

## **Islamic feminism as a way to live the “everyday Islam”: the second-generation of young Muslim women in Spain**

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### **Introduction**

Previous research has shown that migration process brings along changes in the structure and dynamics of Moroccan Muslim communities and that the role of women is particularly relevant in this process (Ramirez, 1998). Factors such as the knowledge of new lifestyles, education, and working outside the home have caused ideological changes on the second-generation of young Muslim Moroccan women who live in Spain.

In this process, the boundaries between what is considered piety are also changing, while these women try to adapt to the challenges and situations of the context they are living in. They need a discourse that helps them to find a balance between Islamic morality, the norms of their own families and communities, and the moral norms of Spanish society: a balance between morality and the everyday.

In this research we have found new ways of interpreting Islamic morality and adapt it to everyday. This paper aims to present the role of Islamic feminism as a discourse that emerges from the everyday of these young women, and that is starting to change the way they understand and show piety. It is important to clarify that we don't try to establish Islamic feminism as a unique way of understand religion but to present the existence of different forms of living the "everyday Islam".

The relevance of this study relies on the knowledge that gives us about the second-generation of Moroccan Muslim women, and the challenges and changes they face in the process of acculturation to the Spanish society. We want our findings not only contribute to the expansion of this knowledge, but also to eliminate stereotypes and ignorance about Muslim community.

**Key words:** Islamic feminism, “Everyday Islam”, Muslim women, Second-generation, Education.

## Islamic morality and Islamic feminism in Europe

The concept of *everyday Islam* is used by the anthropologists to refer to the ways in which Muslims draw on ideas of what they consider part of Islam, in order to decide how to manage every aspect of their lives (Deeb, 2015). This concept seems to have found a way to articulate two central ambiguities of anthropology: (a) the dual commitment to study humanity's diversity and commonality; (b) the interest to expose dominant social structures and opposition to the norms (Fadil & Fernando, 2015).

Over the last decades, a movement of Islamic revivalism<sup>1</sup> has try to make sense to the discourses and practices of Muslims, however, it has been criticized for focusing too much on piety and Islamic norms leaving aside other structures (as politics and economics) that also mediate Muslims' lives; and for his lack of complexity regarding piety (Fadil & Fernando, 2015), meaning that is equally important to present the struggles and ambivalences of the everyday religiosity.

Nowadays, research on Islam and Muslim communities has begun to highlighting the ways in which the everyday is shaping religion and normativity as well as these last are being shaped by the everyday. It is important to understand that these aspects of the Muslims' lives are not separated from each other; that is why observe the everyday as opposed to religion can restrict the analysis of these investigations. In this scenario it will be more productive to ask ourselves as researchers: What elements or individual practices carried out within the everyday are considered as part of the "pious"? And how can we define what is "piety" in the first place? (Deeb, 2015); and answer these questions through the ethnographic practice.

On the other hand, *Islamic feminism* emerges as a theory that seeks to recover the egalitarian dimension of the Quranic message and vindicate the role of women in front of the most orthodox Muslim groups (who are in favor of a patriarchal reading of the Quran, that encourages the inequality between men and women), and the secular Western feminism (who states that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron).

According to Islamic feminism, the reinterpretation of the Quran plays an important part of the struggle to improve the condition of Muslim women. In fact, the feminist Quranic hermeneutic is one of the fundamental tools to achieve this goal (Wadud, 1999). Islamic feminists claim that Islamic scholars almost never take into account the context and the historical moment when they interpret the sacred text, and that this affects particularly the status of Muslim women. For

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as the engagement in the process of exegesis and theological reasoning by Muslims who doesn't have a traditional formation in Islamic institutions.

these feminists, the Quran has the capability to adapt to the present time and still maintain his universality.

Education is another fundamental tool for this theory; it aims to eradicate situations of oppression and ignorance, and promote instead the autonomy and freedom of Muslim women. As Mernissi (1995) explain, there cannot be a modern Muslim society if the women are kept in the ignorance and deprived of their right to participate in the social life. She also explain that in the Muslim society, where religion and social-political norms are so linked, the only way that women can fight for their rights is justifying their vindications through Islam.

Another particular feature of Islamic feminism is that is mainly related to immigrant communities. It emerges in countries where women seek the vindication of their religion and identity, claiming the need of awareness about the structural issues that these communities endure, as the stereotype of an Islam that does not share the interest for human rights, democracy, education, and gender equality. They ensure that patriarchal interpretations of the Quran (and their implementation) are the ones in conflict with these values (Mernissi, 1995; Wadud, 1999; Prado, 2008), because "true" Islam is actually founded on the principles of pluralism and equality.

Thus, Islamic feminism is not just a theory for vindicate the role of Muslim women, but also a theory for vindicate Islam as a fair religion and the image of the immigrant Muslim community.

## **Methodology**

This research is carried out in the province of Barcelona, Spain. The participants are second-generation young women from Muslim Moroccan families. The age range of participants is between 18 and 25 years old. These women are the first into their families in pursuing a higher education and attend to college.

We use Doubly-Reflexive Ethnography (Dietz, 2012) which consists in the observation and detailed description of the phenomenon (*etic*), taking into account the subjects' interpretations (*emic*) and comparing their discourses with what the ethnographer observed in the practice. This approach also states the need to recognize the existence of hierarchical relationships inside the research process and the interactions between subjects.

The methods used are participant observation and the biographical method. Because there are no records of Muslim students in the universities, we resorted to student associations conformed mostly by Moroccan students (men and women) to establish first contacts. Thus, participant observation was conducted for fifteen months at weekly meetings and events organized by these associations. We were also allowed to access the personal social networks of

the participants (WhatsApp chat groups and Facebook) in order to observe their interactions and interests. We also use the biographical method with the purpose of gain a deeper understanding of the conditions that encourage the academic trajectories of these young women (Suárez, 2012). So far, seventeen interviews have been conducted with Moroccan Muslim women who are studying in four universities of Barcelona.

<b>Method</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Register</b>	<b>Total time</b>
<b>Participant observation within student associations</b>	15 months	38 fieldnotes	127 hours of fieldwork
<b>Observation within Facebook</b>	13 months	50 screenshots	-
<b>Observation within WhatsApp chat groups</b>	8 months	16 screenshots	-
<b>Life-history</b>	16 months	17 life-histories	20 hours 51 minutes of audio

Table 1.1 Data collection methods

## **Findings and discussion**

In this chapter we present some ethnographic data that will give us an idea of the boundaries between what is consider piety and what is not in the everyday of the Moroccan Muslim young women who studies in Barcelonan universities. Previous studies has demonstrated that these boundaries are in constant change, even inside the own families and communities (Deeb, 2015). These changes show us how the "everyday" molds the ways in which people interpret religion and moral norms, and the way these affect the everyday as well.

A critic to these studies about the "everyday Islam" is that they mainly focus in the inconsistence on the people's behavior; on those aspects of their lives outside the "religious dimension" (Deeb, 2015). This can be a problem because restrict the research to the "orthodox Muslim conduct" (like the veiling) may leave other pious conducts unexplored. In this train of thought, this paper aims to explore the new ways in which some members of the Muslim community understand and show piety in their everyday.

As Deeb (2015) states, it is more productive to think what we mean by the "everyday" when it comes to Islam, and why this is an important part of the analysis in our researches. Thus, in the next categories we exemplify the individual practices carried out by young Moroccan Muslim women in their everyday, related to Islam and "piety".

## ***Living the everyday as a Moroccan-Spanish Muslim women***

Sabrine I feel Spanish. I feel Spain is my home, and that I belong in this society because I was born here. But at the same time...let's say that my roots are also important, thus, I feel I belong both places [Morocco and Spain].

Amira The children of immigrants have to face a problem and solve it, and it's "How do I identify myself? With what I see at home or what I see outside? Do I have to follow the example of my parents?" Because you are in contact with different worlds, different cultures, different ways of thinking. The children of immigrants have to learn to take the good from both sides in order to succeed in life.

Participants in this research feel they constantly are receiving contradictory messages between the expectations and norms of their families, and what the Spanish society expects of them (Pàmies, Bertrán, Ponferrada, Casalta, Aoulad & Narciso, 2010). Their everyday is a constant balance between family, society and personal goals. This generates them a feeling of solitude because: (a) they claim their families put far more pressure over them than over their brothers; (b) the Spanish society have many prejudices about the Muslim women (believing they are ignorant and submissive), so they have to constantly prove themselves.

### ***The importance of Islam in the "everyday"***

Amira [Islam] Is a set of manners, of behaviors. It is a way to live your everyday, to act, to think. It is something ideal.

Marna Islam is a part of my life, and I intend to lead my life and my everyday actions according to Islam.

Lina My faith goes with me in my everyday; it helps me a lot.

Balqís I face everything through Islam; all that I stand for is based on that.

All the women in this research claim that for them Islam is not just a religion but a way of live. Islam gives guidance about how they have to conduct themselves in every aspect of their lives: familiar, personal, romantic, academic, politic, and even in the economic (Jouili, 2015). Their personal goals and expectations appear to be strongly linked to religion norms.

### ***The link between Islam and higher education***

Amira In my high school there wasn't any Muslim Moroccan girl. One day I went wearing the veil, to see how my teachers and peers reacted. That experience was very important for me; it encouraged me to demonstrate what we really are.

Balqís Our goal was to get into college. We could not believe it! It was so great. The fact that she and I have achieved was...a great feeling. It was like "Look at us, look at how we raised, look where we came from,

but we've come so far! We can do it!"

Fer They (Moroccan and Muslim women) have done very well. Because they are trying to put aside prejudices and stereotypes, and are trying to find their own way. I love to see Moroccan women wearing the veil and being successful (at college). I think "people have to see us; they have to see we are not few."

Ihssane The first verse of the Quran that we learned since we are children says "You must read". For Muslims, education is very important.

These women use the Quran to justify the importance of going to college and have professional goals because they believe education is not just a right but an obligation for all Muslims. We have found also that going to college gives these students greater confidence in themselves and makes them feel proud of who they are. Thus, higher education is a tool for empowerment (Waseem & Ahmad, 2012), and vindication of their ethnic religious identity.

### ***Islam as a fair religion to women***

Balqís I used to think that being a Muslim and a woman was incompatible. I grew believing that men were superior to women because God said so. Later I realize that was a lie, that Muslim women are strong and capable. That is when I decided to learn more about Islamic feminism.

Fer I think Islam is fair to women compared to other religions, because it gives us the right to choose for ourselves. Islam tells you, "As a human being, you can choose what you want for yourself".

Ihssane Before Islam, in the Arabian Peninsula, women were treated as objects. But Islam gives us rights: right to vote, right to speak, right to have our own business, to make our own choices. The role of women in Islam is very important. Women have the right to participate in every aspect of society. Although many people think otherwise because in some Muslim countries, culture influences much more than religion.

These women recognize there was a time when they believed that Islam was an unfair religion to women. However, as they grew older they started to question these conceptions and begin to learn more about the Quran and religion. They learned that Quran actually puts the role of women in a high place and that there are no privileges exclusive for men. They states that the misinterpretations of the sacred text and the cultural traditions of Moroccan society have distorted the true meaning of Islam, putting the role of women in a deprived place (Badran, 2008). Therefore, a feminist interpretation of the Quran was imperative in order to recover the egalitarian and fair message of Islam.

### ***Professional and personal expectations***

Marna My main goal is to be independent. I want to work in something I really like and live on my own. I have no plans to marry like my parents think. I see that very far away. I want to earn my own salary, travel if I want

to.

- Fer In any part of the Quran states that women can't work or be independent. I never seen that written [in Quran], and it comforts me...I think this is a bad interpretation or maybe cultural.
- Lina What the media says affect us because society believes in it (...) You walk in the street and you feel how people rejects you and look at you with fear (...) and Muslim women who wear the veil are the most vulnerable (...) But I think this is going to change (...) People is going to get used to see Muslim women wearing the veil in work places (...) and they are going to realize that media was lying (...) and they are going to treat us like normal people.

Second-generation Muslim women have different life goals and expectations than their mothers and older sisters (Maliepaard & Alba, 2016). Before marrying they want to find a suitable job and achieve economic independence. One of the reasons they decide to carry on with their education is to accomplish these goals. They don't deny their desire to form a family in the future, and believe that fulfill their personal goals (to work and be independent) doesn't contradict the idea of what a "good Muslim" should be, because through their work can contribute to their society. Plus, by working and participating actively in society they could change prejudices and stereotypes that Spanish society has about Muslim Moroccan women.

### ***The importance of social and political participation***

- Amira I would like to do something big in these associations where I participate; because I'm part of this society (...) I want to contribute. This prejudice, this racism of the Spanish society against immigrants and Muslims is the reason I have decided to carry on.
- Balqís I work with a group of Moroccan women in my neighborhood. It's interesting how I always end up working with Muslim women. Let's say that at the present time my personal life and my academic life are intertwined.
- Fátima I'm pro Palestine, obviously because people is getting killed but mostly because they are Muslims, and I don't forget my brothers and sisters.

All the girls in this research are part of some project or association dedicated to working with Muslims immigrant people in deprived situations. They believe these kinds of activities are part of their social responsibility and also of the mandates of Islam. A way of justify this is through history and the revitalization of the feminine characters that participated in the conformation of the Islam in their first moments (Lamrabet, 2009). Thus, social and political participation defines them as good citizens and as good Muslim women.

## ***The veil as a symbol of vindication and resilience***

- Balqís            My decision of wearing the veil has brought me closer to God. Is a commitment, an act of faith. But also the veil has an important part on my feminist commitment. It's like "Submissive and ignorant women? Excuse me, but we are all the opposite to that. We are Muslim women who wear the veil, but we are not ignorant or submissive". And that's a way to reformulate symbols.
- Marna            In the end I learned to live with it [the veil] and it's a part of me now. It has made me stronger as a person; It has made me grow.
- Lina              Wearing the veil is an act of faith but some parents pressure their daughters to wear it. But this is because their culture, not because their religion. They say "Put the veil because your cousin has put it". The Moroccan Muslim community justifies a lot of things in the name of Islam, but this is not Islam. They don't follow the rules of religion, they think in their culture and their traditions.

For these women veiling is not necessarily a way of piety. Sometimes wearing the veil can be an act of tradition and culture and this is not congruent with Islam. Rather, the veil as a complex meaning. Wear it must be a personal decision and an act of faith; is a compromise with oneself to follow the rules of Islam and act as a good Muslim everyday. But the veil also has a resilience and vindication meaning (Ramírez, 2011). These women wear it knowing that they are going to be more visible and vulnerable to situations of discrimination and Islamophobia. Nevertheless, they believe that demonstrating that they can follow the rules of their religion (as wearing a veil) and at the same time being "good Spanish citizens" will vindicate the figure of Islam.

In this chapter we wanted to show how the everyday of these women (the context in which they live and the opportunities they are receiving from the Spanish society) (Ogbu, 1992) are molding the ways they interpret Islam and piety. In one hand, they are aware of the situations of inequality and discrimination towards Muslim Moroccan community in Spain. In the other hand, they have to cope with family expectations about how a "good Muslim Moroccan woman" should be. They intend to change the traditional ways in which the role of Muslim women has been conceived in order to achieve a balance that allows them to: (a) live their everyday without leaving aside their religious identity and moral; (b) to adapt and be accepted as part of the Spanish society.

For these young women, the Islamic Feminism appears to be the right tool for it. Is a discourse that goes against the "dominant way in which words are read" (Deebs, 2015) and that seems to eliminate the opposition between the text norms (the piety) and their everyday practices.

For them, the limit between what is piety and what is not is the limit between a fair equitable Islam, and the everyday full of traditions and cultural practices that

put the role of women in a subordinated place. With a feminist interpretation of Islam there would be no incongruence between piety and the everyday because this discourse aims to restore the true message of Islam.

## Conclusions

In this research, the discourse of Islamic feminism has offered us a very productive space where we can observe different individual (non-orthodox) practices related to piety and the everyday. We have come to know that Islamic feminism promotes a contextual and historical interpretation of the Qur'an that encourages political, social and academic participation of women. The participants of this research believe that a way of piety (a way to be a "good Muslim woman") is show themselves as educated Muslim women who contribute actively to the society they live in, to make it fairer and equitable. The perspective of Islamic feminism brings congruence to the "everyday Islam" of these women: a balance between morality, religion and everyday practices.

## Further work

We have found out how the discourse of Islamic feminism gives coherence and legitimacy to the everyday practices of these young women. For further research it will be interesting to know if this discourse impact on a broader context, like with religious authorities and community leaders.

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