

“They Think We Have No Ears” – Muslim Women Immigrants’ Experiences in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The continuous debate in the West about women wearing a hijab in the public sphere excludes the women themselves and does not enable a fair discussion of the topic. This study aims to benefit Muslim women by bringing their experiences to the forefront and providing them with an opportunity to voice their distress without concern. The study examines the experiences of Muslim women immigrants in three cities in Germany. These women experienced exclusion and felt marginalized, and believed they were unjustly treated in the public sphere, which purports to be liberal and enabling. Nevertheless, these women preserved their Muslim-Arab identity. The study recommends, among other suggestions, to display the Muslim women immigrants’ culture, showing where they live and establishing shared educational settings for German and Muslim girls and women.

Key words: *hijab, Islam, Germany, immigrants, public space*

Introduction

In the modern age, the discussion surrounding wearing the hijab has become a Western battleground¹. This framework created a collision between religious and secular values, to the point that Muslim scholars and jurists are conflicted regarding the hijab – is it mandatory or discretionary?². Most scholars agree that the hijab symbolizes the Muslim woman’s modesty³, yet both philosophers and women’s movements debate whether wearing it is compulsory.

In 2014, Iranian activist Masih Alinejad spoke out against wearing the hijab in the Iranian public sphere, and activists all over the world followed. Fani et al.⁴ present new evidence that some Iranian women are abandoning the hijab. This is a surprising phenomenon, as the consensus among researchers is that over the past two decades there has been a return to religion among Muslim women, especially in the Arab world.⁵

The questions of religion and the hijab are predominant in Western countries as a result of the immigration wave from the Middle East. It seems that the West views the Islam in a negative manner. This attitude can be contrasted with the West’s view of Buddhism – the number of Buddhists increased dramatically in 2014, but this did not raise concern in the Western media and was not a point of deliberation. Similarly, the assumed number of Catho-

lics in Norway surpassed the number of Muslims for the first time⁶, and the immigration of the former from Catholic countries did not stir up a storm. This is not the case where Islam is concerned, since the West views it in a complex manner; Islam is associated with terrorism and wars, and it sparks conversations about democracy, gender, and familial relations⁷⁻⁹. Empirical studies conducted in the West reveal that anti-Islamic prejudice is more prevalent than prejudices against immigrants of other minorities^{10, 11}. A study of a small sample of 42 participants in England found an increase in negative attitudes towards women wearing hijabs¹². However, another study with a larger sample from four countries in Europe¹³ did not find high levels of anti-Islamic views.¹²

Muslim women immigration to Germany

In 2015, Europe experienced one of its gravest political crises of the 21st century. Many refugees, especially women, fled to Western Europe and specifically Germany. The latter received over one million Muslims in that year, most of them from the war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.¹⁴ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that by late 2018, Germany became home to the largest number of Muslims in Europe, roughly 1.4 million overall, which is 4% of the German population.¹⁵ The number of asylum seekers in Germany increased from 30.8% in 2015 to nearly 40% in 2016¹⁷.¹⁶ Since 2015, about

550,000 women have arrived in Germany: many of them are religious and members of traditional Muslim communities.

The increase in the number of Muslims in the country intensified the negative views among Germans towards the immigrants, especially towards hijab-wearing women. This aided the rise of the far-right political party Alternative for Germany (AD), and in 2017 it received 12% of the vote.

The refugee crisis, and especially the arrival of Muslim women refugees, renewed the debate about immigration in Germany, raising several questions: How much of a threat is the Muslim immigrant community to Germany's harmony? Should Germany push for segregation or integration of the immigrants? To what degree can these numbers destabilize the German public sphere, with its different culture? Can the immigrants assimilate into German society? How well does this assimilation correspond to the assumption that Germany is multi-cultural?

Various researchers considered these questions and deliberated how Muslim women immigrants can affect the German hegemony.^{17,18} Muslim women's dress remains a topic of discussion and criticism.^{17,19} Germany does not have legislation limiting hijab-wearing, but the question remains whether the absence of a legal restriction is upheld in practice.

The hijab is a veil covering Muslim women's hair and necks, providing a distinct frame for their faces. The meaning and connotations of these veils were discussed by feminists, politicians, and lawyers, even more since they were prohibited in French schools and in some German schools.^{20,21} The debate places freedom of religion against oppression of women.²²

Sociologists and gender researchers treated the hijab as a factor that classifies identity and encourages stereotypes and prejudice.^{23, 24} The hijab may provide a topic of discussion for social psychologists, but thus far they have avoided it. The number of women wearing the hijab in the Western public sphere is growing, as opposed to traditional Muslim societies, and the question is whether this movement and presence affect the German public sphere and create antagonism. This study aims to answer this question, while considering the existing literature.

A preliminary perusal of the literature suggests that the hijab characterizes the religious Muslim woman. The research that Unkelbach et al.²⁵ conducted with a sample of German students strengthens the hypothesis that there is discrimination against hijab-wearing Muslims among Germans. The apparent conclusion is that Muslim women have a harder time integrating into German society. In addition, Weichselbaumer's research indicated negative views among Germans interested in hiring Muslim women, and a tendency not to hire women wearing hijabs.²⁶

The public sphere and Muslim women

According to Western perceptions, the public sphere is meant for the use of any person, without limitation. The

experiences and feelings that people have in private spaces are different than those felt in public.²⁷ Public spaces include not only open areas, but also visible areas such as gardens and front yards.²⁸

A quality public space is defined by the community's ability to identify and understand it. Such a space contains an exuberant life that permits retaining an authentic identity.²⁹ For a space to have significance for society, it is necessary to have a degree of compatibility between the social groups using it, its definition, spatial demarcation, and established rules.^{27,29}

Modesty is a core issue in Islamic perception, with its aim not just to prevent physical contact between men and women, but to protect women's privacy from a visual perspective. Islam permits controlled movement of Muslim women.³⁰ For Muslim women to move about a space, it must be suitable for them.²⁸ A public space which does not enable women to guard their modesty forces them to change either their behavior or their values.

In Tehran, precisely because of the societal safeguarding of modesty, there has been an increase in women's movement in the public sphere. The law enforcing women to wear a hijab in public spaces protects them from man's gaze, and permits them to move freely in places where they could not have done so without a hijab.⁵ In the Arab-Muslim world, a hijab protects the woman and allows her to inhabit public spaces without fearing criticism. The hijab-wearing woman is seen as respectable and protected.

The German public sphere, on the other hand, does not provide for the modesty and privacy of Muslim women. The German space is open, liberal, and permits movement, but Muslim women are afraid to move around freely because of the German community's reaction that views the hijab as a threat to Western culture.

It is important to note that Muslim women behave in different manners according to their value sets. Muslim women maintain a multitude of opinions regarding Islamic religious laws, and these opinions can transform over time or in relation to different areas. Therefore, architects and planners need to be conscious of these changes.²⁸

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, with the aim to provide women with space to speak and express opinions without concern. In the study, we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with women. One of the women passed away during the research period, thus the final count is 17 interviews. All the participants are Muslim, hijab-wearing immigrants. The women were selected from three cities in Germany – Tübingen, Stuttgart, and Würzburg. The research took place in the late summer of 2017-18, while the researcher was in Germany for his studies and research. The sampling was done in the snowball method, where one interviewee led to another. A relative of the researcher selected five women from Tübingen. One of these women connect-

ed the researcher to eight women in Stuttgart, and a Lebanese student connected him to five women in Würzburg. The age of the participants was 19–65. The women arrived in Germany from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine. Of the participants, 70% were married, 20% were single, and 10% were divorced or widowed. Only three women graduated from university, and the rest have a minimal education.

The researcher did not face resistance when requesting participation. On the contrary, the women were glad to have their voices heard, as the recommendation to be interviewed came through their acquaintances. An additional benefit was the researcher's ability to speak Arabic and his knowledge of their culture. He helped them speak up where their voices are not usually heard.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' mother tongue. We did not record the interviews due to the cultural sensitivity of the topic in Arab society. We held most of the interviews in the integration centers or the houses of the acquaintances, apart from four interviews held at the University of Würzburg.

We analyzed the data using Carol Gilligan's *The Listening Guide*.^{31,32} This method, meant to analyze qualitative research data, focuses on the participant's voice and provides a path for careful listening. The purpose of this method is to understand the core ideas and create a space to listen to those who are otherwise marginalized.

Research question

What do Muslim women immigrants experience in their encounter with the public sphere in Germany?

Results

The meaning of the hijab to Muslim women immigrants is not homogeneous. Some view it as a religious symbol, while others perceive it as a symbol of culture and identity. Yet most women agree that the hijab is negatively perceived in Germany. Most women who participated in the study mentioned they experienced racism, violence, and exclusion. They perceived the hijab as a catalyst for fear, antagonism, and hate. They sensed these feelings from the Germans.

The hijab as a threat

Most interviewees stated that they had negative and threatening experiences in the public sphere, especially in the German public sphere, and nevertheless they persisted in wearing the hijab. Nadya from Tübingen provided a clear description of the experience and reported many incidents. One of these took place in the Stuttgart airport, as she recounted: "Two weeks ago, a relative came to visit me from Lebanon. She had many suitcases, and we headed toward a taxi outside the terminal. We were all with hijabs. He did not pay any attention to us and mut-

tered, 'Go back to your countries.' He yelled a lot, but that is all I understood from his German. You did not have to understand the language, he was red with rage. He probably does not see us."

Lyla, 50 years old, added: "We went with a friend to buy clothes in a large shopping area between Tübingen and Stuttgart. Our friend seemed to park in a prohibited spot. Suddenly a bald man appeared, came out of a car, and started yelling at us. We managed to understand these words – 'I have been yelling at you for several minutes not to park here, I guess the hijab on your head prevents you from hearing. This is Germany, not Arabia.'"

Confrontation avoidance

Despite the public sphere being open to the women, they fear and avoid going out on the street to prevent confrontation. This tendency can be discerned from Saida's experience. Saida, a relatively fresh Muslim immigrant, continued the same trend as the previous interviewees and expressed her fears: "When I see a policeman, I avoid meeting him. My fear is he will deport me. I know my hijab gives me away, and I have thought of taking it off many times. But something strong, internal, prevents me from DOing so. One of my friends wanted to sell some things in the market by Berlin. A policeman came over, inspected her, and threatened that if he saw her again in that area, he would send her back home (to her motherland). She barely understood any German."

The hijab as an identity

Dunia, from Syria, said: "I am afraid of leaving the house. I am shut in. I cannot say what I want to, and I cannot wear anything other than the hijab. The hijab is my identity. I am afraid that if I go out, they will harass me. Often when I go out in public, I feel like everyone is looking at me, and it truly bothers me."

The hijab in the private sphere

Samira conveyed an interesting opinion: "Where I came from, women were not allowed out in public. In my country there is a separation between the men's public sphere and that of the women, especially of women with a hijab. We felt oppressed. We came to Germany because of our situation and because of the wars. The public sphere in Germany is open to all, women and men, but in fact it is closed to us because of the fear that we will be deported or lose our identity, and the Germans' fear that we will threaten their culture. Nobody sees us, the women, in Germany. We are like objects. I had many thoughts and questions why this is happening to us. I wonder why we, who believe and uphold our religion's laws, suffer such a cruel fate."

Stereotypes about the hijab in Germany

Many of the women mentioned their conflict with German society due to wearing the hijab. They encounter

many questions, such as 'How can you hear?'. Sara said, "What do they think, we have no ears? Sometimes they look at us from afar like they are searching for something under the hijab. I wanted to yell 'Yes, I have two ears just like you do, but unfortunately I cannot prove it to you.' I will not remove my hijab, because the hijab is my identity and religion."

Sara continued to speak, with a restrained laugh. "Do they think I sleep with a hijab? Shower with it? They think the hijab is part of my skin, glued to my body without the ability to shed it. They were surprised that I speak German and English well, and that I went to the opera once. It makes no sense to them."

Sara's friend, Dunia, a university graduate, expanded on Sara's perception and opinion. "My German friends cannot understand my ability to hold up my hijab with just one pin. They are curious to know how I can handle wearing this complicated veil. Their curiosity is an indication of their low opinion of the Muslim woman. They are shocked we go to university, drive, and can even swim. It does not make sense to them."

The hijab as dehumanizing

Several interviewees reported that Germans viewed them negatively when they were seen wearing the hijab, to the point of dehumanization. It must be stressed that this was not a common point among all interviewees. This claim was more common among the educated women. Amina described the objectifying looks directed at hijab-wearing women when they go out into public. "The worst is standing in line at the supermarket and meeting the cashier's gaze. The man is amiable, smiles, says good morning to everyone. The minute I arrive with my hijab, it all disappears. All his friendliness evaporates. I feel like I am forcing him to serve me. He treats me like an object (instead of him feeling bad for me, I felt like I need to feel bad for him). People like him, in the public sphere, give us the feeling like we force them to serve us. They control your mood and cause great frustration. I got used to the fact that in meetings with all types of clerks in the public sphere they look at us like objects and treat us like the paintings, clocks, and chairs in their offices. The frozen, inhuman look will not be forgotten."

Amina continued and expressed frustration related to the weather. "We are more exposed in summer and stand out with our dress. Most German women outside wear minimal clothing, and it is as if we come to disturb them in their comfort zone. I guess the presence of the hijab spoils their harmony. This troubled me so much, that I started having a dialogue with myself – why should I inconvenience them? Should I just stay at home and let them feel comfortable? It is, after all, their country, and I am a foreigner. I will not fix the world; it is good that the Germans accepted us and gave us a living. But we wear the hijab because we have nothing to hide, we are not ugly, and we do have ears. We are human."

Following the interviews, we held a discussion with the five women from Tübingen. We asked them, "Why did you come to Germany, if you feel so bad there?". The women had different responses. Two maintained that it was a necessity, as only Germany let them in. The other three said that despite their personal difficulties, they see Germany as a good country that takes care of refugees and helps them live. "When we compare Germany to the war zone in Syria, Germany is heaven to us." These women's words lead us to conclude that they truly appreciate Germany, despite the hardships.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Muslim women's experience in the West has become a popular theme and is frequently in public discourse. The hijab often signifies different things for Muslim women immigrants. The German perception is that there is only one significance for the hijab, that it is a symbol of the Muslim woman's oppression and an insult to the German public sphere.

The current study refers to the experiences of Muslim immigrants from different areas of the Middle East to Germany, while focusing on race, gender, different interactions in the German public sphere, and constitutional status. Heretofore, many studies were concerned with Muslim women, specifically with those who wear hijabs, but only a few referred to Muslim women immigrants. The current study highlights the experience of the refugee, which renders the women powerless. This experience begins way back in Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq, and continues emphatically in the host country following the forced immigration.

The participants did not immigrate to Germany by choice, but by necessity; along with the displacement they lost the important support frameworks of family, community, possessions, and social status³³. These losses reinforce their dependence on others, diminish them, undermine their sense of self-confidence, and prevent self-satisfaction³⁴. These women suffer a repudiation of their citizenship and of their identity, and therefore are doubly aggrieved. They lose their identities by the very act of being torn away from the motherland due to war, yet neither can they belong to the community in the host country and be citizens of constitutional equality. This situation may be called "schizophrenia of the identity."

The immigrant's new status, "Muslim woman refugee," is a recipe for her oppression and harm.³⁵ She is exposed to isolation and other dangers, instead of being sheltered. The Muslim woman immigrant is oppressed both in the motherland, by nature of being a weak woman in public and defined spaces, and in the host country, where she is excluded, her identity damaged, and her visa revoked.

Muslim women immigrants carry the entire weight of the anti-Islamic perception and Islamophobia on their shoulders, accompanied by violence and racism. The anti-Islamic agendas and the West's perception of hijab-wearing women as oppressed, belittle the women, weaken them,

undercut their identity, and turn their experience into an unbearable one. The current study objects to the West's understanding of the hijab as a threat to the Western-liberal social order. The hijab-wearing Muslim immigrants cannot profess their pain and subvert this perception; their voices, when trying to explain that the hijab is nothing more than a part of their culture and religion, are not heard.

“We want to be good Muslim women. Why does that need to undermine the social order?”, asks one of the participants. The Muslim women immigrants' situation leads them to view the hijab ambivalently. On the one hand, it causes hardship because of the Islamophobia it sparks; and on the other, it provides the women with a sense of control over themselves and their lives. They feel that by wearing the hijab they protect their motherland's culture and their religion's values. They wish to shout out: “It is your (the West's) fault! Colonialism ruined our countries, and we must protect them! The hijab is the last remaining symbol that identifies us with our country and our values. Would you deprive us of the hijab as well?”

Understanding the hijab as a cultural characteristic enhances its place as a component in the women's identity, as opposed to other perceptions that view Muslim women as devoid of their own singular identities. The interviews demonstrate that the hijab as an identity component is more important than the religious aspect, and that the women are aware of their inability to influence the German public sphere. Their experiences, both of refugee and wearing the hijab, lead the women to withdraw and confine themselves at home. These experiences hurt their sense of justice, render them vulnerable, and encumber their integration into the German public sphere. They strive to avoid any open confrontation, fearing it will cause a chain reaction that will negatively affect their status and expose them to the danger of deportation back to the war-torn conflict zone. They view the violence as part of their lives and are aware that their choice ranges from bad to worse.

These women withdraw, do not react to difficult events, and simply wish to survive. They do not hold a dialogue with the German public sphere. The meaningful dialogue they have is with themselves, in bed at night. As one of the women said, “My pillow is a sea of tears. I cry about my hardships every night. I had suicidal thoughts. I wanted to yell: ‘We have ears, we *can* hear,’ we are not even ugly (we have nothing to hide) and it is important that you understand that the hijab is an identity, culture, and religion, nothing more. Germany is a liberal country, but I am still ‘confined within myself,’ and it is not the hijab's fault. In my motherland the hijab protected me in public, and here it exposes me to threats and harassment. The hijab symbolized the boundaries of morality in my country; it marked me as a respectable woman. That does not exist here, in the host country.”

The hijab became a powerful symbol of Muslim women's identity. This is an ever growing feeling among Muslim women; they struggle to identify with the West and prefer to reaffirm their Muslim identity in the German street by wearing the hijab, despite the reported hardships. In addition, they refute the German and Western allegation that the hijab is a symbol of oppression and claim the hijab is a symbol of liberation that protects them from a sexist society. The hijab allows them physical mobility as they feel freed from the male gaze, and as a result they move about the public sphere more freely. They lament that the public sphere has not yet fathomed the hijab's significance.

The recommendation of this study is to make the Islamic culture more present and accessible wherever Muslim women live. It is imperative that German decision makers acknowledge the Western-Islamic conflict. Shared educational settings for Muslim and German girls and women should be established. It is also useful to understand the Muslim women immigrants' perception of time and space, which is quite different than the one prevalent in Germany.

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“ONI MISLE DA NEMAMO UŠI” – ISKUSTVA MUSLIMANSKIH IMIGRANTICA U NJEMAČKOJ

SAŽETAK

Kontinuirana debata na Zapadu o ženama koje nose hidžab u javnoj sferi isključuje same žene i ne omogućuje poštnu raspravu o toj temi. Ova studija ima za cilj uključiti muslimanke i pružiti im priliku da izraze svoje mišljenje. Studija ispituje iskustva muslimanskih imigrantica u tri grada u Njemačkoj. Te su žene doživjele isključenost i osjećale se marginalizirano i smatraju da su bile nepravedno tretirane u javnoj sferi, koja se smatra liberalnom i otvorenom. Ipak, ove su žene sačuvale svoj muslimansko-arapski identitet. Studija preporučuje, među ostalim prijedlozima, upoznavanje šire zajednice s kulturom i načinom života muslimanskih imigrantica i uspostavljanje zajedničkih obrazovnih okruženja za njemačke i muslimanske djevojke i žene.