

Unveiling Muslim women's experiences with anti-Muslim racism in the Netherlands

Gresa Gashi
Erasmus University Rotterdam
gresa.gashi@eur.nl

Zakia Essanhaji
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
z.essanhaji@vu.nl

Abstract

In contemporary debates on multiculturalism and immigration, gender (equality) remains crucial in drawing lines between the Western European self and non-Western Others. A crucial figure in these debates is the veiled Muslim woman, who is marked to be both the victim of a perceived oppressive patriarchal religion and a cultural threat to Western modernity and its freedoms (with regards to gender and sexuality). Different studies scrutinise how this figure is employed to constitute cultural differences and imagine national selves. This paper explores the impact of such national discourse on the everyday experiences of anti-Muslim racism of fourteen Muslim women in the Netherlands. Drawing on a distinction between structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and everyday anti-Muslim racism, we demonstrate how veiling and unveiling practices of one's Muslim identity are crucial in the racism that is experienced. Veiled Muslim women experience more structural (e.g. labour market and educational), hegemonic (stereotypes to (re)imagine national selves) and everyday (e.g. exclusion, discrimination, and violence) anti-Muslim racism. While unveiled Muslim women – in unveiling or veiling their religious identity – are more likely to navigate everyday anti-Muslim racism. Altogether, anti-Muslim racism fundamentally limits the ways in which Muslim women can move, dress, and express themselves in different spaces.

Keywords: gender, Muslim women, anti-Muslim racism, orientalism, Islamophobia

Introduction

Over the past decades, the presence and belonging of Muslims in Western Europe have been heavily problematised in public and political discourse (Bracke & Aguilar, 2021). A crucial figure in this discourse is the veiled Muslim woman, whose body is increasingly policed by Western governments through the introduction of various veil bans (Hass, 2020). Western societies view the veil¹ as a symbol of the supposedly oppressive, subordinating and sexist practices of Islam which are seen as inherently contrary to the Western world and its gender and sexual freedoms (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012). As a result, the veil is seen as a cultural threat to those values, especially in the Netherlands, which imagines itself to be a tolerant country in which gender equality and sexual freedoms prevail (Bracke, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2011). More importantly, the veil has become a key symbol of Muslim Otherness, portraying Muslim women as silenced, oppressed, and powerless, while rendering them hypervisible (Razack, 2008). This hypervisibility has made Muslim women easy targets for anti-Muslim racist remarks and attacks.

Although multiple studies demonstrate how the figure of the veiled Muslim woman is employed to constitute cultural differences and imagine national selves, little attention is paid to the impact of such national imaginations on the everyday experiences of Muslim women in Western countries (Aziz, 2012; Allen, 2015; Beydoun & Sediqe, 2023; AliMahomed-Wilson, 2020), particularly in the Netherlands (Hass, 2020). Therefore, this paper focuses on the everyday experiences of anti-Muslim racism of fourteen women to deepen our understanding of anti-Muslim racism in Western Europe beyond mere discourse. We use the term anti-Muslim racism instead of Islamophobia because of how the latter mostly relies on attitudes towards a specific religion rather than on discriminatory and racist acts towards individuals and groups (Selod & Embrick, 2013). Moreover, we do so to underline how Muslims are racialised through a fixation on their cultural traits (e.g. dress, language, or beliefs) (Modood, 2005). Cultural signifiers, such as particular names, skin colour, a veil, modest clothes, or ethnicities make certain bodies targets for anti-Muslim racist acts, surveillance, and policies (Selod & Embrick, 2013). This is why we have decided to study how practices of veiling or unveiling one's religious identity – thus being hypervisible, or less so but still visible, as a Muslim woman – may impact the types of anti-Muslim racism experienced by Muslim women. To do so, we pose the central question: how do practices of veiling and unveiling one's religious identity play a role in the types of anti-Muslim racism experienced by Muslim women in the Netherlands?

By drawing on interviews with various Muslim women, we demonstrate that veiled Muslim women more often experience labour market discrimination, stereotypes, and physical harassment, while unveiled Muslim women are more likely to face stereotypes and exclusion. In what follows, we build our theoretical framework to contextualise our research and describe how our interviews were conducted. Next, we discuss how practices of veiling and unveiling are central to the everyday experiences of anti-Muslim racism of Muslim women. Finally, we discuss the implications for research and policy on anti-Muslim racism.

Imagining the Dutch self and the Islamic Other

For decades, multiple studies have documented the ways in which Muslims have been problematised and excluded from national imaginations due to their perceived cultural and religious incompatibility with Western values (Bracke & Fadil, 2012; Ghorashi, 2018). The presence of Muslims in the Netherlands can be traced back to 1879 when 49 people identified as Muslim (Al Abdallah, 2019). This number greatly increased after the 1960s with the immigration of guest labourers and their families from Morocco and Turkey (Yukleyen, 2010) and from the 1980s and 1990s with the coming of refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Somalia and Syria, (Al Abdallah, 2019). The presence of guest workers and refugees was expected to be temporary. However, when their presence became permanent, multicultural policies were developed to ensure their integration.

However, the idea that multicultural society was failing has been growing since the 1980s. While such failure was mainly expressed in terms of cultural incompatibility, from the 1990s onwards this idea shifted towards the incompatibility of Islamic and Western values (Ghorashi, 2018). Such problematisation of Islam in Western Europe arose, according to Zemni (2011), because Islam was presumed to reject and resist Western modernity. Aside from being perceived as a cultural threat, the fear of 'replacement' also arose. In this line of thinking, Muslim populations would 'replace' the white Christian populations that are considered 'native' to Western Europe (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2020). The problematisation of the Islamic Other gradually became normalised and routinised with increased surveillance, exclusion, and discrimination of Muslims in public policy and space in Western Europe (Babacan, 2023; Zempi, 2020).

After 9/11, discrimination and hate crimes targeting Muslims increased, specifically targeting those who are readily identifiable as Muslim, such

as women who wear a veil (Perry, 2014). Concurrently, an anti-immigrant discourse emerged in which governments called for policies that would counter migration from Islamic countries and the 'terrorism' that would accompany it, as terrorism was perceived as innate to Islam (El-Tayeb, 2011). As such, different categories (migrants, refugees, Muslims) were conflated and different stereotypes about Muslims were constructed (e.g. terrorists, aggressive, uncivilised) (Ghumman & Ryan, 2018).

In doing so, the construction of Muslims as 'different' and 'Other' not only served to exclude them from the national imagination but also led to the construction of the national self (Bracke & Fadil, 2012). It enabled the production of an exceptionalist imaginary of a 'tolerant' country that champions itself for its secularity, sexual freedoms, and gender equality (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). These values are seen as that which sets the West apart from Islam and they lie at the heart of many debates about multiculturalism. A crucial figure here is the veiled Muslim woman, who is marked to be both the victim of a perceived oppressive patriarchal religion and a cultural threat to Western modernity (Razack, 2008; El-Tayeb, 2011). In what follows, we discuss how the veiled Muslim woman's body becomes a battleground for issues concerning citizenship, belonging and identity.

The veil as a battleground

Muslim women's experience of anti-Muslim racism is heavily influenced by their gendered experience because of the fact that wearing a veil makes Muslim women hypervisible (Razack, 2008). The veil is perceived as submissive, oppressive, and as something blocking women's emancipation (Hass, 2020). Indeed, Muslim women are perceived to be oppressed by and in need of saving from their religion, culture, and men (Abu-Lughod, 2002), and as incapable of thinking for themselves. As such, Muslim women's bodies are used as signifiers of women's rights violations. These stigmas are projected onto Muslim women, which may result in (subtle) discrimination and microaggressions.

Indeed, studies show that Muslim women are less likely to be invited for a job interview when wearing a hijab (Fernandez-Reino, Di Stasio & Veit, 2022), are questioned about their ability to read (Bendixson, 2013), are rejected for internships or jobs because of their hijab and are denied access to certain public spaces (Abrahams, 2021). As the veil has become a growing symbol of Islam in public spaces (Bracke & Fadil, 2012) this has also led to increasing physical harassment and the threatening of Muslim

women, in acts such as spitting on them and physically attacking them, with clothes or hijabs being torn off (Bendixson, 2013; Ghummah & Ryan, 2013). This has especially been the case after the enactment of various hijab bans throughout Western European countries such as Belgium, Germany and France (Llorent-Bedmar, et al. 2023). After the Burqa ban was enacted in the Netherlands in 2019, Report Islamophobia (Meld Islamofobie) announced that attacks on Muslim women have increased, both verbally and physically, in places where the law does not apply, such as in playgrounds and in shops (Report Islamophobia, 2021). The type of racism that Muslim women experience may therefore differ as a result of how (hyper)visible they are. In what follows, we unpack Muslim women's everyday experiences with anti-Muslim racism.

Behind the veil: unpacking (hi)stories of anti-Muslim racism

To understand experiences of anti-Muslim racism, open interviews with fourteen Muslim women were conducted. Such interviews functioned as windows into the lived experiences of Muslim women whose voices have often been ignored or silenced, but whose experiences shine light on how anti-Muslim racism manifests itself and how it is experienced. By adopting an oral (life) history method, we asked each participant to 'look back in detail across her entire life course' (Bryman, 2016, p. 485) to understand how they experience(d), interpret(ed) and define(d) the different forms of anti-Muslim racism throughout their lives. Hence, our interviewees were able to decide for themselves which significant experience(s) they wanted to share (Ssali, Theobald & Hawkins, 2015).

Due to covid restrictions in 2021, the interviews were conducted online by the first author for her master's thesis. A call was shared on LinkedIn to ask for Muslim women's participation in the study. Eventually fourteen women were interviewed. They were between 20-55 years old and had a migrant or refugee background. The women lived in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht, while a few women lived in rural areas and had diverse educational backgrounds. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were transcribed. As the interviews were open, the question that was asked was: 'can you share your experiences with anti-Muslim racism?' and a conversation unfolded on their everyday experiences. An important note is that the women have their own situated experiences of anti-Muslim racism, which means this study is not concerned with 'proving' that anti-Muslim racism occurs but rather looks at *how* it occurs and how it is *experienced*.

To unpack these experiences, we use Alimahomed-Wilson's (2020) matrix of gendered Islamophobia, which includes structural (in/exclusion of women in institutions, e.g. labour market, education, and legal system), disciplinary (surveillance and monitoring, e.g. hijab bans), hegemonic (production of anti-Muslim rationales, e.g. subordination of Muslim women), and interpersonal (e.g. navigating everyday oppression, stereotypes, violence, racism) components. This matrix fits our understanding of anti-Muslim racism as concrete actions targeting specific groups, while allowing us to explore other expressions of racism too. We find that hypervisibility and lesser visibility influence the types of anti-Muslim racism women face.

Unveiling women's everyday experiences with anti-Muslim racism

Muslim women experience anti-Muslim racism in various ways, which also depend on how and if they veil or unveil their Muslim identity. In the following paragraphs, we demonstrate how veiled women experience a combination of structural, hegemonic, and everyday anti-Muslim racism, while unveiled Muslim women – in unveiling or veiling their religious identity – were more likely to navigate hegemonic and everyday anti-Muslim racism.

Being hypervisible: recognisable targets for anti-Muslim racism

When talking to the different Muslim women, they all recalled experiences of being stigmatised and excluded because of their religion (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Such experiences often take place in the workplace or public spaces where they are rendered into the Islamic Other (Ghorashi, 2018). One of the women shares that she remembers being rejected for an internship because of her veil:

I can remember well that I was once rejected for an internship because of my veil. They literally said: You are more than welcome here. You are a nice, spontaneous lady but if you want to get started here then you have to take off your veil. (Participant 8)

Despite the fact that there is no legal ban on wearing a veil in the workplace in the Netherlands except for in certain 'neutral' professions (e.g. police officers and judges), Muslim women are still frequently asked to take off their veils, which is common throughout Western Europe (Allen, 2015). As

the excerpt shows, Muslim women are told they are only welcome *if* and *when* they are willing to take off their veil. This becomes a condition for their inclusion in the workplace and forces them to break with certain Islamic values if they do so. Such conditions, albeit not explicitly mentioned, are often framed in terms of questions. Another woman described how her potential employers expressed that her appearance did not fit their expectations when she showed up for the job interview:

I was invited. They really said: oh, we didn't expect you to wear a veil. And then they really asked me: is [wearing a veil] really necessary? Can't you take it off in the workplace? Then I think: no, this is part of me. This is my identity. (Participant 12)

A condition for her inclusion in the workplace is set where such inclusion can be a form of exclusion (e.g. being asked to remove one's veil). Through a reference to their expectations, she is reminded of there being a norm(al) of appearances in which her appearance does not fit what is normally to be expected. Sometimes lines are explicitly drawn, leading to experiences of rejection. A veiled Muslim woman who worked as a nurse experienced rejection when trying to take care of a patient. As she explained: 'the client said that he did not want to be taken care of by me because of my veil.' The client rejects participant 5 as his caretaker, by which he not only delegitimises her as an adequate caretaker, but also makes her unable to do her work. As he refers to her veil as the reason for his rejection, his response is illustrative of clear anti-Muslim racism. Such a decline or rejection of help by women who wear a veil is not incidental, but common across settings and contexts (Vickers, 2017) and can be understood as structural anti-Muslim racism (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). Besides structural anti-Muslim racism, veiled Muslim women also experience a combination of hegemonic and everyday anti-Muslim racism in which they are faced with questions, remarks, looks and harassment to imagine a particular Dutch national self that excludes veiled Muslim women. Participants ascribed these experiences to being hypervisible because of their veil. A participant recalled how she became aware of this as a young, veiled Muslim woman:

I started wearing a veil somewhere between 7th grade and 8th grade. And then I suddenly noticed how I was seen. Yes, it was very different. So, fellow students but also parents said: 'why do you wear a veil? You always had such beautiful hair'. So, I realised then: ok wait, so wearing a veil makes me extra visible to people. (Participant 6)

In this excerpt, participant 6 noticed a change in how she was seen, which made her conscious of her hypervisibility because of her veil. She explains that it led to exclusion in elementary school as she recalls that: 'Suddenly all kinds of play dates were cancelled'. This shows how parents were excluding her from playing with her peers. Another woman shared a similar experience: 'At the start of my new appointment at work, I was asked: "may I know why you wear a veil?" I told them this is feminism to me.' Muslim women being questioned for wearing a veil is something that occurs frequently (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Such questions often go together with an understanding of the veil as oppressive and patriarchal as participant 7 continued to share her experience:

I worked in a legal department with only men. And the men always said to me: 'oh, look the feminist'. And one day to the next I started wearing a veil at the office and then suddenly it was: 'hey, are you getting married?' Or: 'did your father make you wear it?' (Participant 7)

Note how participant 7 was first being addressed as a feminist in a male crowd to underline her gendered 'difference'. However, when she started to wear a veil, she was seen as someone who has little, if any, agentic power to develop her own beliefs (Mahmood, 2005). Instead, she is seen as a mere extension of family relationships with patriarchal male members. Similarly, participant 8 was asked:

'Why do you wear a veil? Why doesn't she wear it? And have you been married off?' And when you say no, then it's like, 'oh really, oh how modern.' (Participant 8)

By contrasting different Muslim women, some sort of scale of proximity to Western modernity and Dutchness is constructed. While initially wearing a veil is seen as non-modern compared to her non-veiling Muslim woman counterpart, her negative response to the question of being 'married off' is met with 'oh really, how modern'. In other words, what makes the veil 'modern' according to the Western standard depends on the extent of these Muslim women's not fitting into the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman (Bilge, 2010). Moreover, wearing a veil is seen as a marker for not being (well enough) integrated in Western society (El-Tayeb, 2011). Another participant recalled being harassed by her fellow students to take off her veil to behave 'Dutch':

In another [school] year we were with three girls, and they said all the time: 'just take off your veil! We are in the Netherlands! What do you

think?! Why do you wear a veil in class? It really shouldn't be possible. You are also the only one. Why don't you just behave? You have to take it off.'
(Participant 6)

In this excerpt, her classmates engage in a process of 'othering' by singling her out and mentioning that it should not be possible for her to wear a veil in class as 'we are in the Netherlands'. Moreover, her choice to wear a hijab is seen as 'not behaving' according to the archetypal Dutch view of how women should dress (Hass, 2020) and thus 'behave'. Other women also experienced being stared at or being physically harassed. Such micro-experiences are connected to macro-events such as hijab and burkini bans. For example, a veiled Muslim woman recalled how she was looked at differently in the Netherlands after the Burkini ban was announced in France:

I noticed that when I walked on the beach and just fully dressed, so not even a burkini, I would be looked at weirdly. Like, hey, a veil doesn't belong here. (Participant 7)

Certain looks imply that someone is (moving) out of place. A veiled Muslim woman stated that she noticed how such experiences of harassment and violence were connected to violent attacks elsewhere, as she states:

Of course, you always have people looking at you, especially when something has happened in the world. I once had someone cycle by and spit. Luckily it didn't hit me. Then he said something and cycled on again.
(Participant 8)

So macro-events ('when something has happened in the world') shape the everyday experiences of anti-Muslim racism of these women. For participant 8, that translates to being spat on, which is a common way of attacking visible Muslim women (Bendixson, 2013). As such, being hypervisible is crucial in veiled Muslim women's experiences with anti-Muslim racism. In what follows, we contrast the experiences of unveiled Muslim women to untangle how the reading of their 'unveiled' Muslim bodies – whether unveiling or veiling their Muslim identity – impacts their experiences with anti-Muslim racism.

Practices of 'unveiling': becoming (extra) visible as a Muslim woman
When Muslim women who do not wear a veil unveil their religious identity by engaging in Islamic practices such as prayers, fasting, eating halal, and

dressing modestly, they often face anti-Muslim racism in the form of questions, shocked remarks, exclusion, and stereotypes. One woman shared how the fact that she wasn't wearing a veil was a reason to question why she prays, as she said:

I once said to my colleagues at work on a Friday: 'I'm going to the mosque! So, I have two hours off.' My colleague said: 'To the mosque?!' I said: 'Yes, to the mosque! I'm Muslim after all and I like to pray.' 'Oh, huh, but why are you doing that? You don't wear a veil.' (Participant 9)

In this excerpt, the colleague refers to a (certain) image of what a Muslim woman must look like. The fact that she was unveiled was a reason to assume she wasn't Muslim. When she reveals herself to be Muslim, the colleague responds surprised and confused ('why are you doing that?'). Another woman also experienced that there is a 'standard image' of Muslim women, as she mentioned:

They do not expect you to be Muslim, and of course it is not always mentioned. But for example, during Ramadan they say: 'I did not expect it', and then you see that they have a standard image of what a Muslim woman should look like and that is with a veil. (Participant 13)

This figure of the veiled Muslim woman as 'the only possible' Muslim woman seems persistent. Indeed, another woman shares that she dresses modestly, but does not wear a veil. Yet, she still receives remarks about her way of veiling:

I came to work in the summer, and I don't wear a veil, but I am covered. In the summer I also wear long sleeves and pants. So, I came to work, and a colleague asked: 'Aren't you hot?' So, I asked why? Then she said: 'Well, you're all covered, and I really feel sorry for you all and for the veil too'. (Participant 1)

This displays the framing of Muslim women as victims who need saving, as the colleague says, 'I really feel sorry for you' (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Importantly, she mentions feeling sorry for the veil that the woman is not even wearing. This underlines how the veil remains a crucial signifier of Muslimness, but is not the only one. Muslim women also experience anti-Muslim racism because of other practices that function as signifiers

of Muslimness. Another woman shares an experience at work in which she and her colleague asked the kitchen staff if the meat was halal:

My colleague and I got the answer that we should just eat what everyone else is eating and not complain. We indicated we were not complaining, but just asked the question so that we knew whether we should leave the meat or eat it. (Participant 14)

By saying, 'just eat what everyone else is eating and not complain', the kitchen staff member deems their request of eating halal meat as not in line with what *everyone* else is supposed to be eating. By interpreting their question as a complaint, they are turned into complainers who (aim to) disturb (what) everyone else (is eating). Such reminders of being the Islamic Other are also made explicitly.

The nurse also shared an experience with a white Dutch Christian client who projected onto her different stigmas about Islam, as she explains:

She asked me what my faith was, and I told her I was Muslim. Then she asked me if I was practicing. To which I answered yes. The client then said with an angry tone that what the Muslims are doing to Christians in Nigeria is horrific and that we should leave them alone. I became confused and hurt by that comment. I indicated that I am not from Nigeria and don't know the situation there. (Participant 3)

Macro-events such as attacks and violence play a crucial role in shaping the micro-realities of our interviewees. Here, the nurse is seen as a representative of a specific religion and is made responsible for something that is not only out of her hands, but is also not even occurring in the Netherlands. Another woman shares a similar experience when colleagues were discussing recent violence:

Some of my co-workers said: 'Oh my god, how bad!' And other colleagues said: 'Yes, see what is happening now, all kinds of attacks in the world. That's your people.' (Participant 9)

Again, macro-events are invoked to draw a line that reminds these women of their perceived status as not quite 'from here'. In both situations, societal discourses in which violence and terrorism are framed as inherent to Islam (El-Tayeb, 2011) are taken up by individuals who then question, aim to hold

accountable, and blame Muslims. Such anti-Muslim racism is experienced precisely because of how these women's bodies are read as Muslim. Hence, some women aim to veil their Muslim identity for as long as possible so as not to face anti-Muslim racism.

Practices of 'veiling': the hiding away of one's Muslim identity

Muslim women who do not wear a veil can 'unveil' themselves by engaging in Islamic practices, while unveiled Muslim women can veil themselves by *not* sharing that they are Muslim. Some Muslim women expressed being afraid of disclosing information on their religion due to the negative experiences when they did. As participant 3 shares:

At my last job interview I was asked about my religion, and I tried to talk over it a bit and try to keep it to myself as long as possible, because I was afraid of not being hired because of it. Because I don't wear a hijab, you can't necessarily see that I am Muslim, unless I mention it. (Participant 3)

Muslim women are aware of the ongoing structural anti-Muslim racism that limits their job opportunities (Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio & Veit, 2022). As this woman is aware of this, she attempts to evade possible negative outcomes by talking over her religion for as long as possible. Another woman did not disclose her Muslim identity as she became aware of the aftermath of 9/11 and its impact on Muslims:

Just after 9/11 I assumed it was better not to tell what my religion is, because there was suddenly a lot of Muslim hate. And I know from one of my Muslim colleagues, and colleagues knew she was Muslim, that she once found an A4 with the text: 'Muslim terrorist, go back to your home country!' in her inbox. I didn't want to not be accepted based on my religion and was always very careful. (Participant 2)

Due to their awareness of how macro-events such as 9/11 shape micro-interactions, participants develop certain tactics to not experience anti-Muslim racism. Such tactics entail not disclosing or visibly practicing their religion. They veil away parts of their identity to move a little bit easier in everyday life. In other words, it is precisely how these signifiers of Muslimness are excluded from the imaginations of what the Dutch national self is and can be that limits the ways in which Muslim women can occupy space, move, dress, and express themselves in their daily lives.

Conclusion and discussion

Over the past decades, many scholars have demonstrated how the veiled Muslim woman was a crucial figure in the problematisations of and debates on the presence and belonging of Muslims in Western Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011; Allen, 2015; Bracke & Aguilar, 2020; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). In these, Muslim women are seen as a victim of a perceived oppressive patriarchal religion and a cultural threat to Western modernity and its freedoms (with regards to gender and sexuality) (Bracke, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2011). Our aim was to understand how such national and Western European imaginations and discourses impact the everyday experiences of Muslim women specifically by focusing on whether and how they (un)veil (their Muslim identity).

The Muslim women in our study reported experiencing multiple forms of anti-Muslim racism. Their Muslim identity becomes the reason for intrusive questions about the veil, forced marriages and masculine oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bendixson, 2013), thereby turning their bodies into battlegrounds for issues of identity and national belonging. Other scholars argued that this often happens to women who are hypervisible as Muslim (Razack, 2008; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Our study demonstrates how such hypervisibility mostly emerges from macro-events such as hijab bans and 9/11, which shape Muslim women's micro-experiences of anti-Muslim racism. In particular, we show how such macro-events are connected to micro-readings of certain bodies as Muslim, for which other signifiers of Muslimness (e.g. eating halal, dressing modestly, praying, fasting) play a key role. While (hyper)visibility, thus veiling and unveiling, plays a key role, it is also how certain bodies are read as Muslim and what is then projected onto them due to macro developments, that shapes experiences of anti-Muslim racism.

Veiled Muslim women experienced more structural (e.g. labour market and educational) and hegemonic (e.g. 'passive', 'oppressed', victims of male family members) discrimination, and everyday anti-Muslim racism (e.g. exclusion, stereotypes, harassment). Such anti-Muslim racism serves to imagine the national Dutch self as 'modern, emancipated and free' (Bracke, 2011) from which veiled Muslim women were excluded through stereotypes, questioning, and verbal and physical harassment that render them into the Islamic Other who 'does not belong here' (Ghorashi, 2018). Unveiled Muslim women are more likely to navigate everyday anti-Muslim racism. As they practice their religion, they are often met with surprised, confused reactions and tears, which underline the saviour fantasies, complexes, and anxieties around (perceived) Muslim bodies in Western Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011). Given these affective responses, future research should not only scrutinise

the shapes of anti-Muslim racism, but also study how it is *felt* in different bodies and in particular how Muslim women can(not) move, dress, and be in spaces (Khokhar, 2022).

Rather than looking at veiling and unveiling practices through a liberal-secular White gaze in which (un)veiling practices are either seen as emancipatory or submissive (Amir-Moazemi, 2014), we urge researchers to break with this binary thinking and focus on the practices of resistance of Muslim women to be, move, dress, and envision new worlds (Almila, 2019). Especially in light of 'neutrality policies' that shape Muslim women's access to and advancement in Western European organisations (Abrahams, 2021). Our study showed how different signifiers of Muslimness were read, resulting in various forms of anti-Muslim racism. While it was beyond the scope of this article, the women in our study highlighted how their ethnicity, national background and legal status also shaped their experiences of anti-Muslim racism. Hence, we ask scholars to recognise how Muslim women are not merely Muslim or women but Muslim women with a specific ethnicity, class, and legal status to which distinct social meanings are ascribed (Bilge, 2010), and which shape their experiences (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020).

We hope to have demonstrated that gender equality remains elusive in Western Europe as long as Muslim women are still subjected to anti-Muslim racism. If we are to study and make policies around gender inequality, we must reconsider our notions of gender and make sure we include the voices of those women who are often excluded, ignored, or silenced, also because of their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and able-bodiedness.

Note

1. The veil refers in this article to the hijab (in public discourse 'headscarf'), niqab (face veil) and burqa (fully covered).

Bibliography

- Abrahams, N. (2021). On being a space invader and the thing around my neck: Navigating white educational space as a (Muslim) researcher of colour. *Teaching Anthropology Journal*, 10(4), 73-83.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790

- Al Abdallah. (2019). *De eerste moslims in Nederland*. Net in Nederland. Retrieved from: <https://www.netinederland.nl/informatie/nieuws/2019/de-eerste-moslims-in-Nederland.html>
- Alimahomed-Wilson, S. (2020). The matrix of gendered Islamophobia: Muslim women's repression and resistance. *Gender & Society*, 34(4), 648–678. DOI:10.1177/0891243220932156
- Allen, C. (2015). 'People hate you because of the way you dress' Understanding the invisible experiences of veiled British Muslim women victims of Islamophobia. *International review of victimology*, 21(3), 287–301.
- Almila, A. (2019). *Veiling in fashion: Space and the hijab in minority communities*. London: Tauris.
- Amir-Moazami, S. (2014). The performativity of face-veil controversies in Europe. In *The experiences of face veil wearers in Europe and the law*, E. Brauns (ed.), pp. 263–277. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aziz, S. F. (2012). From the oppressed to the terrorist: Muslim-American women in the crosshairs of intersectionality. *Hastings Race & Poverty LJ*, 9, 191.
- Babacan, M. (2023). "Were you treated differently because you wore the hijab?": Everyday Islamophobia, racialization and young Turks in Britain. *Ethnicities*, 23(1), 64–87.
- Bracke & Hernandez Aguilar. (2020). They love death as we love life: The Muslim Question and the biopolitics of replacement. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 71. DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12742.
- Bracke, S. (2011). Subjects of debate: Secular and sexual exceptionalism, and Muslim women in the Netherlands. *Feminist review*, 98(1), 28–46.
- Bracke & Fadil. (2012). Is the headscarf oppressive or emancipatory? Field notes from the 'multicultural debate'. *Religion and Gender*, 2. DOI: 10.18352/rg.40.
- Bendixson. (2013). *Religious identity of young Muslim women in Berlin: An ethnographic study*. BRILL.
- Beydoun, K. A., & Sediqe, N. A. (2023). Unveiling: The law of gendered Islamophobia. *California Law Review*, 111(2), 465–527.
- Bilge, S. (2010). Beyond subordination vs. resistance: An intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women. *Journal of intercultural studies*, 31(1), 9–28.
- Bryman. (2016). *Social research methods*, 5. London: Oxford University Press.
- Chakraborti, N., & Zempi, I. (2012). The veil under attack: Gendered dimensions of Islamophobic victimization. *International review of victimology*, 18(3), 269–284.
- El-Tayeb, F. (2011). *European others. Queering ethnicity in postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fernández-Reino, M., Di Stasio, V., & Veit, S. (2022). Discrimination unveiled: A field experiment on the barriers faced by Muslim women in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. *European Sociological Review*, 39(3), 479–497.

- Ghorashi, H. (2018). Decolonizing the Islamic Other: The changed conditions of critical thinking. *Smash the Pillars: Decoloniality and the Imaginary of Color in the Dutch Kingdom*. Lexington Books. 185-197.
- Ghumman, s., & Ryan, A. (2013). Not welcome here: Discrimination towards women who wear the Muslim headscarf. *Human Relations*, 66(5), 671–698. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712469540>
- Hass, B. (2020). The burka ban: Islamic dress, freedom and choice in the Netherlands in light of the 2019 burka ban law. *Religions*, 11(2), 93. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020093>
- Khokhar, F. J. (2022). Reclaiming the narrative: Gendered Islamophobia, its impacts and responses from Muslim women. *Social Identities*, 28(2), 267–281. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010101>
- Llorent-Bedmar, V., Torres-Zaragoza, L., & Sánchez-Lissen, E. (2023). The use of religious signs in schools in Germany, France, England and Spain: The Islamic veil. *Religions*, 14(1), 101.
- Mepschen, P., Duyvendak, J. W., & Tonkens, E. H. (2010). Sexual politics, orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands. *Sociology*, 44(5), 962–979.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety – The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.
- Modood, T. (2005). *Multicultural politics: Racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Perry, B. (2014). Gendered Islamophobia: Hate crime against Muslim women. *Social Identities*, 20(1), 74–89.
- Selod, S., & Embrick, D. G. (2013). Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim experience in race scholarship. *Sociology Compass*, 7(8), 644–655.
- Ssali, Theobald & Hawkins. (2015). *Life histories: a research method to capture people's experiences of health systems in post-conflict countries*. Health Systems Global. Retrieved from: <https://healthsystemsglobal.org/news/life-histories-a-research-method-to-capture-peoples-experiences-of-health-systems-in-post-conflict-countries/>
- Razack, S. (2008). *Casting out: The eviction of Muslims from western law and politics*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Report Islamophobia (2021). Press release: Burqa ban report. Retrieved from: <https://www.meldislamofobie.org/press-release-burqa-ban-report/>
- Vickers, L. (2017). Headscarves and the Court of Justice of the EU: Discrimination and genuine occupational requirements. *International Labor Rights Case Law*, 3(3), 413–418.
- Yukleyen, A. (2010). State policies and Islam in Europe: Milli Görüş in Germany and the Netherlands, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(3), 445–463. DOI: [10.1080/13691830903123203](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830903123203)

- Zemni, S. (2011). The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium. *Race & Class*, 53(1), 28–44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396811406781>
- Zempi, I. (2020). Veiled Muslim women's responses to experiences of gendered Islamophobia in the UK. *International Review of Victimology*, 26, 111–96.

About the authors

Gresa Gashi is a researcher at the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) Center of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). As part of the Academic Outreach Programme, she works on improving the access and retention of historically underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minority students at EUR. Prior to that, she worked as a tutor and researcher at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology of EUR where she taught several bachelor courses.

Zakia Essanhaji is a postdoc at the Department of Sociology at VU Amsterdam. Her research focuses on institutional racism in academia. Currently, she studies how whiteness continues to be the academy's orientation that produces, disorients, and excludes 'defective' racialised academics from progressing in Dutch academia. In her dissertation, she studied how whiteness is recomposed rather than decomposed in and through the (university's) production of specific compositions of 'the' diversity problem. She has published on intersectional racial and gender inequality in diversity research, policies, and complaint procedures in academia.