

## **Burqinis, Bikinis and Bodies: Encounters in Public Pools in Italy and Sweden**

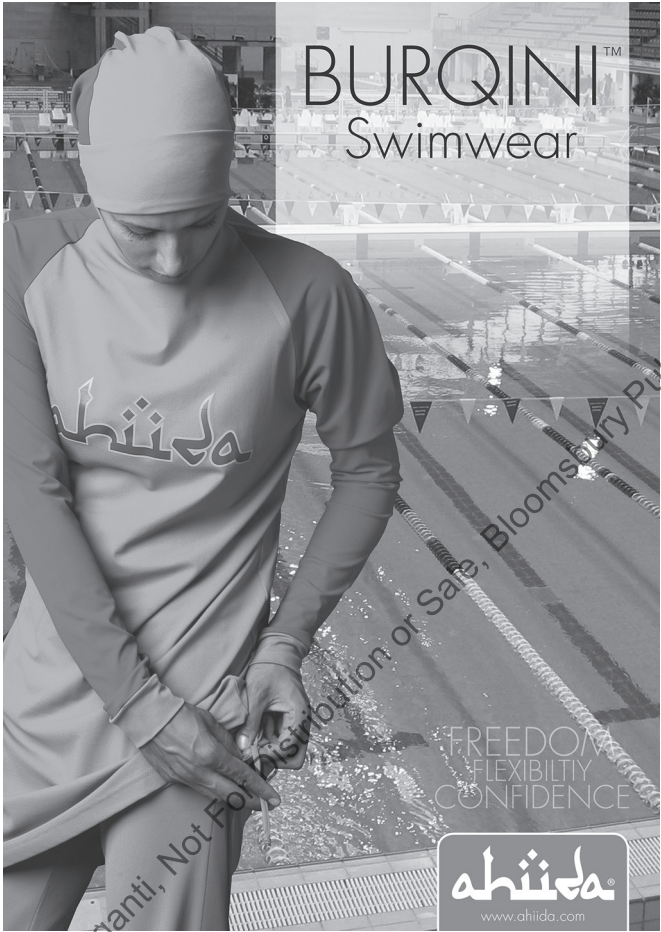
*Pia Karlsson Minganti*

In recent years, a swimsuit which has become known as the *burqini* has attracted immense attention in the European media and from the general public. It is a two-piece costume which offers full-body and hair coverage except for the face, hands and feet. It was launched as a sartorial option for Muslim women who cover to enable them to enjoy swimming at public baths or outdoor locations like anyone else without having to compromise what they consider appropriate levels of modesty.

Muslim women's swimwear is produced in various places. The Turkish company Haşema claims to have been producing 'alternative bathing suits' for women since the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The forms and designations of the garment differ, from local terms such as the Turkish *haşema* to general references to Islamic or modest swimwear (Berglund 2008). The actual trademark, *Burqini*, was registered by designer Aheda Zanetti in 2003. Since then, the term *burqini* has developed into a generic term and has spread around the globe along with the actual product.<sup>2</sup> Growing up a Muslim/Arab girl who migrated to Australia from Lebanon at the age of one, Zanetti was familiar with the problems faced by women who wished to maintain Islamic dress codes and participate in sports. Introducing the *Burqini* as a solution, she now distributes her product through her international company Ahiida Pty with the following positive message:

All eyes are on the appearance of Muslim women in sports. Their appearance should be modest and at the same time it should reflect a professional sporty appearance with pride. By providing the appropriate clothing for the Muslim woman, who complies with religious, cultural and sports obligation, we are helping to bring out the best in Muslim woman, to prove that a Muslim woman is a role model to other women in the world, not an oppressed, no name, and no face being. With Ahiida® sportswear, we can now compete with confidence.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 1.1.)

On the Web site of Ahiida Pty, the *burqini* is launched in 'Modest-Fit' and 'Semi-Fit' models, the former consisting of a knee-length top and boot leg



**Fig. 1.1** A burqini. The trademark Burqini was registered by designer Aheda Zanetti in 2003. Copyright Ahiida® Pty Ltd

pants, and the latter a thigh-length top and straight leg pants. The company also markets the Hijood sportswear, which has been used by several sports-women, including Olympian Ruqaya al Ghasara from Bahrain. The association of the burqini with swimming and sport is important. In the Ahiida Pty country of origin, Australia, the marketing of the outfit was stimulated by a BBC-produced documentary about young Muslims and their becoming part of the country's special beach and surf culture through their inclusion in lifeguard associations (Fitzpatrick 2009: 3; Suganuma 2010).

In Europe, the opposition to the burqini is to a great extent focussed on it representing some sort of threat to common European norms and values. Real or imagined Islamic norms are presented as fundamentally strange and incompatible with modern European democracy. This notion of

Muslim exceptionality not only reflects intersecting debates about immigration, 'culture clashes' and national identity but is further rooted in normative debates on how to organize gender, the body, sexuality and even beauty (Göle 2009; Moors 2009a; Amir-Moazami 2011).

In Sweden, the burqini has been denounced by segments of the general public, although the media coverage has been positive and public pools allow its use. The criticism focusses on the idea that the burqini is alien to regular practice and a threat both to hygiene and women's freedom. In Italy, some sections of the media have expressed similar critical attitudes and paved the way for local rejections. In the northern Italian town of Varallo Sesia, the mayor, who represents the openly Islamophobic party Lega Nord (Northern League), an influential member of Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government until November 2011 (Guolo 2003; Della Porta and Bosi 2010: 15), has implemented a prohibition against the burqini along with a fine of €500. In nearby Verona, also governed by Lega Nord, a woman dressed in a burqini was asked to leave the pool after some mothers complained she was intimidating their children. The decision was also connected to assumptions made about the potentially unhygienic material of the swimwear.

In this contribution, I will discuss reactions to the burqini and relate these to reactions to the older bikini and to nudity. Drawing on current research on Muslim women and Islamic fashion along with Mary Douglas's anthropological theory on classificatory order I will argue against the existence of any clear-cut shared European values concerning degrees of covering in public showers and baths. Likewise, I will argue against the existence of any obvious Islamic norms concerning what to wear for swimming. Rather, I will highlight differences and similarities that vary across national and religious boundaries. The examples are taken from showers and public swimming pools in Sweden and Italy and from my own life experience and fieldwork among Muslims in these two European countries.<sup>4</sup>

## WOMEN IN PUBLIC SHOWERS

The burqini is often met with resistance. Muslim women are considered to cover themselves too much. Their habits differ from ours, whether in Sweden and Italy or elsewhere in Europe. One day I experienced how this taken-for-granted assumption on European homogeneity is challenged. During a stay in Italy, I had decided to go swimming at a public swimming bath. While in the shower, washing myself before going into the pool, I noticed an information panel on the wall. It stated the regulations, including the following rule:

It is obligatory to wear a swimsuit in the shower out of consideration for children and adults who use the bathing establishment.

I immediately felt a sense of shame. Naturally, I had *undressed* before entering the shower; an automatic action fully in line with the moral guidelines that I have been internalizing since childhood. Now this conduct was no longer acceptable. Nor was the binary opposition between Muslim women's veiling and European normality as evident as it may once have appeared. Instead, the situation seemed to indicate a hierarchy of difference based on three variables. According to this formulation, both Muslim veiling and Swedish nudity were inferior to Italian common sense.<sup>5</sup>

The situation evoked difference—to the very skin. But if one views the scenario from a gender perspective, a common element of these three normative dress codes in public showers becomes apparent: all are variations of cultural and religious control over women's bodies and movements. Indeed, all societies seek to systematize human behaviour and create order out of complexity and formlessness, mainly through processes of inclusion and exclusion. To retrieve Mary Douglas's (1984, 1996) anthropological theory on classificatory order, each society has value systems that categorize people and things into the binary oppositions of pure and impure, normal and abnormal, legitimate and illicit. Such cohesive and differentiating systems help us define who and what we *are* just as much as determining who and what we *are not*. Douglas convincingly demonstrated the centrality of the body in the maintenance of group boundaries, and it is especially women who are called upon to fulfil this task of embodying the group's purity and recognized standards of modesty (Delaney 1991; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Morley 2000; Duits and Van Zoonen 2006). Paradoxically enough, the embodying of purity from one group's viewpoint is likely to evoke notions of dirt and danger for the other. This is quite obvious in the debates on women's bodies, hygiene and decency in public showers and swimming pools.

## AN ITALIAN SENSE OF DECENCY

In Italy as well as in Sweden, it is standard practice to wash oneself in the showers before going into public swimming pools, but as we have seen, contrary to Swedes, Italians are urged to complete the washing with their swimwear on. The information panel, which alerted me to this variation, politely referred to the well-being of children. Interestingly, the same argument has been used in Italy when denouncing the burqini. Both the practice of donning the burqini and showering undressed stand out as deviations from the general behaviour of the Italian bathing establishment. Both the exaggerated veiling and the naked body are categorized and excluded as 'matter out of place', to use Douglas's unforgettable phrase, whether representing 'impure' materials, 'strangers', or 'foreign' objects which are seen to defile the symbolic space of the group/nation (Morley 2000: 142–5, 155–6).

The bathhouse staff in the northern Italian town of Varallo Sesia focussed its argument against the burqini on the garment's potentially unhygienic material and advanced a request for its information tag. The woman in question had already cut away the tag, a fact which resulted in the staff successfully removing her from the common bath facility. Considering that the burqini is a synthetic material in line with any other swimwear and that Italians are expected to clean their swimwear in the showers prior to swimming, I cannot but associate the pool staff's reference to 'dirt' with Douglas's theory of sociocultural pollution. Dirt is 'essentially disorder' and eliminating it is 'a positive effort to organize the environment' and make it 'conform to an idea' (1984: 3).

The persons who manifest the two topical deviations from the Italian standard—donning the burqini or showering nude—appear to be strange, indeed strangers, associated with pollution and danger. The children are said to be frightened, spoken for by parents involved in the maintenance of cultural order and identity. Migration and globalization tend to bring about transgressors who blur the lines and are not easily categorized in terms of belonging or not belonging. In fact, the burqini and the visual presence of Muslim women in public are at the core of contemporary debates on citizenship and the place of Islam in contemporary Europe (Gole 2009: 279; Moors 2009b: 175; Salih 2009: 421).

One dominant frame through which Muslims are interpreted in today's Italy is the 'security frame', according to which 'all Muslims are dangerous because they are likely to be terrorists' (Frisina 2010: 560). In 2010, an Italian government report proposed legislation banning face coverings, such as the burqa and niqab. The proposal was presented in a bill from the far-right Lega Nord. The bill aimed at amending a 1975 law that allowed exceptions for 'justified reasons', such as the difficulty of identifying individuals. The Italian Constitutional Affairs Commission is currently considering an Interior Ministry report which claims that the possible law would be implemented not for religious reasons but for security reasons. After hearings with leading Muslims, the burqa was found not to be obligatory in Islam, while the threat of international terrorism and local public disorder was looked upon as imminent (Ministero dell'Interno 2010; see Figure 1.2).

Following the burqa debate, there has also been a backlash against the burqini. The woman in Varallo Sesia is not the only one who has been asked to leave a public bath in Italy or Europe at large. People like me, who have happened to shower undressed in an Italian bath establishment, have not evoked any equivalent public attention in the media. This fact may be interpreted with reference to the concepts of cultural categorization and social hierarchy. Muslims are currently stigmatized as the ultimate Others and collectively ranked low on the social ladder. Contrary to this, the practice of showering undressed is not associated with any supposedly low-ranking and threatening immigrant group.



**Fig. 1.2** Billboard announcing the local ban of 'burqa, burqini and niqab' in Varallo Sesia, Italy. Photo: Jon R. Snyder

Yet it is nudity and not the stigmatized burqini that has been targeted in the statutes of Italian public showers and duly publicized on information boards such as the one that caught my eye. A common Italian expression associated with virtuous manners is *il senso del pudore* (the sense of decency). Although naturalized and taken for granted, common sense is always a site of cultural contestation. In this case, it is used to refer to purity in terms of body hygiene but also to the purity of the group as embodied by women's clothing and behaviour.

The dress code for bathing and beach life in Italy has varied over time, spanning from everyday garments and full-cover suits, to two-piece bikinis, tanga and topless outfits. Cultural theorist Stephen Gundle has explored the specific place of female beauty in Italian collective identity. He calls attention to the press, cinema and, not least, beauty contests as vital vehicles in the post-war process of reasserting national ideals of beauty and reconstructing Italian identity on new lines. Strong influence was exercised from the allied Americans, who offered a new image: the pin-up girl, symbolizing vitality with her fresh, yet flirtatious, smile and daring swimsuit (2007: 110–12).

The beauty contests and new ideals brought on 'significant cultural battles between Catholics, bourgeois traditionalists, commercial forces and the left



over the nature and meaning of such exposure and its relation to the collective identity of the Italians' (Gundle 2007: 108). The fascists had banned beauty contests in 1938. Their model for 'true' Italian beauty was the peasant woman's assumed simplicity in contrast to the modern, urban femininity associated with cosmetics, fashion and consumption which was denounced as 'un-Italian'. With the post-war boom for beauty contests, the Left resisted galas with girls in swimsuits but arranged alternative events with young women competing for the title *Stellina* (little star) dressed in unpretentious leisurewear (Gundle 2007: 130–1). The bikini was soon introduced, and its size gradually reduced. Today women are competing for the title *Velina*. It is assigned to the lightly dressed pin-up girls serving as decoration to fully dressed middle-aged anchormen in the TV productions associated with media mogul and former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Contestations over the meaning of bodily exposure and its relation to collective identity go beyond beauty contests and TV shows, emerging in the showers of public swimming pools. *Il senso del pudore*, as expressed in the urge to shower with swimwear on, is currently imbued with conservatives' and Catholics' reclamation of fashion and modesty norms. According to anthropologist Ruba Salih, the commonly spread argument about Muslims being a threat to secularized Italian society can be relativized in light of the Catholic Church's striving to reoccupy its position in the public sphere, which has been shrinking since the 1970s.

The Catholic Church in Italy strives to recreate a bond that revolves around the idea of a homogeneous religious Christian community, defined by a shared ethos, morality and values, that are threatened by the increasing gendered visibility of Islam. Interestingly, this ethos places a heavy emphasis on the control of women's bodies and on the preservation of a moral community whose boundaries are defined by the restoration of the nuclear heterosexual family and the reiteration of the Christian nature of the country. (Salih 2009: 421)

Such a Catholic ethos would both compete and overlap with other discourses on gender and morals, such as conservative Muslim views of gender or feminist critiques (Islamic included) of the commodification and exploitation of women's bodies. During the spring of 2011, the campaign 'Basta! (Enough!)' was organized by the movement *Se Non Ora, Quando?* (SNOQ; If Not Now, When?); for it, Italian women and men of different political and religious orientations protested against the culture of sexism.<sup>6</sup> The protests were triggered by the exposure of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's alleged affairs with escort girls but soon came to include a critique of the image of Italian women represented in the televised *Velina*.

Much of the critique against sexism in Italy has concentrated on sexism in politics and the media but rarely on how bodies are simultaneously both

gendered and racialized and subject to various naturalized axes of power and privilege (Bonfiglioli 2010; Pepicelli 2012). Many grassroots movements and some of the Italian population are, however, developing reflexive and pluralistic perspectives which produce greater understanding and support of women who choose to wear burqinis.

## SWEDISH IDEAS OF NUDITY AND DECENCY

The Swedish term for decency, *anständighet*, leaves a certain space for nudity. It is looked upon as healthy for quite old children to bathe naked in lakes and at the seaside. Many parents mix casually with their children at home whilst remaining undressed. In private houses and summer cottages, guests are invited to mixed-gender saunas. A dominant pattern is to wash undressed in public baths and to laugh at others' apparently irrational and outdated fear of nudity and exaggerated sexualization of the human body. If civilized behaviour in Italian showers is generally associated with covering private parts, in Sweden it is associated with the pragmatic cleaning of the natural human body, liberated from any cultural and religious hang-ups.

Yet, in Sweden, as in any society, there are limits to nudity and the interaction between the sexes. Public baths are equipped with separate showers and saunas for men and women, and nudist baths are not allowed except for exceptional events. In my Swedish home town of Uppsala, the regulations of the public baths include the following two sentences:

Everyone must dress in swimwear intended for bathing (bathing trunks, bikini or swimsuit, without underwear).

Shower and wash yourself with soap without swimwear before you go into the pool or sauna.

The instruction to shower undressed is quite the opposite of that given in Italy. Yet, like my own deviation from the Italian order, in Sweden, too, there are visitors who display alternative practices.<sup>8</sup> There are an increasing number of people, especially youth, who keep their swimwear on in the showers. In the context of Swedish public pools, the burqini is today generally accepted as 'swimwear intended for bathing'. Less accepted, however, are the T-shirts, shorts and trousers worn during the exclusive swimming sessions held for Muslim women. Further rejected is the new trend among some young men of keeping their underwear on under their bathing trunks, exposing just enough to show off brand names.

As in Italy, deviations from the regulations are perceived in Sweden in terms of the dissolution of moral and common sense and, thus, as dissolution of fundamental aspects of national identity. In Sweden, nudity is



viewed as natural and decent within the context of gender-separated saunas and the showers at public baths.<sup>9</sup> When this 'natural' and 'rational' relation to body and hygiene is threatened, so is its link to the very sense of progressive modernity, which has been shown to be a core feature of Swedish national identity (Ehn, Frykman and Löfgren 1993; Hübinette and Lundström 2011). Many Swedes claim this perceived moral dissolution in public baths stems from immigrants who are still held back by cultural traditions and religion. Also accused are American and global popular culture, and the fashion and pornography industries, which are all believed to reinforce outdated norms.

## RESISTING SEXUALIZATION

The notion of Swedish modernity fuses with international discourses on Western modernity and progress. Critical cultural theorists have called attention to how governing ideas about modernity and progress have concealed the ongoing marginalization and even exclusion of the Muslim Other (i.e. Abu-Lughod 1998; Mahmood 2005; Ahmed 2010). In her critical analysis of English media coverage of the burqini, Fitzpatrick exposes the construction of the burqini as a symbol for the liberation of oppressed Muslim women, making them free to participate in sport and assimilate into 'Western culture' (2009). These media and publicity stories seem to ignore the fact that for many women the covering of their bodies is not understood as a tradition they are forced to follow but a conscious decision meant to be an individual, cultural, religious, aesthetical, political or even feminist statement. It is not necessarily in tune with dominant conceptions of what constitutes progress but is nevertheless based on women's experience of living Islam in contemporary Europe (Karls-son Minganti 2007; Tarlo 2010).

Despite the emphasis on liberty, there are women in Sweden and Italy, of any ethnic or confessional background, who refrain from going to public pools because of negative body self-perception. Body shape, body hair, sagging skin and unattainable beauty ideals lead to feelings of failure. They may indeed be exposed to sanctions for such failures by being greeted with contempt and mockery. They can be read as objects which are deemed unbeautiful and, thus, fall into the category of dirt; they are anomalies that do not fit society's construction of how things should be. Similarly, women who display themselves too much as objects of male desire risk being stigmatized as whores or bimbos. Women and girls are, paradoxically, expected to be both tempting and virtuous, sexual and virginal at the same time (Tseëlon 1995).<sup>10</sup>

The feminist network *Bara bröst* (Bare Breasts) challenges the expectation placed on women to manage their own and men's sexual lust with their dress codes and behaviour, when the same demand is not put on men. It promotes

further desexualization of women's bodies and the right to bathe topless in public pools.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of its promotion of topless bathing, *Bara bröst* turns out to have something in common with the concerns of many Muslim women activists. Although having different perspectives, goals and solutions, these different groups overlap in their critique of the sexualization, commodification and exploitation of women's bodies.

## MODESTLY ACTIVE

In Sweden, Italy and Europe at large, there are Muslim women who argue that their Islamic dress is a protest against the sexism in the media and market forces. Their counter strategy involves not the divestment of clothes as with *Bara bröst* but rather the full covering of those body parts associated with sexual appeal. They see sexuality as an inevitable force ever-present in any situation that includes men and women. Contrary to the logic of many secular feminists, but in line with numerous other non-Muslims of various political and religious convictions, they deem pre- and extramarital sexual actions a sin and prioritize the managing of sexuality which, left uncurbed, is considered a potentially destructive force. Full-body covering for women stands out as the preferred means by which to reduce sexual attraction and to signal to the world that this woman is not sexually available. Thus, the *burqini* acts simultaneously as a critique of sexism and a safeguard against sexual harassment.

Indeed, the women in question perceive their secluding Islamic dress code as a means of achieving recognition as full subjects rather than as objects of male desire. Women's increased participation in mosques and Muslim organizations in recent decades is a well-known fact discussed by a growing body of scholars (Mahmood 2005; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006; Karlsson Minganti 2007, 2011b; Bano and Kalmbach 2011). This trend has, among other things, resulted in profound feelings among the women involved of being active agents rather than passive victims of patriarchal customs and Western dominance. Women are becoming recognized as pious subjects with the right and duty to become educated within both religious and secular spheres. They participate in the rereading of religious texts and the search for the true meaning and implementation of Islam in different contexts, including public baths. Intentionality (*niyya*) and free choice are made core moral concepts and pave the way for personal responsibility (Karlsson Minganti 2008: 11; Moors 2009b: 191). The Islamic dress code functions as a signal of such pious intentions. Dressed in hijab on their way to the public baths, and in the *burqini* once diving into the pool, many women do not see themselves in need of being secluded at home or guided by a male escort. They have strong faith, self-respect and control.



**Fig. 1.3** Kausar Sacranie, designer and CEO of Modestly Active. Photo: Emma Tarlo

Living in Europe, belonging to a religious minority and the highly marked category of Muslim, these women are fully aware of their representative position. They express a compelling responsibility to counteract negative images of Islam and Muslims and create an image of normality in which Muslim women are seen as well-spoken, humorous, capable of maintaining a public presence, visible in cinemas and cafés, shopping with friends, talking to young men or even taking part in activities linked to men, such as parachuting and martial arts. The burqini gives its wearers an air of being sporty and cool, ‘modestly active’—an appellation that has now turned into an important trademark for Islamic swimwear in Britain and beyond (see Figure 1.3).<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, many Muslims, women included, reject the burqini. The reasons are many. To some, it suggests commercialization and Westernization rather

than solidarity with the Muslim ummah. To others, the concern revolves around ideas of Islamic femininity. The burqini is thought to be too revealing of body contours, and swimming is considered an inappropriate activity for Muslim women. Again using Douglas for understanding the acute urge for boundary control within a vulnerable minority, women are seen as potentially staining the reputation of themselves, their families and the Muslim ummah. According to this logic, Muslim women need to personify dignity and should never appear nude or semi-nude in public pools and showers.

However, behind the woman, that is, the elevated symbol of the community's order, dignity and reproduction, there are real women who are in fact acting and negotiating dominant norms in their everyday lives (Sered 2000). Naima in Sweden says her burqini is a perfect invention: 'I exercise regularly in the swimming pool and play in the lakes during the summer.' Cherin enjoys the women-only swimming sessions. With no men present, she wears an ordinary swimsuit rather than the burqini, which is sold and rented out directly at the pool. Hind does not like the feel of the burqini, arguing, 'It sticks to my body, but I still use it when jumping into the pool with my kids.' Dalia says she has 'never tried it and never will. It exposes your body and is not coherent with Islam.' Iman chooses a burqini with 'cute decorations', while Mona goes for a strait, black one, compatible with her notion of *haya* (modesty).

The woman who was asked to leave the public pool in the Italian town of Verona is named Najat Retzki Idrissi. At the time, she was forty-three years of age and had lived in Verona for thirteen years. She works as a cultural mediator and proudly talks about her burqini, which she bought on the Internet. However, she does not like the designation *burqini*, as for her it hints at the face-covering burqa. She usually wears hijab in daily life and uses the Islamic swimwear mainly when bathing with her children (Perbellini 2009).

## DIVERSITY AS REALITY

The burqini has been restricted, prohibited and contrasted to 'our European value system' in negative ways. Yet, my simple act of taking a shower in an Italian public bathhouse reveals how European standards are by no means obvious or fixed. In Sweden, washing should be done undressed, while in Italy you should wash wearing a swimsuit, although according to many, not a full-cover burqini. Burqini wearers are regarded by some as the ultimate aliens. Yet, their presence, just like mine, could instead be used to instigate deconstructive self-reflection. In her biographic novel, Italian-born Sumaya Abdel Qader, who is of Jordanian-Palestinian descent, twists the common sense idea of what is normal in the dressing room. Her description of entering the changing room with her female Muslim peers is revealing:

Shock! We do not know where to direct our eyes. Totally embarrassed we search for a free corner and with blank looks we allow ourselves some seconds to recover. The shock comes out of surprise: we have entered a room of nudists. Our education has always prevented us from looking at women and men stark naked, especially without the notorious fig leaf! Anyway, in our little corner we get changed while staring at the wall. We slowly relax, while giggling and joking about the situation. Here we go, ready: gym suit, gym shoes and, obviously, the veil... End of lesson. It is time to return to the nudists' room. Again facing the wall, we force ourselves back to our lockers. Now the problem is the shower. We are disgustingly sweaty and going home to wash is beyond dispute. We move towards the showers. Yet another shock! Transparent cabinets! What the heck! Can't we have a little privacy? Do we really have to share everything? What a communal world! Anyway, we help one another to shield behind the towels. How the other women look at us! Maybe they ask themselves whether we are nuts or what? In fact, after we attend the gym for a while, a young woman approaches us and asks us why we make all this fuss when changing and washing. When we explain our purely demure, moral and religious reasons, she says: 'So, now it is we who are the shameless ones?!' (Abdel Qader 2008: 74–76, author's translation)

Embodying purity from one group's viewpoint is likely to evoke dirt and danger for the other. Abdel Qader's reflections point to the diverse norms for hygiene and decency in public showers. While I have perceived Italian showering norms as prudish in their demand for the wearing of swimsuits, Abdel Qader and her friends experienced another Italian shower room as shockingly shameless. Her example also points to how communities (moral, national, religious) are constructed and renegotiated on the basis of women's embodiment of normative decency.

Typically, the one public example of a non-Muslim woman who chose to don the burqini resulted in her being ridiculed and accused of being a traitor. The world famous British food writer and journalist Nigella Lawson was spotted in 2011 on an Australian beach wearing the full-cover swimsuit. Although she claimed she wore it in order to protect herself from skin cancer, which has allegedly troubled several members of her family, her action was regarded as so transgressive that the Google search combination of 'nigella lawson burqini' triggers thousands of hits, the vast majority expanding on the themes of ridicule and betrayal (i.e. Woods 2011).

There are no reliable statistics about the number of burqinis bought and used in Sweden and Italy. The difficulty with indicating its prevalence is linked to the diversity of Muslim swimwear. Having dealt with the heterogeneous norms for dressing in public baths, I will now offer a closer look into the various regulations for the burqini and into Muslim women's different approaches to this garb.

On a supranational level, the negative stereotyping of the burqini in media and public debate coexists with official policies, such as the European Charter of Women's Rights in Sport.<sup>13</sup> The charter provides measures to reinforce gender equality policies with regard to women's participation in sports and provides specific measures for targeted groups, among them Muslim women. In the town of Turin, the national Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti (UISP; Italian Union of Sports for All) has adopted the charter and provides sessions for women-only swimming.<sup>14</sup> Besides Turin, only Milan, to my knowledge, provides a similar service in one of its pools. However, Asmaa Gueddouda, a Muslim woman living in Milan, explains that she does not have enough 'passion for swimming' to travel to the other side of this big city where the women-only session is offered. Also, the attraction of the pool is weakened by the negative attention she draws with her burqini: 'Perhaps in the future it will be easier for me having access to public pools in Italy, but for the time being I hold back.'

According to the sociologist Stefano Allievi (2010: 85), Italy still lacks public reflection on multiculturalism as an empirical reality and, thus, a realistic model for cultural relations. Simultaneously, the mayoral ordinances signal considerable fragmentation, both normative and territorial, in a state divided into more than eight thousand municipalities. The situation becomes even more critical as it is often a matter of monolithic regulations characterized by a democratic deficit (Lorenzetti 2010: 363). As a result, few Italian swimming pools comply with the aim of the European Charter of Women's Rights in Sport by explicitly supporting Muslim women's swimming.

Swedish public institutions are required to guarantee equal opportunities with regard to gender, ethnicity, faith or disability (Borevi 2010). The prioritizing of citizens' swimming knowledge, safety and health has led to the allowance of the burqini in public pools, and today it is sold or rented at many bathing establishments (Aytar 2011).<sup>15</sup> Also, many public pools offer separate sessions for women, either for group rental or individual entrance fees.<sup>16</sup> However, such a solution has not become the dominant norm, and this is reflected in women booking outside the ordinary schedule. Affirmative policies aside, there would not be any women-only swimming sessions or burqinis without strong Muslim women initiators prepared to defy the harsh glances and comments from some members of the public.

The one published estimation of the number of burqinis in Sweden I could find was in a newspaper article about Rosengård, a Malmö suburb with a high percentage of inhabitants from Muslim backgrounds. In the article, the manager of the local pool estimated that about one in ten female visitors wear the burqini (Sahlin 2011). Although there are variations between local municipalities, neighbourhoods and public pools, the number is unlikely to be higher elsewhere in Sweden. The single shop in Rosengård selling the burqini claims to have sold a handful during the summer of 2011. In the bath establishment of Skövde a burqini has never been seen. In Flen, two were sold during 2011.



The lady in the shop at Uppsala's main communal bath establishment says many Muslim women take a look at her products, but she only sells the burqini to one in a hundred. She confirms that the price may deter many, although the garment would be more expensive if bought online.<sup>17</sup> Her colleague in Flen is appreciative of the fact that some women ask her for advice on suitable fabrics for homemade swimwear. The general rule favours synthetic material and bans cotton, which allegedly destroys the sewage system. Swedish online resellers such as Tahara.se and Shamsa.se claim to see a growing demand for burqinis. Swedish Web site awpdesign.se sells models from Ahiida Pty online and estimates the number to be a couple of hundred a year.<sup>18</sup>

Italian women turn to international Web sites or to local shops such as Libreria Islamica Iman, a combined bookshop and women's Islamic clothing boutique in central Milan. Peak interest is during the summer season, says Asmaa Gueddouda, the present shopkeeper and daughter of the founder. She demonstrates the one remaining sample, a model of the Turkish brand Haşema. It is a full-cover suit in a fabric that dries quickly and thus avoids exposure of the contours of the body. Yet, stresses Asmaa, who has studied fashion at the Caterina da Siena Institute, fashion is crucial to her customers, and they are predominantly looking for colourful and decorated models (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5).



**Fig. 1.4** Asmaa Gueddouda in a shop in Milan demonstrates a model of swimwear designed by the Turkish company Haşema. Photo: Pia Karlsson Minganti



**Fig. 15** The Asude full-cover swimsuit from the Turkish company Haşema, sold by Asmaa Gueddouda in Milan. Copyright Haşema

The heterogeneous reality of Muslim swimwear in Italy, Sweden and Europe at large is not only a matter of the regulations in public showers and swimming pools or of dominant norms as proclaimed by Islamic religious authorities. Above all, it is a matter of the various practices of individual women. When administrators of public pools try to facilitate Muslim women's participation, they encounter complexity rather than one unequivocal dress code. For some women, swimming is out of the question, since they would never bathe in the presence of women, let alone unfamiliar men. Some may come to the pool but only to supervise their children from the poolside. Then there are women who believe it to be permissible according to Islam to swim during exclusive sessions for women, with curtains covering the windows and female staff at hand. Usually these women feel free to swim in ordinary

swimsuits or make do with outfits such as leggings with T-shirts or tops (Tarlo 2010: 226, n9). It seems fair to claim that the burqini is primarily chosen by those who find it legitimate to swim in pools and beaches, which are open to all.

The burqini is, it seems, here to stay. It sells slowly but surely, whether online or in shops. The term *burqini* is disliked by some. Its combination of burqa and bikini may reinforce the dichotomy between Muslim and European women and the former's stereotypical position as aliens and norm-breakers, although some Muslim women appreciate the humour evoked by the term. The women focussed on for this article are all involved in a wider Islamic revival as well as in processes of 'commodification of clothing production and the ensuing more rapid turnover or change of styles as part of a highly self-conscious consumer culture' (Moors 2009b: 197). By defining the burqini and swimming pools as compatible with Islam, they are in fact countering both patriarchal and xenophobic forces which keep them away from public fields of action. By doing this, they participate in the redefining of citizenship, European identity and women's well-being.

## NOTES

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A preliminary discussion of this topic has been published in Swedish (Karlsson Minganti 2011a).

1. See Hasema home page, <[http://hasema.com/default\\_eng.html](http://hasema.com/default_eng.html)> accessed 25 March 2013.
2. There are also other trademarks, such as bodykini ([www.bodykini.com](http://www.bodykini.com)) and modestkini ([www.modestkini.com](http://www.modestkini.com)).
3. See <<http://www.ahiida.com/About-Ahiida.html>> accessed 22 November 2011.
4. Sweden has a total population of 9.4 million. Approximately 350,000 to 400,000 are Muslims, of which 100,000 to 150,000 belong to officially registered Muslim organizations (Larsson 2009: 56; SST 2011). Italy has 60.6 million inhabitants. An estimated 1.5 million are Muslims, of which only a minority have Italian citizenship (Caritas/Migrantes 2011).
5. Some Italians, with whom I have discussed this issue, do not recognize the common sense of showering in swimsuits. They are not all aware of official regulations and some shower naked. Whilst there are undoubtedly some local variations in practice regarding what is worn in swimming pool

showers, my brief investigation into the regulations presented on the Web sites of public swimming baths in Italy reveals the prevalence of a dominant norm. Common sense norms are reinforced through signs and the verbal correction of norm-breaking practices.

6. See <<http://www.senonoraquando.eu/?p=2948>> accessed 8 November 2011. See also the influential film *Il corpo delle donne* (Women's Bodies) by Lorella Zanardi; for the English version, see <[http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/?page\\_id=91](http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/?page_id=91)> accessed 25 March 2013.
7. See <[http://www.fyrishov.se/fyrishov/templates/StandardPage\\_\\_\\_\\_13704.aspx](http://www.fyrishov.se/fyrishov/templates/StandardPage____13704.aspx)> accessed 25 March 2013.
8. Ethnologist Ella Johansson (2011) has examined the negotiations on body and space in Swedish public pools. Insightfully, she suggests that the many graphic signboards about how to dress and wash indicate that the rules are in fact contested.
9. The importance of public baths and saunas in Swedish tradition has been dealt with by ethnologists such as Jonas Frykman (2004), Ella Johansson (2011) and Tom O'Dell (2010). David Gunnarsson examines the fact that the grand mosque of Stockholm comprises a gym and a sauna—'the only sauna with a mosque attached' as one mosque guide jokingly said (2004: 20).
10. There is a marginal, yet increasing, demand from non-Muslim women for gender-separate solutions in the public pools and relaxation departments. Further, some pool staff I spoke to associate such demands, as well as the wearing of T-shirts and shorts, not only with Muslim women but also with 'overweight' people.
11. *The Local. Sweden's News in English* (24 June 2009), <<http://www.thelocal.se/20250/20090624/#>> accessed 9 November 2011.
12. See <<http://www.modestlyactive.com>> accessed 22 November 2011.
13. See <[http://www.olympiaproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/CHART\\_ENGLISH1.pdf](http://www.olympiaproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/CHART_ENGLISH1.pdf)> accessed 8 November 2011.
14. See page 11, <[http://www.olympiaproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/CHART\\_ENGLISH1.pdf](http://www.olympiaproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/CHART_ENGLISH1.pdf)>. Also see <<http://www.facebook.com/groups/138224270392>> accessed 25 March 2013.
15. The policy of allowing alternative swimwear for Muslim women was put to the test in 2008, when the municipality of Gothenburg had to pay compensation for discrimination on grounds of religion. The case included two women who were forced to leave a public pool, as they did not obey the dress code. They were wearing long sleeves, trousers and headscarves, claiming that they did not intend to swim but were merely watching their children (Sundkvist 2010: 20–3).
16. An early initiative to develop women-only swimming sessions came from Muslimska Kvinnors Idrottsförening (MKIF; Muslim Womens Sports Association), established in Gothenburg in 1997: see <<http://www>>.

mkif.se/index.html> accessed 7 November 2011. The women's need for functional swimwear resulted in the development of the trademark Shamsa (www.shamsa.se), also sold online at Tahara.se and in a shop in Rosengård, Malmö.

17. The prices vary from €35 to over €100. The rental price in Sweden is around €4.
18. See <<http://www.awpdesign.se/kollektion/badklader-dam/ahiida-burqini/ahiida-burqini.aspx>> accessed 25 March 2013.

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