

# NEW FACES OF A NEW PHASE: THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY AMONG YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN IN SWEDEN

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In the post-September 11 climate, the category of “the Muslim” has become increasingly constructed in opposition to valued features of the Western citizen. Dissociated with modernity and democracy, the Muslim is portrayed as being determined by religious and cultural heritage (Runfors 2006; Bracke and Fadil 2012) and as having some “indefinable propensity to barbarism” (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 31). The stereotyping is gendered and portrays Muslim women as passive victims to patriarchal oppression and in need of help from non-Muslims to be set free from cultural, religious and familial attachments. This negative imagery has generated various governmental and non-governmental actions aiming at liberating Muslim women, and also the legitimizing of immigration-hostile politics and discrimination against Muslims generally (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Andreassen, this volume). Thus, for many young Muslim women it appears particularly important to struggle for recognition as full subjects and citizens. For some this includes the decision to step into the realm of public visibility, particularly through media appearances.

Gerdien Jonker and Valérie Amiraux (2006, 11) illuminate how the stigma of “Muslim” has led to a situation in which many people have “ceased to participate in public events that addressed Islam or the Muslim minorities in Europe.” However, in their seminal study the authors present a recent trend of Muslim actors entering various public spheres. Rather than elaborating on the “politics of stereotyping,” the authors investigate the “politics of visibility” among individuals who do not withdraw from public interaction or disidentify with Islam, but “insist on acting and speaking as Muslims” (Jonker and Amiraux 2006, 10). It is a heterogeneous body consisting of men and women, young and old, believers and non-believers, secular Muslims, traditionalists and modernists.

This article studies young hijab-wearing women who act and speak publicly as self-identified Swedish Muslims, drawing on two distinct, yet interrelated case studies, that of collective engagement in Muslim youth organizations, and that of individuals promoting Islamic fashion (emic term, Moors and Tarlo 2013).<sup>1</sup> Both cases reflect how women are simultaneously affected by, and actively making use of, various politics of visibility in the public sphere. The analysis is influenced by a theoretical framework suggested by Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach in their edited volume *Women, Leadership and Mosques* (2011). It is a framework that helps explain the conditions behind women's stepping up as religious front figures, that is, between "male invitation, state intervention, and female initiative" (Bano and Kalmbach 2011, 31). Two more dimensions will be added: the media and the market.

The young women in our studies, born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, have grown up within contexts affected by a global Islamic revival where "new veiling" is encouraged as a personal choice (McLeod 1991; Moors 2009, 178). The worldwide Islamic revival has emerged since at least the 1970s and is manifested in greater religious piety, such as an "increase in attendance at mosques by both women and men, and in marked displays of religious sociability [...] including the adoption of the veil" (Mahmood 2005, 3–5). This revival implies a redistribution of power where women and youth are increasingly given (and taking) both representative and interpretative roles (Bano and Kalmbach 2011; Karlsson Minganti 2011), a development that is accelerated by the increase in religiously framed social media activity (Lewis 2013). While the revival initially encompassed an anti-consumerist orientation, which made an imprint on previous leaderships and front figures, what we see today is "a more individualized and fragmented reformist trend with identities increasingly produced through consumption" (Moors 2009, 179; see also Moors and Tarlo 2013; Österlind 2013). These changes have given new opportunities for young women to become inspiring faces of modern Islam and entrepreneurs in the market of Islamic fashion.

In this article we show that there is a demand from both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences for young women to act as public representatives of a distinctly modern and Swedish Muslim identity. We argue that this is part of an ongoing generational shift away from the first-generation immigrant men and women converts, who formerly inhabited the front figure positions for Muslims in Sweden. Further, we discuss the implications of this recent call for young women's accessibility to the media and the general public as we investigate their (re)negotiations of

identity and belonging across perceived cultural, religious, gendered and generational boundaries.

## **Acting through Muslim Youth Organizations**

Muslim immigration to Sweden became significant after the Second World War. From fifteen people defining themselves as Muslims in a 1930 census, the estimated number is today 350,000–400,000 in a country with a total population of 9 million. Of these, approximately 100,000–150,000 are members of Islamic congregations entitled to receive state support (SST 2013).<sup>2</sup> Initially the official representatives of Swedish Muslim organizations were almost exclusively men, but since the 1980s they have been supported by women converts (Roald 2004). Many of these female activists have been and still are involved in offering activities for women, children and adolescents. In this way, younger women have come to have several adult women role models showing that public engagement is both possible and worth striving for.

In the early 1990s, some of these young women became pioneers in the emerging local Muslim youth associations and the Sunni-dominated national umbrella organization Sveriges Unga Muslimer (SUM) [Sweden's Young Muslims]. Today SUM claims 2,800 members and over forty local youth associations in towns all over the country (SUM 2015). It receives operating and project grants from the state agency Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor [Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society], formerly known as Ungdomsstyrelsen [Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs]. The board works to “ensure that all young people between the ages of 13 and 25 have real access to influence and real access to welfare” and has among its target groups “organisations working with young people, women, homosexual, bisexual and transgender people, national minorities, ethnic minorities etc.” (Bohlin and Persson 2009).

On its homepage SUM declares as one of its aims to promote the members' “Swedish Muslim identity” and their “positive participation, responsibility and engagement in society” (SUM 2015). The members attracted are teenagers and young adults, of whom most are born and raised in Sweden. In fact, the organization reflects generational divergence and the sense of belonging to a “new generation” Swedish Muslims. The age span of the members is approximately 13 to 25, but many of those who come of age continue to identify with SUM and engage as leaders for the younger ones. A majority of the SUM members are claimed to be women, some have been appointed presidents, and the present board is constituted by an equal number of men and women.



Figure 3.1: Participants in the 2011 SUM conference. (Photo by Ahmed Nuru)

In SUM the youths, women included, are presented with the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts and to reflectively choose what interpretations to adhere to and disseminate to others. The organization and its local associations offer courses in religious reasoning and are influenced by the enhancement of communication technology, which have increased both the quest and the opportunities for debates among peers, and helped new religious leaderships find their audiences. In the process, conventional authorities (e.g., theological scholars, men, parents) are potentially sidestepped, while interpretive authority increases among young people and women (Jonker and Amiraux 2006; Bano and Kalmbach 2011; Lewis 2013).

In their youth movement the women are recognized as religious subjects with the right and the duty to attend Islamic forums in order to cultivate their piety and increase their knowledge of Islam. They are encouraged by their peers (male and female) to participate within both religious and secular spheres, and to show that Muslims – women included – can be represented at all levels of society. In fact, there is great demand from both Muslims and non-Muslims for the young women’s public Islamic activism. Within mosques and formal Muslim organizations, they are promoted as transmitters of Islam to the next generation and motivators for the young to identify with Islam. One of the women, whom we call Noor, tells about her assumed role as a youth leader:

We felt that we wanted to do something for the young ones. Yes really, to help them feel proud to be Muslims. Then they need to know more about Islam, and... well, be educated in general. We arrange homework help for the smaller ones, and take them to museums and nature areas around here.

For the older ones, we see that we can come together, especially on Friday and Saturday evenings when they might need an alternative to staying at home or ending up in bad company.<sup>3</sup>

Thus even while they are students, the young women take part in teaching Islam to children and peers. They act as leaders also in the sense of being decision-makers and organizers, taking part in arranging courses, seminars, conferences, camps and excursions. Further, they are engaged in boards and committees, also as chairpersons. Barlin Nuur was president of SUM between 2004 and 2008. She describes her desire to inform about Islam in order to correct misunderstandings and states that it is her duty as an immigrant to communicate her experiences in a way that people of Swedish background can understand (Kantor and Lerner 2006).

In relations with broader Swedish society, the young women are requested by the Muslim community to act as public representatives or “ambassadors” for Islam. They are, as a young male peer from Noor’s local association phrased it, “super-sisters,” ideal representatives for Swedish Islam (Karlsson Minganti 2011, 378). This mind-set is also reflected in the views of formal, male-dominated Muslim organizations, such as the umbrella organization Sveriges Muslimska Råd (SMR) [Muslim Council of Sweden], of which SUM is a member. Thus the young women are invited to act as guides in mosques and as public speakers and debaters. Their Islamic activism is in many ways compatible with what could be defined as identity politics: they take action in favor of specific minority rights, they are committed to supervising representations of Islam and Muslims in the media and other public spheres and counteracting misrepresentations, and they engage as writers and editors for newsletters and homepages on the Internet.

The young women’s commitment includes acting as participant citizens, and they cooperate with non-Muslim organizations, institutions and projects aiming at, for instance, interreligious dialogue, charity, anti-racism and temperance. One of the most thriving spin-off organizations from SUM is Svenska Muslimer för Fred och Rättvisa (SMFR) [Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice], founded by among others ex-president of SUM, Barlin Nuur. Another of SMFR’s front figures is Fazeela Selberg Zaib, who reflects on the development of women’s position in Muslim organizations and non-formal education in Sweden in the last decade:

The women went from the back seat to the driver’s seat, and many Muslim associations got their first female presidents. [...] They refuse to take on a victim role but want to be initiators and independent parts of the society. (Selberg Zaib 2012)<sup>4</sup>

Collaborative activities and women's full participation match the requirements for receiving support from the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, that works for equality and against discrimination and to "ensure that all young people between the ages of 13 and 25 have real access to influence and real access to welfare" (Bohlin and Persson 2009). In fact, we interpret the support from the Board as a state intervention to appoint young Muslim women as mediators between religious communities and secular society, mediators who demonstrate that it is possible to simultaneously be a young woman, a Muslim believer and a dedicated Swedish citizen.

Importantly, the positioning of these young women as public figures is not only depending on male invitation and state intervention, but certainly also on their own initiative. The experience of agency is strongly reflected in the women's narratives on their faith and activism as a result of an individual choice. This experience of personal agency coincides with one of the women's crucial ambitions, that is, to change the widespread image of Muslim women as passive victims to oppression. Noor illustrates her encounter with the stereotype in the following way: "When people see me in this [touches her hijab] they think that I cannot speak Swedish and that I'm not developed [she makes quotation marks with her fingers when uttering the word developed]."<sup>5</sup> To counter this view she intends to "keep educating myself, but also educating Swedes about true Islam."<sup>6</sup> While criticizing cultural patterns of oppression among both Muslims and non-Muslims, Noor and the other young women call attention to Islam in terms of liberation, and to SUM and the local Muslim youth associations as platforms that enable women to express themselves as free subjects.

### **Acting through Fashion**

In the previous section we have described how young women act as public figures through Muslim organizations and we have stressed male invitation, state intervention and female initiative as important factors behind such a space for female authority (Bano and Kalmbach 2011). We have explained how peers and leaders within Muslim organizations invite young female members to act as representatives or "ambassadors for Islam." Further, we have highlighted a form of state intervention to involve young Muslim women in public activities, that is, the support given to SUM through the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs on condition that the organization works for the active participation and equal influence of women. Last but not least, we have illustrated how the young women's public activism builds on their personal choice and effort. In this

section we will add two more dimensions that help explain their stepping up as front figures in the public realm: the (social and conventional) media and the market.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a few women converts were frequently visible in various media, sometimes in collaboration with the male leaders, sometimes independently (Roald 2004). When interviewed in national media, these representatives would explain Islam as a faith and discuss its practices. They would also figure in media when certain rights in relation to the freedom of religion were discussed, e.g., the establishment of mosques and independent schools with Muslim profiles, time off for prayer, or women-only public swimming (Karlsson Minganti 2013). Their clothes were sober and had an air of proper official representatives for a religious community. While male imams wore austere dark suits or “traditional” garb, the women were dressed in long, loose-fitting, unadorned skirts and jackets, or at times, an abaya.<sup>7</sup> These outfits were combined with a plain hijab or khimar.<sup>8</sup> The catchword was “modesty,” in the sense of downplaying both vanity and sexual attraction.

With a new generation of Muslims growing up in Sweden, these formal, adult representatives seem to have become less interesting to the mainstream media. The last decade has brought new faces into the picture – young, female and fashionable. Among them are even a number of upcoming Muslim fashionistas, who display individual creativity and position themselves as entrepreneurs in fashion. These highly visible women do not only attain public interest with their counter-narrative to the victimization of Muslim women but follow an obvious market incitement – the hijab sells (issues as well as garments), and so do young good-looking hijabis.

Particularly two young women have become Swedish media’s hijabi darlings in the late 2000s and early 2010s, designer Iman Aldebe and her former colleague, artist and stylist Mejsa Jelloul (previously Chaaraoui).<sup>9</sup> Both have chosen not to organize collectively around their Muslim identity, but rather to express themselves through fashion.<sup>10</sup> Jelloul describes her personal view on hijab styling thus:<sup>11</sup>

When you go out in the city you see how people look at you. Then, why not give them something that really catches the eye? Style your headscarf and make it really beautiful in order to play it down a bit.<sup>12</sup>

According to Jelloul, being recognizably fashionable and Muslim makes the visible Muslimness less frightening and hence played down. Aldebe and Jelloul promote positive images of hijab in order to make Islam seem

(more) attractive and less alarming to non-Muslims. About the motivation behind her choice to develop a career in fashion, Aldebe states that:

Being politically active for years might not get you anywhere with issues such as integration or segregation, but through fashion you can make things less tense and reduce the fear of Islam.<sup>13</sup>

The generational shift includes a shift away from the emphasis of Muslim particularity. Young hijabis (both the fashionistas and the SUM-activists) increasingly stress their similarity to non-Muslim Swedes of their generation. *Belonging* has become the catchword. Aldebe and Jelloul elaborate on their belonging to the category of Swedishness and its normative ideal of a modern, empowered woman with her own ideas about how to live her life. The two fashionistas have figured in Swedish national media since 2006, when they first promoted hijabi styles in the Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet* (Bengtsson 2006). Their designs were more eye-catching than most hijab styles seen on Swedish streets at the time, and it required courage both to present them in public and to claim that wearing them could reverse negative stereotypes about Muslim women.

Since their first *Aftonbladet* feature, Aldebe and Jelloul have developed their styles and made them public in close relation to conventional media. They have often prepared new looks for particular media appearances. Jelloul has shown her version of the latest hijab fashion trends on the Swedish commercial channel TV4 each spring for several years.<sup>14</sup> Iman Aldebe had her major professional breakthrough as a designer in 2012, when her 2011–12-collection was well received and she was listed as one of Sweden's most successful young entrepreneurs (number 19 out of 30) by online career community *Shortcut's* quarterly *Shortcut magazine* (2011). Further, she was chosen to participate in the first edition of the TV program *Project Runway Sweden*, produced by the Swedish commercial channel TV3.





Figure 3.2: Swedish designer Iman Aldebe with models and stylist after a fashion show in Stockholm 2009. (Photo by Leila Karin Österlind)

Aldebe also makes use of social media to market herself as a designer and entrepreneur. She continually publishes texts and images on her webpage, blog and public Facebook page. On May 2, 2011, the headline on the cover of the free daily paper *Stockholm CITY* established that Aldebe has managed to take the veil to Svampen [the Mushroom],<sup>15</sup> a meeting point at Stureplan, a square in central Stockholm and also a symbol of economic power and the lifestyles of the richest people in the country. The cover confirms her contribution to shift focus from the political or religious issues usually associated with Muslim identity, to

consumption and fashion commonly associated with modern capitalist societies.

In 2012 Aldebe was asked by the Swedish National Police Agency to design the first Swedish police uniform hijab, an assignment that received much attention in national and international media. The initiative can be viewed as a state intervention in response to the emerging presence of Muslim female police officers (Grill 2012).<sup>16</sup> Another example of how the fashionistas have been involved in a form of state intervention for making Muslim women publicly visible is a program by the state-owned public service television company SVT. In the program, called “Profetens döttrar – kvinna och muslim i Sverige” [The Daughters of the Prophet – Woman and Muslim in Sweden], Aldebe and Jelloul arranged and styled a mini-catwalk.<sup>17</sup> Present in the panel during this two-hour program, recorded live, was also one of the female representatives of a Muslim organization, former SMFR president Nejat Jaffer.

The choice to develop and wear differentiated hijab styles can be seen as an attempt to resist perceptions of Muslim women, and hijab wearers in particular, as part of a submissive and homogenous mass. By presenting themselves within the context of fashion, Aldebe and Jelloul have managed to achieve recognition as both Muslims and creative individuals. They bring glamour and humor into play, with explicit allusions to sensitive matters such as sex, racism and suppressed minorities. When Aldebe opens her closet, saying: “Welcome to my closet, this is *Sex and the City* minus the sex!”<sup>18</sup> it is typical of her way of playing with words and mainstream cultural references in order to present her identity. Her media strategy has been built around an intention to counter stereotypes by taking journalists and the public by surprise.

The women in our studies are actively embracing their role as highly visible articulators of a Swedish Muslim identity. They deliberately make use of the increased visibility that the hijab gives them. Also, they make use of the (mis-)conception that all hijab wearers both can and should represent Islam and Muslims. The hijabis of our studies are not representative of Muslim women in general with regard to wearing the hijab, since most Swedish women of their generation with backgrounds in predominantly Muslim countries do not. The styles introduced by Aldebe and Jelloul have been influential among certain groups of Swedish hijabis, but there are also groups to whom other trends are more relevant. For instance, it is common among young women of Turkish descent to wear styles dictated from Istanbul. These differ from the styles of Aldebe’s and Jelloul’s, but are nonetheless eye-catching and fashionable.

Also the women who act publicly through Muslim youth organizations are heterogeneous in style. Noor, for example, would, like Aldebe, “like to shock people” and stage “the Muslim woman” in unexpected manners – joking, studying, car-driving, giving a helping hand and dressing up in fashion (Karlsson Minganti 2007, 236). She would not criticize Aldebe’s creations, but decline her turban styles in favor of a hijab that covers her neck. The looks Aldebe introduces are new to Swedish Muslims, but with time also many of the most critical tend to adapt to these and other Islamic fashion trends. The variations in preference and style prove the failure of the stereotyping of Muslim women as a uniform mass. Simultaneously the gradual trendsetting by publicly visible Muslim women confirms the impact of fashion, media and marketing.

### **A Public Presence between Celebration and Fear**

The analysis of young Muslim women’s way into public visibility highlights the positive contribution of social media. A platform for the women to manage and control their own self-presentations, it constitutes a democratic tool. At the same time social media opens up for an increased amount of aggressive responses from so-called *näthatare* [Internet haters]: anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-feminist, racist and extreme-right activists. For instance, after the invitation from the Swedish National Police Agency to design a hijab for the standard police uniform, Iman Aldebe received hundreds of comments on her webpage describing potential ways for her to die (Ström 2012).

Also conventional media give space to Internet haters and contribute to putting young, publicly visible Muslim women in a vulnerable position. In today’s mediascapes conventional media and social media are interlinked phenomena. Most newspapers, radio and TV channels invite readers to comment on their outputs directly online, an initiative which has resulted in the spread of hateful messages. Since the terror attacks in Norway in 2011 many such comment fields have been abolished. Those remaining are restricted and not possible to use anonymously anymore, yet they maintain a space where Islamophobic and racist ideas are disseminated. The Swedish conventional media on an overall level play into dominant liberal discourses and state policies in favor of equality but at the same time negatively represent and marginalize Muslims. In the following paragraphs we will demonstrate this situation with two cases. Both are illustrative of how young Swedish Muslim women are coping with their sense of belonging in a setting characterized by two intertwined frames of interpretation, one based on security issues and the association of the

women with terrorism, and another based on their gendered position as reproducers of group boundaries (Maira 2009; Yuval-Davis 2011).

The first case occurred in the fall of 2007 when *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest daily newspaper, contacted Aldebe about featuring her designs in their fashion pages. She accepted and began creating items for the photo shoot – in vain, as it turned out. After discussions internally and with Swedish Muslim leaders, the editorial staff decided that the representation of the hijab in a fashion context was too provocative and subsequently cancelled the spread. The cautious stance of *Dagens Nyheter* can be explained by a fear of representing Muslims in potentially provoking ways. The incident coincided with the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoon controversy (Hervik 2012), which might have increased such fear.

Notably, the shift in the public image of Muslims away from migrant male and convert female adults, to the faces of young women is not an entirely welcome development among Swedish Muslims. In a minority situation, women's bodies often become sites of signification and contestation. The collective maintenance of so-called ethnic roots tends to position women as symbolic reproducers of the group and its boundaries, which puts heavy demands on their modesty and chastity (Yuval-Davis 2011). Young women like Aldebe have to manage criticism from both Muslim and anti-Muslim forces, and when such intensive claim-making occurs about the way a woman should appear in the public sphere, conventional media can apparently waver in their commitment to these young women's inclusion and equal influence.

The second case occurred in the fall of 2008, when SVT launched a talk show called *Halal-TV*, with three hostesses all wearing hijab (Karlsson Minganti 2011; Lövheim and Axner 2011).<sup>19</sup> It was broadcast at prime time with the explicit aim of giving voice to “women committed to Islam.”<sup>20</sup> This category was left undefined but made it possible for young hijabis to be seen and heard in public. Borrowing the concept from the Dutch show *De Meiden van Halal* [Halal Girls], the Swedish version was hosted by Cherin Awad, Dalia Azzam Kassem and Khadiga El Khabiry, all three previously unknown to most of the viewers. They had university educations but no journalistic training.

The show was not initiated by the young women themselves but rather was a product of SVT's eagerness to showcase diversity and successful integration. Like public service television in many other European countries, SVT “has a designated task to be an arena for impartial journalism and to represent different parts of the population” (Horsti and Hultén 2011, 219–20; Lövheim and Axner 2011, 58). The program was

meant to meet these expectations and to be thought-provoking with themes such as equality, alcohol, sex, class and racism. The hostesses did, for example, interview Jimmy Åkesson, the leader of the anti-immigration party Sverigedemokraterna [Sweden Democrats].

However, the program was cancelled after seven (out of eight) episodes following strong criticism not only from those opposed to the mere presence of Muslims in Sweden but also from those who initially liked the initiative but disliked how the show turned out. The hostesses were accused, among other things, of doublespeak and having an unclear agenda. The *Halal-TV* example sheds light on the failure of non-Muslim audiences to grasp the complexity of young women's representations of Islam. There was profound confusion about the hostesses' personal views and their references to various trends within Islam, that is, multifaceted debates and contests over interpretation and representative positioning. The critique was heavily targeting the problem surrounding the three women's representativeness in relation to other Muslims. Rather than being associated with "good" Muslims (secular, modern, democratic) they were falling into the "bad" Muslim category (fanatic and anti-Western), according to a common categorization of Muslims living in the West created from outside Muslim communities (Maira 2009).

Another polarized positioning affecting the conflict around *Halal-TV* is that of the women as symbolic reproducers of the Muslim *ummah* [nation] on the one side, and potential agents for integration into the non-Muslim larger society/nation on the other. As Rikke Andreassen (this volume) has illuminated, this double positioning impacts on – indeed, conflates – the women's public and intimate realms. In fact, one of the most heated debates on *Halal-TV* followed after the refusal of the hostesses to shake hands with a male guest – writer and debater Carl Hamilton. This refusal of body contact with a man was interpreted as a rejection of the gender equality values that have become emblematic for today's Sweden (Hübinette and Lundström 2011), and of the offered role as agents for integration.

Hamilton reacted with indignation and left the show, but later reflected upon the conflict in terms of a scenario directed by the editors of the program; a successful attempt to use the hijabi hosts to create conflict and spark debates (Hamilton 2008). Andreassen (this volume) underscores how young Muslim/minority women are offered public visibility and voice on the condition of submitting to the guidance of white non-Muslims, predominantly elder men. Hence, Hamilton's interpretation seems plausible but simultaneously maintains the downplaying of the young

women's subjective agency when describing them as merely being "sent out to create conflict" by "scheming men" (Hamilton 2008).

In retrospect, the arrangement of *Halal-TV* seems to have put the hostesses in an impossible position, repeatedly left in tense situations where one could expect their subjectivity and Swedishness to be questioned. Young women's attempts to present counter-narratives are often encouraged by Swedish conventional media, but this support is not unequivocal. *Halal-TV* might have seemed to fit the national dominant discourse of Muslims' rights to equal inclusion in society but came to keep stereotypes about Swedish Muslim women alive and suppress their subjective agency.

### Concluding Remarks

In Sweden, Islam has been renegotiated in the public sphere through the media exposure of young hijab wearing women. Even if these new faces, looks and voices do not imply a complete shift of power within Islamic organizations (most are still dominated by an elder generation and by men), both the organized and the unorganized young women of this chapter are involved in what we see as a significant ongoing generational shift. The first-generation immigrant men and women converts, who previously inhabited the front figure position for Muslims in Sweden, tend to be replaced by young hijabis representing a new generation born and raised in Sweden.

The change in Muslim representation implies a redistribution of power, where women and youth are increasingly given (and taking) both representative and interpretative roles, a development that is accelerated by the increase in religiously framed social media activity. Young, publicly active Muslim women give voices and faces to various ideas about how Muslims can and should act as well as what they can say or wear, when and where. In relation to the broader society they introduce experiences of belonging across perceived cultural, religious, gendered and generational boundaries.

The young women's public activities are encouraged by many, but they simultaneously evoke celebration and fear, recognition and hatred. Some individuals and groups (both Muslim and non-Muslim) resist the young women's public participation with gendered and racialized counter-actions. The interest from society and media is hence ambivalent; the women are not only offered the opportunity of visibility, but they are also put in a vulnerable situation when their appearances are framed in ways that create tension and cast doubt on their subjectivity and Swedishness.

However, rather than emphasizing the vulnerability of Muslim women, we have highlighted the significance of their own agency along with positive encouragement from various actors, including men, state, media and market. The problem-oriented focus (common to youth research in general) needs to be redirected toward the recognition of young Muslim women as

agents of change, creators and consumers of new technologies, trendsetters in the arts, music, fashion, and innovators of new forms of political organization and social movements toward greater social and economic justice. (Herrera 2005, 4)

In Sweden, dominant media discourses and state policies promote diversity, gender equality and equal representation, although they are contested by loud groups of far right-wing activists and Internet haters in social media as well as by the conventional media's ambivalence. We understand the demand for the young Swedish Muslim women's public activities as meeting the demand for positive images of a particular Swedish take on gender equality and diversity. The recent focus on young women as front figures has led to Islam being presented as *more diverse* and *less foreign*. These women take part in the repackaging of Islamic activism, from a strong focus on private and religious aspects of identity politics (e.g. alternative diets and burials), into issues such as anti-racism, gender equality, peace, temperance and fashion. The women members of SUM, the hijabi fashionistas, the *Halal-TV* hostesses, publicly renegotiate what it can mean to be a Muslim: an involved citizen, a stylish woman who loves shopping, a successful entrepreneur. The counter-stories that these young, outspoken and attractive Swedish hijabis present fit a desired and "selling" image of a country with equality and diversity as defining values. The public visibility of the young hijabis of this study and the dominant national discourse on equality and diversity hence become mutually reinforcing.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This article was made possible by support from The Swedish Research Council [grant number 2009-867; 2009-1345]. The method used is qualitative with observations, conversations and repeated in-depth interviews with women in the Sunni-dominated umbrella organization Sweden's Young Muslims and five of its local youth associations in different towns (Karlsson Minganti), and with women engaged in Islamic fashion in Stockholm (Österlind). The period of Karlsson Minganti's fieldwork is 1998 to 2002 with a follow-up from 2009 to date, and

Österlind's fieldwork dates from 2007 to 2012. While Karlsson Minganti anonymizes her interviewees, Österlind does not, as her project mainly involves semi-public figures.

<sup>2</sup> The government support is intended to help faith-based communities to conduct religious services, education, and spiritual and pastoral care. The support is distributed by Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund (SST) [The Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities], through six major umbrella organizations that organize the majority of local Muslim communities in Sweden. These are not clearly divided by ethnicity or religious affiliation but dominated by Sunni Islam (SST 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Vi kände att vi ville göra något för de yngre. Ja verkligen, hjälpa dem att känna sig stolta över att vara muslimer. Då måste de veta mer om islam, och... ja, utbilda sig i största allmänhet. Vi arrangerar läxhjälp för de små, och tar med dem på museum och på utflykter häromkring. När det gäller de äldre så ser vi till att vi kan träffas, särskilt på fredagar och lördagar när de kan behöva alternativ till att bara stanna hemma eller hamna i dåligt sällskap.

<sup>4</sup> Kvinnorna gick från baksätet till förarsätet och flertalet muslimska föreningar och förbund fick sina första kvinnliga ordföranden. [...] Man vägrar inta en offerroll utan vill vara en initiativtagande och självständig del av samhället.

<sup>5</sup> När folk ser mig i den här tror de inte att jag kan prata svenska och att jag inte är utvecklad.

<sup>6</sup> Fortsätta utbilda mig själv, men även utbilda svenskar om sann islam.

<sup>7</sup> Full length, long-sleeved dress or kaftan.

<sup>8</sup> Longer headscarf that covers the wearer's chest.

<sup>9</sup> Aldebe has a pre-university degree in fashion design [gymnasieexamen] and in TV hosting, and is today a university student of law. Jelloul has attended art schools and is trained as a hairdresser.

<sup>10</sup> Swedish Muslim contexts are comparatively small, and there is therefore a rather frequent interaction between the women organized in SUM and the non-organized Muslim fashionistas. Aldebe and Jelloul have links to SUM through friends and family, and have attended SUM activities in the Stockholm region. Aldebe has been a youth leader for younger Muslim "sisters." SUM is a member of The Muslim Council of Sweden in which Aldebe's father has served as vice president.

<sup>11</sup> If no other reference is given, quotes from Mejsa Jelloul and Iman Aldebe are from interviews with Österlind from the period 2007 to 2012.

<sup>12</sup> När man går ut på stan ser man hur folk tittar på en. Så varför inte ge dem något att verkligen titta på? Styla om sin slöja, liksom göra den riktigt fin så att det blir lite avdramatiserat.

<sup>13</sup> Istället för att vara aktiv politiskt kanske i flera år, man kanske inte kommer någon vart med integrationsfrågor och segregationsfrågor. Men genom mode kan man ta bort så stor laddning av rädslan för islam.

<sup>14</sup> See for example,

[http://www.tv4play.se/program/nyhetsmorgon?video\\_id=756891](http://www.tv4play.se/program/nyhetsmorgon?video_id=756891).

<sup>15</sup> Hon tar slöjan till Svampen.



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<sup>16</sup> Eftersom det nu finns en poliselev som bär huvudduk [...] så nu inskaffar vi det som en del av uniformen.

<sup>17</sup> The program was first broadcasted on November 3, 2008, but has since been rerun on four occasions.

<sup>18</sup> Välkommen in i min garderob, det här är *Sex and the City* utan sex! Albebe discusses this quote from 2008 in Österlind (2009).

<sup>19</sup> *Halal* means “permitted,” and the name of the program refers to the hostesses’ wish to uphold Islamic standards.

<sup>20</sup> The trailer for the show can be watched at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEd-SpdN5dM&feature=related>.

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