or they do not know proper Dutch and is considered a microinsult.⁹⁸ The cultural mediator that was interviewed signaled what is referred to as the idea of "passing" for a member of the dominant group or as a non-Muslim because of the way she looks and dresses.⁹⁹ This contributes to her experiencing fewer microaggressions herself and to members of the majority group (unknowingly) communicating negative stereotypes about Muslims to her.

There are also clear references to be found to the idea of Islam as somehow threatening. First, it is seen as a violent religion with references to war and terrorism. We see statements that the Quran is the language of ISIS. Under the subsection about harassment, the gynecologist also referred to the fact that Muslims were in some way also to blame for wars going on at that particular moment. Additionally, Islam is presented as incompatible with Western values, such as the rule of law. Second, there seems to be this representation of Muslim woman who wear religious garments as a threat to Western Europe,¹⁰⁰ whereby susceptible children need to be protected from exposure to them or they might be converted on the spot. This understanding comes forward in the statements that children should not see veiled women and that something about a female student voluntarily wanting to take an Islamic religious course appears problematic. The discussed statements include denigrating messages toward the interviewees as Muslims and thus constitute "spiritual microaggressions."¹⁰¹

More Harshly Judged

Results

Some interviewees perceived headscarf prohibitions at school as problematic *in se*. Yet, the fact that other forbidden "practices" were not enforced as rigorously made this treatment feel increasingly unfair. One interviewee explained that, at the graduation ceremony, they were not allowed to wear a headscarf. However, nothing was said about short dresses or piercings, although equally prohibited; the interviewee stressed: "not that it would make me happy that those girls get punished as well." Another interviewee made a similar remark about her removal from the school festivities: "if they really would have been applying school regulation, then they would . . . call out everyone with piercings or pretty large tattoos and say to them they are not welcome." Then, there is the example of the seamstress asked to remove her headscarf "for safety reasons," while other employees wore chunky scarves around their necks that could easily get stuck in the sewing machine.

In one case, an interviewee was expected at a company where she would get training before starting her student job. When she rang the doorbell at the entrance door, a man opened the door and—while giving her a dirty look—asked, "what are you here for?" When she explained that she was there to get training for her student job, he said, "yeah, I don't think so." Then, she showed him the e-mail proving her appointment, to which he said, "you know you are not allowed to work here with a headscarf." He then closed the door in her face.

One of the women who participated in this study was interviewed for an internship placement mandatory for her psychology master's degree. There, she was asked questions that she believes were not relevant to the tasks she would be given during the placement. One example was whether she would be able to write her master thesis in proper Dutch, as the team of speech therapists would not appreciate language mistakes in her reports.

One interviewee stated that, during her hospital residency, the head of one specific department told her to remove her headscarf; if not, she would not be coming into the department. She considered that she was treated unfairly during that period and got very low grades, adding that "you can never prove that there is a connection between the two, but somehow you feel that you weren't evaluated in a fair manner."

Discussion

The narratives included here illustrate interviewees' perceptions of being judged more harshly than others. Some interviewees signal other cases that they believe should have gotten a comparable treatment but that they did not.¹⁰² In the first two cases, the interviewees discuss comparable practices that are prohibited by the school regulations as well. Yet, upon violation of those rules, the school does not respond with the same degree of rigor. The same was stated by the woman working as a seamstress. Other employees were wearing bulky scarves that did present a safety hazard in that specific work environment. Yet, her headscarf was singled out as a threat to a safe work environment. In the two other cases, the interviewees did not discuss any comparable cases, but they were still left with the feeling that their treatment had been different if they would not have belonged to a minority group. For example, the psychology student who got interviewed stated that the questions she was asked would not be the same if she would have had a Flemish last name or a student without a headscarf would not have had to show an e-mail to prove she was there upon invitation.

Neglected or Obstructed

Results

One woman mentioned a previous work experience where she and two other women were hired to do an office job. They would all receive training for their first month there and then be supervised closely after that. Yet, her two colleagues ended up getting personal supervision, and she did not. By the end of the employment period, they mentioned that they actually hired one employee too many and did not have the capacity to train her.

After applying for a student job, one interviewee was invited to come over for an introduction into the work content as well as a company tour. When she arrived at the appointment while wearing a headscarf, the manager looked surprised and did not seem to understand she was the person she had been e-mailing back and forth with. Instead of taking her for the scheduled tour, they remained next to the entrance door and the manager told her the rest of the information would be e-mailed to her. After that appointment, the interviewee was never contacted again.

One interviewee was asked by a volunteer at her workplace when she started wearing a headscarf "what she had put on her head." When she explained it was a bonnet-type headscarf, the woman told her she would not be speaking to her anymore. She added that when she shops at . . . and she spots "one of them with a rag on her head behind the cash desk," she will wait for another desk to open.

Another interviewee worked as a general practitioner. During on-duty weekends, she had to do home visits. At one point, she arrived at a patient's house who would not let her enter. He told her, "he [did] not do headscarves." She then continued to explain calmly that no other doctor would be coming over.

Discussion

The first two experiences show a lack of assistance to the interviewee.¹⁰³ In the first case, it was not clear that this treatment was necessarily discriminatory, but it does seem that the interviewee was the only employee wearing a headscarf. In the second case, it was clear that the passivity toward the interviewee had not been present until the moment she showed up for the appointment while wearing a headscarf. The final two cases are clear examples of exclusionary practices,¹⁰⁴ where it was made explicit that their headscarf was the reason for them being obstructed from either being in contact with certain colleagues or from doing their job.

CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this study was to identify which treatment, circumstances, and behavior are perceived as discriminatory through the eyes of Belgian Muslim women who have reported these experiences to the national equality body. The accounts of the interviewees provide critical insights for this identification process. The intention was not to verify the existence of discrimination of Muslim women in Flanders but rather to provide a window into their perceptions and lived experiences.

It is clear that rule-driven discrimination in the form of headscarf prohibitions on various levels is omnipresent. It allows Muslim women to be singled out and harassed by their teachers, lifeguards, colleagues, and doctors. One can argue that the institutionalization of Islamophobia in the form of headscarf prohibitions and "burkini" bans facilitates or even legitimizes Islamophobic discourse by the general public, as has been demonstrated in the context of burqa bans in both France and Belgium.¹⁰⁵ In cases where there is no established rule blocking their access, individual acts of neglect and obstruction diminish the opportunities of Muslim women in their professional lives.

Women who are "less identifiably Muslim" still experience the adverse effects of being seen as part of a minority group that is distrusted so frequently. They are the target of various kinds of religious microaggressions that convey a great variety of stereotypes about both Muslims and Islam. What is worse is that they are mistakenly excluded from the distrusted minority group and, thus, included in painful communications about the "other."

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ENDNOTES

¹The Constitutional Court replied to a preliminary question asked by the Court of First Instance in Brussels. The subject of the question was whether it would be permitted to prohibit the wearing of any external symbols of a political, philosophical or religious opinion or conviction in public schools. <https://www.const-court.be/public/n/2020/2020-081n.pdf>

²https://twitter.com/Ayoubhass/status/1272213771746934788?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

³https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200616_04992387.

⁴“Muslim women” is no homogenous group and is not viewed as such in this contribution. Instead, I assume “Muslim women” as a heterogeneous group with great variation in class, age, ethnicity, gender identity and so on.

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⁸Rolfe, Heather et al. 2009. “Perceptions of Discrimination in Employment.” National Institute of Economic & Social Research. Government Equalities Office: 8.

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¹⁰When discussing various definitions of Islamophobia, it is important to take into account that it is a fluid concept that varies from one context to another, as it tells us more about the Islamophobe than about the Muslim (Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez. 2015. “Introduction,” *European Islamophobia Report 2015*, Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez, eds. Istanbul: SETA: 5–8).

¹¹European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). 2015. General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech. Adopted on December 8. Art. 7. r.

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¹⁶Zemni (n. 15) 29.

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- ²⁰Coolsaet, Rik. *What drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian case*. Waltham: Academia Press, 2015: 3.
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- ²²Mescoli, Elsa. 2019. “Countering Islamophobia in Belgium.” *Countering Islamophobia in Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 253–87.
- ²³(Nouria Ouali, ULB, October 7, 2017) (Mescoli, 258).
- ²⁴Fadil, N., F. El Asri, and S. Bracke. 2014. Chapter 5 “Belgium.” In *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, J. Cesari ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 222–62.
- ²⁵Zemni (n. 15) 32.
- ²⁶Zemni (n. 15) 33.
- ²⁷van Rooy, Wim, and Sam van Rooy, eds. 2010. *De Islam: kritische essays over een politieke religie*. ASP/VUBPRESS/UPA.
- ²⁸European Islamophobia Report. 2017. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez eds. Istanbul: SETA: 97–8.
- ²⁹Zemni (n. 15) 29.
- ³⁰“Kan je een moslim deradicaliseren?” *De Standaard*, October 24, 2014: 19.
- ³¹European Islamophobia Report. 2017. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez eds. Istanbul: SETA: 88.
- ³²73% in 2014.
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- ³⁶European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2009. *Data in Focus Report | Muslims, European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*. Vienna: FRA.
- ³⁷Mescoli (n. 33) 22.
- ³⁸Examples include: the prohibition for civil servants of local authorities to wear religious garment, prohibitions for staff and students of schools to wear a headscarf, a nation-wide ban of burqas in the public space and the acceptance of a company-wide prohibition of all religious garb. See for more examples: Zemni (n. 15) 29.

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⁴⁹ Kessler (n. 48) 212.

⁵⁰ Hodge, David R. 2019. "Spiritual Microaggressions: Understanding the Subtle Messages That Foster Religious Discrimination." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*: 1–17.

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⁵² Sue (n. 51).

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⁵⁴ Sue (n. 51) 53.

⁵⁵ Hodge (n. 50) 4.

⁵⁶ Nadal (n. 7) 22.

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- ⁵⁹ Bursell (n. 47) 7.
- ⁶⁰ Bursell (n. 47) 9.
- ⁶¹ Bursell (n. 47) 12.
- ⁶² Bursell (n. 47).
- ⁶³ Ross (n. 9) 532.
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- ⁶⁵ Blumer, Herbert. 1958. "Race prejudice as a sense of group position." *Pacific sociological Review*, 1 no. 1: 3–7.
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- ⁷² Ross (n. 9) 532.
- ⁷³ In two cases, interviewees heard about the study and wanted to come in and explain a situation they considered to be discriminatory. So, in those two cases interviewees were not recruited with the help of Unia.
- ⁷⁴ <https://www.unia.be/en/about-unia>.
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- ⁷⁷ Cijferrapport Unia. 2016, June 2017, 34. <https://www.unia.be/en/articles/number-of-new-discrimination-cases-at-unia-rises-by-20-percent>.
- ⁷⁸ Sander, Åke. 2006. "Experiences of Swedish Muslims after the terror attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32, no. 5: 809–30.

⁷⁹Thomas, W. (1928). *The Children in America: Behavioral Problems and Programs*. New York: No publisher given in the book.

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⁸¹It is characterized by minimal organization, rich description of the data and "interpretation of various aspects of the research topic." Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 no. 2: 77–101.

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⁸⁴Brems, Eva. 2006. "Above Children's Heads—The Headscarf Controversy in European Schools from the Perspective of Children's Rights." *Int'l J. Child. Rts.*, 14: 119.

⁸⁵Heirwegh and Van de Graaf (n. 71).

⁸⁶Grohs, Stephan, Christian Adam, and Christoph Knill. 2016. "Are Some Citizens More Equal Than Others? Evidence from a Field Experiment." *Public Administration Review*, 76, no. 1: 155–64.

⁸⁷Sander (n. 40) 821.

⁸⁸Modood (n. 69) 23.

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⁹²See research by Bursell mentioned above (n. 47).

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⁹⁴"Black" refers to covered by dirt from the road labor.

⁹⁵Sue, Derald Wing. 2010. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. London: John Wiley & Sons: 51.

⁹⁶This incident was not reported to Unia but to another organization. The student in question contacted the researcher because she had heard about this study taking place.

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⁹⁹ Nadal (n. 7) 29.

¹⁰⁰ Mescoli (n. 33) 4.

¹⁰¹ Hodge (n. 55).

¹⁰² Bursell (n. 47) 12.

¹⁰³ Bursell (n. 47) 7.

¹⁰⁴ Bursell (n. 47) 9.

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