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Muslim Women's Activism and Organizations in the Netherlands and Belgium

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Abstract

This article is a thematic exploration of the organizations that Muslim women have established in the Netherlands and Belgium since the 1970s, and the forms of activism they have engaged in. The article provides insight into the complex dynamic between the lived experience of Muslim women in Dutch and Flemish societies, the shifting forms of their collective identities, and their efforts to bring about social change. We discuss the early organizational activities of migrant women from predominantly Muslim countries during the first few decades after their arrival. We explain the emergence of Islamic organizations and the growing participation of women in these organizations. We also explore the attempts made by Muslim women for feminist mobilization across ethnic and religious boundaries. Finally, we examine Muslim women's engagement in (mixed-gender) anti-racist and LGBTQ movements. Our results indicate a rising visibility of Muslim women's activism in the public sphere, and an increase in transversal mobilizations across ethnic and religious boundaries. The article concludes with the latest developments in Muslim women's activism, and provides suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Muslim women, activism, minority organizations, feminism, anti-racism

Introduction

On the occasion of International Women's Day, dozens of Muslim women wearing purple scarves participated in the Women's March in Amsterdam on Saturday 9 March 2019. They carried a large purple banner

emblazoned with the name “S.P.E.A.K.” and the slogan “My Body Is Not Your Battleground”.¹ S.P.E.A.K. is a feminist and anti-racist organization by and for Muslim women that emerged in the Netherlands in 2018-2019. By means of online and offline protests and other activities, these women raise their voices against what they consider the structural exclusion of Muslim women in the Netherlands. Together, they speak up against government policies that interfere with Muslim women’s private lives, accusing that same government of refusing to take anti-Muslim racism seriously. They protest discrimination, hate speech and violence that targets women who are visibly Muslim, and they campaign against various forms of patriarchy in Dutch society. They fight against a lack of space for Muslim women in the media and the political field. They also consistently express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Although S.P.E.A.K. is a new phenomenon, such protests have a long history in the Netherlands and Belgium. How have Muslim women organized themselves during the past several decades, and what form has their activism taken? This article provides a thematic exploration of a number of important developments in the Netherlands and Flanders since the 1970s. Instead of taking *Muslim women* as a fixed category, we use the term strategically so that we can analyze the experiences of many different women.² Our focus is not only on women who identify as Muslims and feel a strong commitment to Islam, but also on women with a Muslim background who do not primarily identify as Muslims. We label organizations as *Islamic* only when they refer to themselves as such.

Migrant women from countries with a Muslim majority population (primarily Turkey and Morocco) began to arrive in significant numbers in the Netherlands and Belgium during the late 1970s and 1980s.³ Most of them came to reunite with their husbands or fathers, who had already migrated during the 1960s and early 1970s as part of worker recruitment programs. Later, the numbers of Turkish and Moroccan women increased as a result of marriage migration, while other women from predominantly Muslim countries arrived as asylum seekers or for work-related reasons. During the 1970s and 1980s, tens of thousands of Surinamese Muslims moved to the Netherlands in the context of the decolonization of Surinam. Meanwhile, a small but growing number of Dutch and Belgian women (with and without a family history of migration) have converted to Islam. This has resulted in highly diverse populations of Muslim women, in terms of national origins as well as in terms of education level and position on the labor market. At present, an estimated four to seven per cent of the population in these two countries is Muslim, half of them being women.⁴

As members of a minority group, and also often members of the working class in Dutch or Belgian society, these women encounter challenges at different and intersecting levels of society. These challenges include multiple expressions of patriarchy within their own communities and in Dutch or Belgian society at large; discrimination in the housing market, the education system and the labor market; restrictions on the wearing of headscarves (especially in Belgium); and the overall rise of Islamophobia in the Netherlands and Flanders. As well, some Muslim women experience other forms of racism and discrimination, such as anti-black racism and/or prejudice against refugees, which can intersect with Islamophobia.

In contemporary public debates, *the Muslim* is often presented as a threat to Western societies, which builds upon postcolonial stereotypes of the Muslim *Other*. Right-wing nationalist parties use xenophobic rhetoric



Protest by the Committee for Independent Residence Rights for Migrant Women at Dam Square in Amsterdam on the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 1988. The committee was an initiative of the HTKB.

Image ANP/Paul Vreeker

in which a stereotypical representation of Muslim women as victims of an oppressive religion is a recurring trope. Such rhetoric has legitimized immigration control and assimilation demands.⁵ The resulting policy changes have often weakened rather than strengthened the position of migrant and refugee women.⁶ All these factors feed into Muslim women's activism.

This article is partly based on our own research into a variety of organizations and movements in Flanders and the Netherlands, and partly on research conducted by other scholars from diverse disciplines. This is not an exhaustive historical overview, but rather a thematic impression of the multiplicity of Muslims women's organizations and collective forms of activism. In paying attention to activism, we provide insight into the complex dynamics between the lived experiences of Muslim women in Dutch and Flemish societies, the shifting formations of collective identities, and Muslim women's efforts to effect social change. Last but not least, we spotlight the role of Muslim women's agency in resistance to marginalization.

Activism and collective identities

The organizations and networks included in this article vary in terms of how intensely they have been engaged in activism, and the public visibility of their engagement. In contemporary European societies, the term *activism* evokes images of people who demonstrate a relentless dedication to a political cause.⁷ This effectively places the term *activist* out of reach for many groups and individuals who engage in activist work, but do not identify with the label.⁸ Moreover, the term is primarily associated with actions that are visible in the public sphere, such as street protests. Feminist scholars have pointed out that such a conceptualization overlooks many other efforts for social justice and equality, especially those carried out by women.⁹ We therefore adopt an expanded notion of activism to include a wide range of efforts by people who fight for social justice and equality.¹⁰

Although activism often takes the form of collective action, it should be noted that some Muslim women engage in activism on an individual basis. A good illustration is Rachida Lamrabet, whose anti-racist and feminist writings and artwork have recently created public controversy in Belgium. In addition, many Muslim women have changed society simply by living their lives.¹¹ In this article, we limit our scope to collective forms of activism taking place within the context of organizations and activist networks.

Instead of seeing these organizations and networks simply as a reflection of pre-existing collective identities, we assume that there is a range of factors that together determine the organizational landscape. Moreover, we take a constructivist approach and assume that people's identifications are by default multiple, fluid and fragmentary.¹² The formation of collective identities among Muslim women is historically contingent and context-dependent. Muslim women's involvement in any particular organization contributes to its collective identity rather than merely being a product of it.¹³

Migration scholars have identified a number of factors that give rise to immigrant organizations and that sustain them. Some of these factors are directly related to migrant communities themselves, such as their pattern of migration, level of resources, and cultural differences with other migrant communities and the dominant majority population. In addition, migration scholars have pointed out the importance of the 'political opportunity structure': the structure of political institutions and the configuration of political power in a given society that provides opportunities and/or constraints on immigrants' collective mobilization and claims-making.¹⁴

Analysing the Dutch and the Belgian cases together enables us to assess the role of the overall structure of opportunity for Muslim women to organize themselves and engage in particular forms of activism. Our discussion of Belgium is primarily focused on Flanders. A general analysis for the whole of Belgium is difficult given that most of the policy programs relevant to Muslim women and their organizations are designed separately by each of the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments. Despite the fact that Muslim women in the Netherlands and Flanders have a similar demographic profile, there are significant differences in the organizations and the public presence of Muslim women in the Dutch and Flemish contexts. These differences are not only the result of the political opportunity structures in the two countries, they also emerge in response to different instances of racism and discrimination against Muslim women.

We explore examples of early organizational activities when many migrant women from predominantly Muslim countries had just arrived in the Netherlands and Flanders. Next, we discuss the emergence of Islamic organizations and the growing participation of women in these organizations. We look at Muslim women's engagement in feminist, LGBTQ and anti-racist movements across ethnic and religious boundaries. Finally, we discuss some of the latest developments in Muslim women's activism, and provide suggestions for future research.

Migrant women's organizations

When migrant women from predominantly Muslim countries began to arrive in the Netherlands and Flanders in the 1970s and 1980s, they did not immediately organize as *Muslim* women. Although it is common nowadays to label any person who is affiliated with Islam as *Muslim*, this was not the case at that time. During the 1970s and 1980s, women referred to themselves – and were referred to by others – as ‘foreign’, ‘migrant’, ‘Turkish’ or ‘Moroccan’.¹⁵ This was also reflected in the first organizations they established, which were ethnicity-based. Few of these were characterized by activist engagement. At first, women united in small, local groups focused on social and cultural activities. These organizations played an important role in providing a social network, a space to preserve traditions, and an opportunity to exchange information about Dutch or Belgian society. Some migrant women's organizations also provided Dutch language courses. In addition to these social and cultural activities, some of the organizations engaged in transnational activism, fighting for political causes in their countries of origin.¹⁶

Ethnicity-based migrant organizations continue to be established by migrant and refugee women, including those from predominantly Muslim countries.¹⁷ An example is *vzw Moustaqbal*, which was established in Antwerp in 1995, by women of Moroccan origin. It still exists today. Based in the Borgerhout neighborhood, the organization provides a social network and organizes language and sports classes, excursions, and group discussions, for example, on impending elections.¹⁸ Due to their small size, their informal character, their local operations, and their focus on social and cultural activities, these organizations are barely visible to outsiders. Besides, they seldom leave any records in the archives, so researchers have found it difficult to map these organizations or trace their histories.¹⁹ It is important to note therefore, that an overview such as this is not exhaustive, nor can it do justice to the pluriformity of Muslim women's organizational life.

Early public activism

Notwithstanding mechanism of political and social marginalization, migrant women were, in fact, visible as political actors during the 1970s and 1980s, both in the Netherlands and Belgium. For example, small numbers of migrant women in Belgium participated in the organization of strikes in the textile industry.²⁰ In the Netherlands, important examples of highly visible



Poster by BOEH! in support of women's freedom of choice to wear a headscarf, featuring the feminist and anti-racist artist Saddi Choua. It was part of a series of fourteen posters, titled "Headscarf? The Woman Decides!". BOEH! launched the poster campaign in 2007, with support from the Federation of Moroccan Associations (FMV) and 21 Belgian celebrities.

Image BOEH!

activist engagement developed in the Turkish Women Worker Association in the Netherlands (HTKB), the Moroccan Women's Association in the Netherlands (MVVN), and the National Association of Single Arab Women (LVAAV).²¹

The HTKB was established in Amsterdam in 1975 in order to strengthen the position of Turkish women workers in every sphere – in their families, at work, and in Dutch society at large. The HTKB had a secular approach, and its activism was informed by a combination of feminism, Marxism and anti-racism. Its leaders were Turkish women with an urban middle-class background, but the core of the organization consisted of rural women who, like the vast majority of Turkish women in the Netherlands, had recently migrated, had little or no education, and did not speak Dutch. The HTKB provided Dutch language courses, literacy courses in Turkish, sewing lessons, cultural activities, consultation hours, and information sessions on health care, worker rights, migration laws, and the Dutch social services system. In sum, these activities brought women together so that they could critically reflect on their position and develop strategies for improvement. Furthermore, the HTKB Board sought to gain public attention for the social, legal and economic problems of Turkish women in the Netherlands. They often engaged in public protests, many of which were organized in cooperation with other women's or migrant organizations. The HTKB also published its own bilingual magazine, the *Turkish Women's Newspaper*. At its peak in the 1980s, the HTKB attracted hundreds of women, and had different departments across the country.²²

An organization by and for migrant women from Morocco, the MVVN, took shape in Amsterdam in 1982. It was very similar to the HTKB in terms of the socio-economic position of its target group, its organizational purpose, and its activities.²³ The self-organizing of Moroccan women in the Netherlands started somewhat later than that of Turkish women. Turkish women were quite familiar with association in their home country, while this was comparatively new for those from Morocco.²⁴ The LVAAV was established in 1983 as an association by and for divorced, Arabic-speaking migrant women predominantly from Morocco. Their aim was to remove the stigma associated with divorce within migrant communities, and to strengthen their legal position.²⁵

Although the HTKB, MVVN and LVAAV fought openly against conservative gender attitudes within their communities, they simultaneously opposed Dutch stereotypes of 'pitiable migrant women', and repeatedly criticized feminists from the dominant majority for their patronizing attitudes towards migrant women.²⁶ Religion played a small role in these early

organizations. The women did not think of Islam as an important factor in their emancipation process – whether negatively or positively. From their perspective, conservative ideas about gender could be found across the world and across religions.²⁷

During the 1980s, organizations such as the HTKB, MVVN and LVA AV could relatively easily receive subsidies from the Dutch government and the Amsterdam municipality. Most of their activities fit well within the prevailing Dutch policy ideal of strengthening migrant women's position while allowing for the preservation of identity. From the 1990s onwards, however, the authorities began to tighten their funding policies, making it more difficult for these organizations to survive. The LVA AV ended its activities in 1996, while the nationwide HTKB changed into a local association named ATK B.²⁸ The rise of right-wing parties in the Netherlands since the beginning of the 21st century, has stirred the debate on integration and emancipation of women with a Muslim background. This did not, however, translate into more financial support for migrant women's organizations. The ATK B and MVVN still exist, but they struggle to offer the wide range of activities upon which they built their constituencies.²⁹

Activism against headscarf regulations

In Flanders, migrant women from predominantly Muslim countries did not establish grassroots organizations with a public activist profile until the early 2000s. For a long time, the self-organizing of Muslim women remained limited to small, local women's associations. These organizations, as well as Muslim women individually, increased their activity in the wake of debates in Belgium over the headscarf. In January 2004, Flanders' liberal Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Domestic Affairs, Patrick Dewael, published an essay in all the main Belgian newspapers, titled 'Elke dwang tot sluieren is onaanvaardbaar' ("Forced Veiling is Unacceptable"). In this essay, the minister argued for a headscarf ban in public schools and in public offices on the grounds of both the neutrality principle and gender equality. He referred extensively to the emancipation of Muslim women.³⁰ In response to this stance, a platform of 32 associations and organizations wrote a protest letter to Dewael, saying his point of view was paternalistic. *De Standaard* published their letter on 19 January 2004. The letter was written by a group consisting of Muslim women's organizations but also included individual Muslim women.³¹ The women experienced the headscarf debates as taking place *about* but not *with* Muslim women.³² New organizations emerged

such as the Action Committee of Muslim Women in Flanders (AMV) and the manifesto and petition drive 'Keep Off My Headscarf' in Mechelen, which vehemently rejected headscarf prohibitions at schools.³³



Poster by BOEH! against headscarf prohibitions in a number of schools in Flanders, titled "I Put On My Head Whatever I Want!" (2009).

Image BOEH!

Gily Coene and Chia Longman have pointed out that the headscarf debates provoked an interculturalization of white feminist organizations that had not previously addressed the issue of cultural and religious diversity among women in Belgium. A good example is the launch of a grouping that set up a successful poster campaign against what was perceived as the female unfriendly decision of the 2007 Antwerp city council to ban headscarves for its public employees. In this grouping, titled 'Boss Over One's Own Head!' (BOEH!), white and minority women's organizations joined ranks.³⁴

Another example is *Furia*, which explicitly presents itself as a left-wing, politically independent, pluralist feminist organization. It was established in 1972 under the name Women's Consultation Committee (VOK), and changed its name to *Furia* in 2016. A small but well-known women's organization, it has a long history of international collaboration and outreach to women of various social, religious and ethnic backgrounds. *Furia* provides policy advice to the authorities and participates in public protests. It organizes a yearly Women's Day on the 11th of November for all Dutch-speaking women in Belgium, where they include debates and workshops on the intersection of sexism with racism, and class and religion, and attract hundreds of women across Flanders. *Furia* was an early supporter of Muslim women's right to make decisions about the headscarf, and individual *Furia* members have collaborated with Muslim women in BOEH!.³⁵

The political opportunity structure and the crowding-out-effect

It takes considerable resources to establish a grassroots organization with a public activist profile. This alone can account for the differences between the early self-organizing of Muslim women in the Netherlands and those in Flanders. The Flemish authorities only began to provide funding to minority organizations (including minority women's organizations) during the 1990s,³⁶ whereas the Dutch authorities had done so in the 1980s.³⁷ Here, we have an example of the importance of the political opportunity structure. It is important to note, however, that both the Dutch and the Flemish authorities have both largely stopped providing structural support in the 21st century, instead only offering small subsidies for specific projects. This has left many grassroots organizations vulnerable.³⁸

Another difference between the early self-organizing of Muslim women in the Netherlands as opposed to Flanders, was that migrant women

in Flanders often made use of the services offered by large, established women's organizations led by white, non-Muslim women. These services consisted of Dutch language courses, literacy training, cooking or sewing lessons, legal advice, and information about the Belgian social service system.³⁹ Many of these organizations belonged to Catholic civil society that historically drew on a large following, and played an important role in the political, religious and social emancipation of Catholic women.⁴⁰

A typical example is *Femma*, which, until 2012, was named the Christian Women Workers' Movement (KAV).⁴¹ Established in the early twentieth century, *Femma* today is still an important movement uniting approximately 65,000 members across Flanders. *Femma* reaches out to women of different nationalities and religious backgrounds, for example, by establishing the likes of *KAV Intercultureel* (now *Femma Quartier*) in Brussels.⁴² Another example is the intercultural women's center IVCA in Antwerp, which is an offshoot of the global NGO, Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). IVCA welcomes women from various religious and ethnic backgrounds and offers low-key activities.⁴³ Muslim female visitors generally report feeling welcome and included in organizations such as IVCA or *Femma Quartier*, precisely due to their Christian origins. In 2012, the Centre General Welfare (*Centrum Algemeen Welzijnszorg*) of the city of Antwerp (partly) took over the IVCA, making it less of an independent operation. For the IVCA, this has resulted in a shift away from providing free and low-key social activities, to imposing an increasingly top-down format that focuses on language and integration courses.⁴⁴

The existence of large and/or well-known women's organizations in Flanders may have meant that Muslim women felt less need to establish their own public activist organizations than their Dutch counterparts. This crowding-out-effect is a well-known phenomenon in the international literature about immigrant organizations.⁴⁵ In the Netherlands, large organizations by and for women of the dominant majority no longer existed when Muslim women began to settle in the Netherlands. As a result of secularization, Christian civil society organizations lost much of their importance – especially in the urban regions where most Muslim women came to live. The small but radical feminist organizations of the second wave, such as *Dolle Mina* ('Mad Mina', which was active in both the Netherlands and Flanders) and *Man Vrouw Maatschappij* ('Man Woman Society'), ceased activity. Hence, there were no significant mainstream women's organizations to which migrant women could turn. In Flanders, however, mainstream women's organizations played, and continue to play, a crucial role in standing up for the rights of women in minoritized communities – despite the sometimes patronizing attitude towards Muslim women (and women of

color more generally). Nonetheless, Muslim women in Belgium are increasingly engaging in their own public activism.⁴⁶



**IK LUST ZE
RAUW**

Deze poster is in het kader van de campagne ECHT NEDERLANDS uitgebracht door Al Nisa en mede mogelijk gemaakt door:
o Drukkerij Vanedruk | www.vanedruk.nl o Speesjaal | www.speesjaal.nl
o WatchThis | Claudia Kamergorodski o Studio-n | Yon Prüst | www.studio-n.nl



Poster belonging to the Al Nisa campaign "Real Dutch" (2010). The phrase "I Eat Them Raw" was a playful reference to Dutch culinary traditions, and negative statements about Muslim women by the right-wing nationalist politician Geert Wilders.

Image Al Nisa

Islamic organizations

In the Netherlands and Flanders, Muslim women became active in faith-based organizations mostly from the 1990s onwards, especially after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Many children of migrants, born and raised in the Netherlands or Flanders, did not identify strongly with their parents' country of origin. For them, Islam provided an alternative form of identification. This growing identification with Islam was reinforced by two important developments. On the one hand, there was a growing Islamic revival movement across the world, which also affected Muslims in Europe. On the other hand, the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe caused many women (and men) with a Muslim background to critically reflect upon their Muslim identity, and to become more actively engaged with their religion.⁴⁷ Scholars have identified a generation gap, where young Muslims distance themselves from Islam as practiced by their parents. In reality, the picture is quite nuanced; a number of young Muslims, critical of Islamic revivalist trends, actively reclaim the traditional Islam of their parents.⁴⁸

In the last 20 years, Muslim women in the Netherlands and Flanders have increasingly become active in small women's groups within male-dominated mosque associations.⁴⁹ Women started to participate in local mosques in Antwerp and Ghent, for example, especially during the month of Ramadan and during religious holidays. Women took Arabic classes and studied the Quran together, and mosques provided meeting space for women.⁵⁰ Over time, some of these women's groups developed into (semi-) independent women's organizations. This is particularly the case with Turkish mosque associations, such as those affiliated to the transnational *Milli Görüş* movement (founded by the Turkish politician, Necmettin Erbakan) and the transnational *Hizmet* movement (founded by the Turkish preacher, Fethullah Gülen). An example from the Netherlands is the *Milli Görüş* Women's Federation (MGVF). At present, most *Milli Görüş*-affiliated mosque associations in the Netherlands have their own women's association, which organizes a variety of devotional, social, charity, and educational activities. Since 1999, the *Milli Görüş* Women's Federation has served as an umbrella for these local women's associations.⁵¹ An example from Belgium is the Golden Rose women's association, which is based in Brussels and affiliated to the *Hizmet* movement.⁵²

In the Netherlands, Muslim women have also established a number of independent Islamic women's organizations across color and nationality. The oldest one, *Al Nisa* ('The Women'), was founded in 1982 by Dutch women who did not have a family history of migration, but who had converted

to Islam.⁵³ They rented an office in Amsterdam where Dutch-speaking Muslim women could regularly meet, share their experiences, and learn about their religion in Dutch. *Al Nisa* soon had a following: its monthly lectures attracted dozens of women, and its monthly magazine had hundreds of subscribers. Local women's networks were established across the country. After 9/11, when the public debate about the emancipation of Muslim women grew louder, *Al Nisa* shifted priorities. Instead of providing a social network and information about Islam to women converts, it focused more on representing the interests of Muslim women in Dutch society. Some of the women on *Al Nisa*'s Board took a prominent role in public debates, and participated in meetings with policy makers, lending their expertise about the emancipation of Muslim women. Since 2010, the foundation has organized a number of publicity campaigns that challenge the stereotypes of Muslim women. *Al Nisa* has consistently defended women's right to wear a headscarf in Dutch society. Since the 1990s, *Al Nisa*'s supporters and its Board have become more diverse. Today, *Al Nisa* attracts Muslim women from many different countries, whether or not they have a family history of migration.⁵⁴

An independent organization of female converts to Islam, *Al Minara*, emerged in Flanders in 2000. They organized the first converts' day in Antwerp on 4 March 2007 in collaboration with the general Flemish converts' organization, *De Koepel*. In comparison with *Al Nisa*, however, *Al Minara* is predominantly involved in creating social networks and learning communities,⁵⁵ rather than engaging in more public campaigns to challenge negative stereotypes of Muslims and Muslim women. Female converts' independent organizing comes as no surprise. Given the ethnic heterogeneity in the Muslim community, converts often feel the need to bridge cultural differences – or find their specific cultural niche.⁵⁶ Furthermore, in the context of public debates that problematize the presence of Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, it is precisely the gendered and religious aspects of Muslim women's identity that sets them apart from the mainstream.

Another important development was the founding of the Belgian *Karamah EU*, in March 2013. Led by Muslim women, this organization focuses not only on women's rights, but on human rights in general. They address the specific challenges faced by Muslim women and men across Europe. *Karamah EU* sets up educational programs, and engages in lobbying and dialogue to further the cause of the emancipation of European Muslims. *Karamah EU* has inspired activism among young, university educated Muslim women in Flanders. For example, several members of BOEH!

have worked to set up a *Karamah EU* branch in Brussels so they could facilitate international discussions about women's rights and emancipation within an Islamic framework.⁵⁷

During the past few decades, Muslim women who were born and brought up in the Netherlands and Flanders have increasingly become active in mixed-gender Islamic youth groups and student associations.⁵⁸ A Dutch example is *MashriQ SV*. This student association arose in 2003 in The Hague, to offer Muslim and non-Muslim students a full-fledged student life within an Islamic framework. This meant, among other things, that no alcohol was served at their functions. The association offered comedy shows, lectures on Islam, excursions, fundraisers, career events, debates, and interfaith dialogue. *MashriQ SV* soon became a popular association among Muslim women and men, and new chapters sprang up in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Leiden. At its peak around 2010, it had a few hundred members.⁵⁹ Nowadays, *MashriQ SV* exists under the umbrella of the nationwide Muslim Student Association, together with other student associations such as *SV ISA* (Amsterdam), *Avicenna* (Rotterdam), and *SV INSAN* (Utrecht). A Flemish student group is *Mahara*, an association established in 2015 in Antwerp, aimed at enabling Muslim students to combine their religious faith and identity within an academic career.⁶⁰

The general tendency among women with a strong commitment to Islam is that they show a growing activist engagement in the Dutch and Flemish public spheres. This is partly in response to the rise of right-wing Islamophobic discourse after 9/11 of 'saving Muslim women from Muslim men'.⁶¹ For the Netherlands, the role of the controversial Somali-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and her opinionated stance on what she considers the backwardness and oppressiveness of Islam, can hardly be overestimated.⁶² Furthermore, in the Netherlands as well as in Flanders, the ongoing public debates about – and in Flanders, the regulation of – wearing a headscarf, create and reinforce anti-Muslim sentiments. In Flanders, such debates have resulted in policy restrictions on Muslim women's right to wear a headscarf in various sectors of education, government employment and the labor market. In both the Netherlands and Belgium, federal law has restricted the wearing of the face-veil in public spaces. Such discourse and regulation have strengthened Muslim women's wish to be heard and taken seriously, instead of simply being the object of discussion.⁶³

In both countries, Muslim women have openly taken a stance against Islamophobia, while also becoming more and more concerned with particular forms of gender inequality. Many of them have adopted (elements of) an Islamic feminist discourse, arguing for women's rights with reference to

the *Qur'an* and *hadith*.⁶⁴ Moreover, the headscarf debates have resulted in a large mobilization of Muslim women defending their right to dress the way they want and/or to express their religious identity.⁶⁵ Even the Islamic organizations that do not have a public activist profile, such as *MashriQ SV*, send out a strong message about Islam and gender. By having Muslim women and men participate on an equal footing, and by placing women in leadership roles, these organizations break with traditional Muslim views and with the stereotyping of Muslim women that goes on in Europe.⁶⁶

Women mobilizing across color, nationality and religion

When Muslim women in Flanders began to organize, they often joined forces with women from other minoritized groups and established organizations across color, nationality and religion. Their aim was usually to engage in feminist activism on their own terms and conditions, independent of the established, mainstream women's organizations.⁶⁷

A prominent example is *ella*: a feminist and anti-racist organization in which many Muslim women are active. Formally established in Brussels in 2000 as the Flemish Coordination Centre for Minority Girls and Women (SAMV),⁶⁸ it changed its name to *ella* in 2010. Throughout the years, the organization has developed from a support center by and for minority women and girls, into a government funded center of expertise on gender and cultural diversity. In addition to providing expertise to counsellors, educators and policy-makers, *ella* aims to educate the general public about the specific problems and inequalities that minority women and girls encounter in Flanders. It offers a counter narrative to the stereotyping of Muslim women, and to the right-wing's argument for assimilation and immigration control in the name of women's rights. Today, *ella* is run by paid staff and volunteers, and it receives most of its funding from the Flemish Ministry of Equal Opportunities. Although *ella* predominantly works with women of Muslim origin and/or conviction, it also includes Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish women, and increasingly focuses a gender perspective on issues impacting boys and men.⁶⁹

Other organizations have mobilized women across lines of color, ethnicity and religion while still focusing on one specific issue. An example is BOEH!, an autonomous feminist and anti-racist grouping that emerged in 2007 in response to the headscarf debates and regulations in Flanders. It is an example of transversal feminism in the sense that it includes Muslim and non-Muslim women and bridges their differences by focusing on a

shared goal.⁷⁰ It maintains strong ties with a wide variety of women's organizations. The immediate impetus for BOEH! was Socialist Party Mayor Patrick Janssens' 2006 decision to ban headscarves for the employees of the Antwerp city services. Since then, BOEH! has protested headscarf bans in various sectors of the labor market and the Flemish education system. BOEH! members have entered into conversation with politicians and journalists, written opinion pieces, organized debates, and initiated court cases.⁷¹

Attempts in the Netherlands to mobilize across color, nationality and religious lines has not resulted in any long-term women's organizations comparable to *ella*. Since the 1980s, women have joined forces in the Black, Migrant and Refugee Women's (ZMV) movement, with the aim of connecting their struggle against sexism with their struggle against racism.⁷² Any initiatives to push this cooperation forward by starting a formal organization, for example, have been short-lived and limited to small groups of university educated women.⁷³ A notable exception is the *Zami* foundation. Since it was established in Amsterdam in 1991, *Zami* has served as a feminist center, but the active participation of Muslim women has remained limited.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, Muslim women from Turkey and Morocco have established grassroots organizations to empower women and girls who have a family history of migration, and who live in a specific (often low income) neighborhoods. These organizations operate on a local level and offer low-threshold activities like information meetings and consultation hours. Although these organizations are open to all women regardless of their country of origin or religion, most participants are Muslim women with similar cultural backgrounds. Examples of organizations established by Moroccan-Dutch women are *Nisa4Nisa* in the Slotervaart neighborhood in Amsterdam, and *Al Amal* ('The Hope') in Kanaleneiland in Utrecht, both established in 2001.⁷⁵ The foundation *Kulan* ('Coming Together') in Krimpen aan den IJssel was established in 2012 by Somali-Dutch women. It has since become a meeting point for a highly diverse group of refugee women, including Syrian women.⁷⁶ An example from Belgium is the women's center *Dar Al Amal* in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, Brussels.⁷⁷

In 2011 in the Netherlands, a Pakistani-Dutch Muslim woman, Shirin Musa, took the initiative to establish *Femmes for Freedom*. It mobilizes women across color, ethnicity and religion to fight forced marriage, marital captivity, polygamy, honor killing and forced abandonment of women during a family visit overseas. *Femmes for Freedom* is dedicated both to preventing these crimes and to (legally) assisting women who are held captive



Muslim women protesting headscarf discrimination in Genk on 12 March 2011, after a young HEMA employee (third from the left) was fired for wearing a headscarf.

Image BELGA/Nicolas Maeterlink

in a marriage. As a secular human rights organization, it assists Muslim women of different nationalities, as well as Jewish and Hindu women in the Netherlands.⁷⁸ *Femmes for Freedom*, in contrast to other groups, does not openly resist the right-wing discourse on ‘saving Muslim women from Muslim men’. Instead, it works together with specific right-wing nationalist and right-wing liberal parties. As such, it has drawn strong criticism from other organizations in which Muslim women are active.

LGBTQ mobilizations

Muslim women have, both in the Netherlands and Flanders, participated in movements for LGBTQ rights, raising awareness on issues of gender and sexual diversity and inclusion. Traditionally, LGBTQ movements and organizations – whether mainstream or specifically focusing on individuals belonging to minoritized communities – have been predominantly initiated and led by men. Women have, however, raised their voices from within and demanded gendered inequalities to be taken seriously in the methods and outreach of such movements.

Merhaba is an organization funded by the Flemish government and situated in Brussels. It is concerned with the emancipation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons belonging to what it calls 'ethnic or bicultural minorities'. In reaching out to ethnic minority individuals and communities, *Merhaba*'s methods include reflection on the role of faith and religious belonging, including Islam, and on the specific position of minoritized men and women.⁷⁹

The Dutch association, *Maruf*, focuses specifically on the empowerment of what it calls 'Muslim queers'. This means that Islam is the common denominator even though the organization is well aware of the heterogeneity of the category 'Muslim queers', knowing that it includes LGBTQ people with families from Turkey, Surinam or North-Africa, as well as refugees and asylum seekers, converts to Islam, and men and women.⁸⁰

It is important to note that *Merhaba* and *Maruf* organize public campaigns, debates and lectures to counter stereotypes in the wider society about ethnic and religious minorities (especially Islamic communities) being particularly hostile to gender and sexual diversity. In this sense, *Merhaba* and *Maruf* show similarities to *Al Nisa* and *ella*, which combine efforts for Muslim women's empowerment with attempts to counter stereotypes of Islam and/or Muslim cultures as inherently patriarchal. Such complex positionality and 'multiple critique' is not surprising.⁸¹ The specific needs of Muslim LGBTQ rights groups are shaped in opposition to the ambitions and expectations of Islamic traditions and communities,⁸² which in turn, are set within the dominant homo-nationalist discourse and afflicted by its stereotypes.

Some Muslim women established their own LGBTQ organizations. The Belgian activist, artist, fashion designer and author, Rachida Aziz, founded a culture and arts center *LeSpace* in Brussels in 2015. The intention here was to provide a radically inclusive antiracist queer and feminist place to gather. *LeSpace* received a small yearly subsidy from the Flemish Community Commission, but mainly subsisted on income generated from sales at their bar, tickets sale for events, and contributions from those sympathetic to the project. In January 2020, *LeSpace* was shut down, as Aziz explained, due to the consequences of gentrification in the Dansaert neighborhood.⁸³

Anti-racist movements and online initiatives

In the Netherlands and Flanders, Muslim women have also become active in mixed-gender organizations and online platforms against racism. In

Flanders, many young girls and women joined the Arab European League (AEL), founded by Dyab Abou Jahjah, a young Belgian man of Lebanese origin. The movement existed between 2000 and 2007 and emphasized a pan-Arab identity. It gained popularity especially among young Belgians of Moroccan origin, because it openly criticized racism and the marginalization of Muslim minorities. The AEL advocated the notion of gender complementarity that considered men and women as having their own particular, but equally dignified, roles and positions. As such, the AEL was criticized from within and without its ranks, as being a movement promoting conservative gender norms. Nevertheless, gender complementarity was embraced by many women and girls within the AEL.⁸⁴ Moreover, many AEL-affiliated women saw the struggle against racism as fundamental to their own emancipation as minority women.⁸⁵

With the emergence of the Internet, and especially social media, online platforms against Islamophobia and other forms of racism have become an important way for Muslim women to raise their voices. With these technological innovations, the line between large, formal organizations and small groups of activist individuals has become blurred. Many of these online platforms are managed by a small number of women and men, but have an outsized following. An example from Flanders is the online alternative media project *Kifkif*, which publishes articles, reviews and videos with an anti-racist perspective. Issues pertaining to Muslims generally, and Muslim women in particular, are regularly discussed.⁸⁶ An example of an online activist platform that aims specifically at Muslims is *MVSLIM*. This platform, established in 2017 by the Belgian activists, artists and entrepreneurs, Taha Riani and Hannan Challouki, starts from the political, religious, social and artistic interests and engagement of Muslims in Belgium, and beyond. The fact that *MVSLIM* is online in English attests to the international ambitions of its creators, who have articulated that '*MVSLIM* is an online community that encourages creativity, self-development and entrepreneurship. *MVSLIM* unites people from different backgrounds and cultures, not only to create a strong community of Muslims, but to make the world of Muslims more accessible to others.'⁸⁷

An online platform from the Netherlands is *WijBlijvenHier* ('We Are Here to Stay'). Started in 2005 by an ethnically diverse group of young Muslim men and women, its goal is to move beyond the mainstream news media and make critical interventions in public debates about Islam, Muslims and immigration. With a healthy dose of humor, they shape their own narratives and assert their rightful place in Dutch society.⁸⁸ Also in the Netherlands is *Meld Islamofobie* ('Report Islamophobia'). Started in 2015, it is an online



S.P.E.A.K. women participating in the Women's March in Amsterdam on Saturday 9 March 2019, on the occasion of International Women's Day.

Image S.P.E.A.K.

platform where people can record hate crimes against Muslims. It has developed into a foundation that raises awareness about Islamophobia by collecting data, publishing research reports, and critically intervening in public debates. From the very beginning, Report Islamophobia has been led by Muslim women who have played a significant role in putting Islamophobia on the political agenda.⁸⁹

Discussion

“Muslim women” are a highly diverse category, and this is reflected in their organizations and their activism. The organizational landscape that women create and shape keeps changing. Muslim women take new initiatives against sexism and racism, and they engage in multiple forms of activism. For example, in the Netherlands, a growing number of women have joined the *Groene Moslims* (Green Muslims), trying to raise awareness from an Islamic perspective, about climate change and other sustainability-related issues.⁹⁰ In Flanders, Muslim women started *Jihad van de Moeders* (‘Jihad of the Mothers’), a support group by and for mothers of children who travelled

to Syria to join the *Islamic State*. Strongly supportive of human and children's rights, their contribution was honoured at the end of 2019, with the annual Human Rights Award by the Belgian League for Human Rights.⁹¹ Furthermore, Muslim women have also become more and more active in mainstream worker unions, for example in the Dutch FNV campaign *Schoongenoeg* (which simultaneously translates as 'Clean Enough' and 'Fed Up') for the rights of professional cleaners.⁹²

With such a variety of associations, it is impossible to give an exhaustive overview of the ways in which Muslim women have engaged in political activity during the last several decades. Still, we show how Muslim women's organizations and activism are not merely a reflection of their challenges in Dutch and Belgian societies. These women are affected by many different variables that inspire them to join together, either in existing organizations, or in ones they establish on their own. The public debates about Muslim women have had an important effect. There is much research yet to be done on these variables, and on the intersectional locations from which Muslim women speak to the assumptions and expectations they encounter publicly and in their private lives. Whether they are participants in social movements, or they become politicians or artists, whether they are emerging from orthodox, liberal or secular communities, and finally, whether they are born or converted Muslims, these women have demonstrated their agency in the multiplicity of their choices.

Notes

- 1 The original Dutch tekst read: 'Ik Ben Niet Jouw Strijdtoneel!'
- 2 Eide, 'Strategic Essentialism'.
- 3 The Netherlands has had a long-term colonial relationship with Islam. Indonesia, which is currently the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, has been a Dutch colony for centuries. However, the number of Muslims from the "Dutch Indies" living in the Netherlands has historically been quite small. Belgium has been a colonial power as well, but its colonial subjects in Congo were predominantly Christian. Nevertheless, European colonial imaginaries of the Muslim *Other* still play an important role in contemporary encounters between Muslims and members of the dominant majority population in the Netherlands and Flanders. Source: Ceuppens and De Mul, 'De Vergeten Congolees'; Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 20.
- 4 Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 20-26.
- 5 Ghorashi, 'From Absolute Invisibility to Extreme Visibility', 75-92; Bracke, 'From "Saving Women" to "Saving Gays"'; Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 43-60.
- 6 Bonjour and De Hardt, 'A Proper Wife, a Proper Marriage'; Miri, 'Bridging colonial feminist discourses and migrant women's lived realities'; Timmerman et al., *Gender and Migration*.

- 7 Depending on someone's political views, the term 'activism' may also evoke images of fanatical and overly emotional protesters who fail to see nuances and are not open for constructive conversations.
- 8 Bobel, 'I Am Not an Activist', 156.
- 9 Bobel, 'I Am Not an Activist', 156. A similar argument has been made regarding women's political participation and civic engagement more generally. Cf.: Joly and Wadia, *Muslim Women and Power*; Longman et al., 'Mothering as a Citizenship Practice'.
- 10 Bobel, 'I Am Not an Activist', 147-148.
- 11 Vintges, 'Feminisme versus Neoliberalisme', 251.
- 12 Baumann, *Contesting Culture*, 21.
- 13 Bobel, 'I Am Not an Activist', 148.
- 14 Schrover and Vermeulen, 'Immigrant Organisations', 826, 828.
- 15 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 7-8.
- 16 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 81-83, 93.
- 17 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 98-99; Ouali, 'Migrant Women in Belgium', 115; Bendadi, *Dolle Amina's*, 215-225.
- 18 Bendadi, *Dolle Amina's*, 215-218; Bellengé, 'In the Picture'.
- 19 Schrover and Vermeulen, 'Immigrant Organisations', 825, 827.
- 20 Ouali, 'Migrant Women in Belgium', 107.
- 21 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 89-91, 97-98.
- 22 Redmond and Goudt, "*Daar Hoor Ik Ook Bij*", 27-33; Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 17-19, 81-87.
- 23 Redmond and Goudt, "*Daar Hoor Ik Ook Bij*", 35-40; Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 17-19, 87-90.
- 24 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 83.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 87, 97-98.
- 26 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 81-97.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 119-125.
- 28 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 85-88.
- 29 Van Es, 'Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women', 159-160.
- 30 Dewael, 'Elke Dwang tot Sluieren'.
- 31 The open letter, entitled 'Islam Emancipeert' was signed by: Hayat, Platform Allochtone Vrouwen, Marom, JVI-Vrouwen, Hidjra, Balsam-Alwi'aam, Umivel, Attawasol, Umiva, Nisa, Nibras, Sensla, IVG, Groep Bekeerde Moslima's, Moslim Jongeren, FZO Vlaanderen, Gezondheid Solidariteit Zonder Grenzen, Memosa, Pico, Ravis, AEL-vrouwen, Muslim Student Community, Meva, Steunpunt Allochtone Vrouwen en meisjes, Banat, Federatie Wereld Vrouwen, El Amal, El Akhawaat, Voem, Hidaya.
- 32 Longman, 'Over Our Heads?'
- 33 Coene and Longman, 'Gendering the Diversification', 315; AMV, 'AMV Enquête'.
- 34 Coene and Longman, 'Gendering the Diversification', 316.
- 35 Van den Brandt, 'Secular Feminisms'.
- 36 Heyse, *Onderzoek naar de Structuur*, 14.
- 37 Ouali, 'Migrant Women in Belgium', 115.
- 38 Heyse, 'Onderzoek naar de Structuur', 15-17; Van Es, 'Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women', 159-160.
- 39 Ouali, 'Migrant Women in Belgium', 108.
- 40 Van Molle, 'De Nieuwe Vrouwenbeweging in Vlaanderen'.
- 41 Willems, *Maria Baers*.
- 42 Vandeveegaete, 'KAV Gaat Intercultureel'.

- 43 YWCA, 'YWCA Antwerpen 100 Jaar'.
- 44 Personal communication with Amal Miri (UGent), 25 June 2020.
- 45 Schrover and Vermeulen, 'Immigrant Organisations', 829.
- 46 Ouali, 'Migrant Women in Belgium', 108; S'jegers, 'Een Feminisme voor Alle Vrouwen?'
- 47 Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 35-35, 61-63.
- 48 Fadil, 'Recalling the "Islam of the Parents"'.
- 49 Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 395-396.
- 50 Oulad, *Knelpunten in Antwerpse Moskeeën*, 8; Kanmaz, *Islamitische Ruimtes in de Stad*.
- 51 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 21-22, 101-107.
- 52 Kayakci, 'Giving in God's Name'.
- 53 Already during the late 1970s, Dutch women converts to Islam had initiated a number of Islamic women's groups, such as the Association for Islamic Women in the Netherlands and the Dutch Islamic Women's Society, but these had a highly informal character and only existed for a few years. Cf.: Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 397.
- 54 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 19-20, 90-97.
- 55 Leman et al., 'Ethnic Dimensions in the Discourse', 1489-1495.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Karamah, *EU flyer*; Van den Brandt, 'Secularity, Gender, Emancipation', 11.
- 58 Butter and Van Oordt, *Zuilen in de Polder*, 401-403.
- 59 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 22-23, 107-112.
- 60 Verde, 'Academia Meets Islam'.
- 61 Coene and Longman, 'Gendering the Diversification'; Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 133-147; Van Es, 'Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women', 153-170.
- 62 Ghorashi, 'Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Daring or Dogmatic?'; Van Es, 'Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women'.
- 63 Brems et al., 'The Belgian "Burqa Ban"'.
- 64 Vanderwaeren, 'Moslima's Aan de Horizon'; Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 133-147; Van Es, 'Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women', 153-170.
- 65 Van den Brandt, 'De Wording van een Feminist'; Korteweg and Yurdakul, *The Headscarf Debates*.
- 66 Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 147-149.
- 67 Coene and Longman, 'Zoeken naar een Evenwicht'.
- 68 The term 'allochthonous' literally means 'from foreign soil'. Until recently, this term was commonly used in the Dutch language for people with a family history of migration, particularly those of Turkish or Moroccan origins.
- 69 Van den Brandt and Longman, 'Working Against Many Grains'.
- 70 Yuval-Davis, 'Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics'.
- 71 Van den Brandt, 'Feminist Practice and Solidarity in Secular Societies'.
- 72 <https://www.theblackarchives.nl/blog/blog-de-verzwegen-geschiedenis-van-de-zmv-beweging.html> (last accessed 10 July 2020).
- 73 Deekman and Hermans, 'Heilig Vuur', 99-100.
- 74 www.zami.nl (last accessed 30 March 2019).
- 75 www.nisa4nisa.nl (last accessed 15 March 2019); www.al-amal.nl/ontstaansgeschiedenis-van-al-amal/ (last accessed 27 March 2019).
- 76 Nawal Mustafa, personal communication, 9 July 2020.
- 77 Govaerts, 'Dar al Amal'.
- 78 www.femmesforfreedom.com (last accessed 30 March 2019).
- 79 Roodsaz and Van den Brandt, 'Properly Gay'; Peumans, *Queer Muslims*.

- 80 <http://www.maruf.eu/overmaruf.html> (last accessed 1 July 2020).
- 81 Cooke, 'Multiple Critique'.
- 82 Bracke, 'From "Saving Women" to "Saving Gays"'; Roodsaz and Van den Brandt, 'Properly Gay'.
- 83 Broos, 'Rachida Aziz'.
- 84 Coene and Longman, 'Zoeken naar een Evenwicht'.
- 85 Fadil Nadia, 'The Political Mobilization'.
- 86 Cf. e.g. Kifkif's dossier 'Gender and Diversity': www.kifkif.be/actua/dossiers/gender-diversiteit; and a recent contribution about the influence of headscarf bans on young Muslim women: <https://kifkif.be/cnt/artikel/de-invloed-van-het-hoofddoekenverbod-op-adolescente-moslimas-6847> (both last accessed 17 April 2019).
- 87 www.mvslim.com/our-story (last accessed 17 April 2019).
- 88 www.wijblijvenhier.nl (last accessed 28 March 2019).
- 89 www.meldislamofobie.org (last accessed 15 March 2019).
- 90 www.groenemoslims.nl (last accessed 30 March 2019).
- 91 De Morgen, 'Liga voor Mensenrechten'.
- 92 www.schoongenoege.nu (last accessed 30 March 2019).

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