

Women, Leadership, and Mosques

Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority

Edited by

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CHAPTER 3.1

CHALLENGING FROM WITHIN: YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN SWEDISH MOSQUES

Pia Karlsson Minganti

New generations of Muslims are coming of age in contemporary Europe.¹ Some of these choose to elaborate on their religious faith and identity, “to act and speak as Muslims.”² This chapter focuses on women members of the Sunni-dominated national organization Sweden’s Young Muslims (Sveriges Unga Muslimer, SUM) and some of its local youth associations in different Swedish towns,³ to argue that involvement with these associations is increasing Muslim women’s engagement with mosques and other venues for acquisition of Islamic knowledge. The women linked to these youth associations acquire leadership positions within Muslim communities and thereby face demands that they should themselves disseminate Islamic knowledge, acting as teachers of children and peers, and as guides in mosques. In fact, both fellow Muslims and non-Muslims place demands on these young women to function as public representatives of Islam. This leads their Islamic activism out beyond the frames of mosques and

¹ This article has been made possible by the support from the Swedish Research Council, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, and the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research.

² Gerdien Jonker and Valérie Amiraux, eds., *Politics of Visibility: Young Muslims in European Public Spaces* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006), 10.

³ The analysis draws on material collected during fieldwork carried out between 1998 and 2002 (see Pia Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima: Islamisk väckelse och unga kvinnors förhandlingar om genus i det samtida Sverige* [Muslima: Islamic revival and young women’s negotiations on gender in contemporary Sweden] (Carlsson Bokförlag: Stockholm, 2007); and “Becoming a ‘Practising’ Muslim: Reflections on Gender, Racism and Religious Identity among Women in a Swedish Muslim Youth Organisation,” *Elore* 15, no. 1 (2008)), with a follow-up in 2009. The method used was qualitative, with participant observations and spontaneous talk along with repeated in-depth interviews with nine women. They were initially 18 to 25 years old, and unmarried. They were born in West Asia and North and East Africa to parents of different social backgrounds, who in one way or another identified themselves as Muslims. Coming to Sweden during childhood (at 4 to 11 years of age), the women went to public school and could speak fluent Swedish.

classrooms, and into identity politics⁴ played out in civic centers and TV studios.

Illuminating the continuous challenges to the women's presence in mosques and their wider public activism, I will examine how these women defend their right to exercise religious authority while supporting the traditional sources of Muslim authority in the public sphere. I will analyze how the women reinterpret the Islamic texts to change their daily lives as well as their position within both the Muslim community and Swedish society as a whole. These women are clearly driven by an impulse to counter their popular image as passive victims; rather, they want to present themselves as autonomous agents.⁵ This message has, however, not been absorbed by ordinary Swedes, who find claims of female empowerment, shrouded in Islamic dictates, unconvincing. I will review this discord in relation to (1) the women's dependence on other Muslims' religious authority, and (2) the women's primary loyalty to the male-dominated Muslim community in situations of public conflict. I will also emphasize that in more informal situations, *backstage* among peers, the women put gender on the agenda, initiate reflexive deliberations, and test alternative norms and practices.

⁴ By the term 'identity politics' I mean "an intersection of *group* identity and politics, which can lead to social change. Identity politics arises when oppression becomes the focus of a strong separate group identity around which support, political analysis, and action are developed" (Ann Phoenix, "Identity Politics," in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* vol. 3, ed. Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1097). It is a contradictory concept: "On the one hand, it can perpetuate the status quo by treating social categories as natural, static, and based on characteristics unique to a group—that is, by being essentialist. On the other hand, it can disrupt the status quo by providing a basis for new political definitions and new struggles" (ibid.). Without delving further into the implications of and debates regarding this concept, I use it in this essay to underline the strong emphasis on identity and representation associated with the young women's Islamic activism.

⁵ Various authors have criticized the practice of describing pious Muslim women using terms, such as 'autonomy' and 'agency,' that stem from Western liberal discourse: see, for example, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8. However, I concur with Ruba Salih's view that agency must be analyzed in particular contexts, and that in Europe young Muslim women can be seen shaping complex selves, simultaneously pious and liberal: see Ruba Salih, "Muslim Women, Fragmented Secularism and the Construction of Interconnected 'Publics' in Italy," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 4 (2009): 410, 421.

Mosques and Muslim Organizations in Sweden

There are 350,000–400,000 Muslims living in Sweden, which has a total population of 9 million. Approximately 100,000–150,000 Muslims belong to officially registered Muslim organizations.⁶ No specific ethnic group can be identified as having a dominant position. The cultural, social, and religious heterogeneity among Swedish Muslims is reflected in their mosques and organizations, resulting in comprehensive collaborations but also tensions regarding official representation. The Swedish state has encouraged the creation of formal organizations with representative spokespersons. Registered religious organizations may apply for state grants from the Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities (SST). Today there are six umbrella organizations (one Shīī, five Sunnī), which, in turn, unite in the Islamic Collaboration Council (Islamiska Samarbetsrådet, IS), which interfaces with the SST.

Plans to build mosques have, as in other European countries, been met with economic and organizational obstacles, as well as opposition from the surrounding society.⁷ To date, five mosques have been erected: in Gothenburg (Aḥmadī), Trollhättan (Shīī), Malmö, Uppsala, and Fittja (Sunnī). Some other mosques have been set up through restructuring already existing buildings, such as an electric power station in Stockholm and a former Pentecostal church in Västerås. Furthermore,

⁶ Göran Larsson, ed., *Islam in the Nordic and Baltic Countries* (London: Routledge, 2009), 56; SST, Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund [The Swedish commission for government support to faith communities], *Statistik 2009*, <http://www.sst.a.se/statistik/statistik2009.4.64075cf012c96962a7d80002580.html>. For further discussion of the process of institutionalization of the Muslim community in Sweden, see Jonas Alwall, *Muslim Rights and Plights: The Religious Liberty Situation of a Minority in Sweden* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998); Ingvar Svanberg and David Westerlund, eds., *Blågul islam? Muslimer i Sverige* [Blue-and-yellow Islam? Muslims in Sweden] (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1999); Göran Larsson, *Muslims in the EU: Cities Report (Sweden): Preliminary Research Report and Literature Survey* (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2007); and Göran Larsson and Åke Sander, *Islam and Muslims in Sweden: Integration or Fragmentation? A Contextual Study* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2008).

⁷ Stefano Allievi, ed., *Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy Issues and Trends—NEF Initiative on Religion and Democracy in Europe* (London: NEF/Alliance Publishing Trust, 2009); Jocelyn Cesari, ed., “Mosque Conflicts in Europe,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31, no. 6 (2005): 1015–1179; Pia Karlsson and Ingvar Svanberg, *Moskéer i Sverige: En religionsetnologisk studie av intolerans och administrativt vanmakt* [Mosques in Sweden: A study of intolerance and administrative despair] (Uppsala: Svenska kyrkans forskningsråd, 1995); Pia Karlsson Minganti, “Mosques in Sweden: On Identity and Spatial Belonging,” in *Creating Diversities: Folklore, Religion and the Politics of Heritage*, ed. Anna-Leena Siikala, Barbro Klein, and Stein R. Mathisen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2004), 153–64.

there are a couple of hundred so-called 'basement mosques' situated in apartments and other rearranged premises.

The most prominent Muslim youth organization is Sweden's Young Muslims (SUM).⁸ It is a national organization with 3,500 members and over forty local youth associations in towns all over the country. SUM is member of the Sunnī umbrella organization, the Council of Swedish Muslims (Sveriges Muslimska Råd, SMR). It is also a member of the National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations (LSU) and the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO). Although dominated by Sunnī Islam, SUM welcomes young Muslims regardless of ethnic or confessional commitment. As the majority of its members have been raised in Sweden, converts included, it may be plausibly argued that these youth are more motivated than their parents' generation to see Islam as a Swedish religion. They tend to adhere to the global Islamic revival and its call for the return to the supposedly authentic message of Islam, while distancing themselves from what they define as cultural traditions and human misconceptions.

The distinction between religion and culture leads to three important features among young organized Muslims. First, they construct a common Islamic identity, which ideally surpasses any association with 'race'/ethnicity, clan, or class. Second, they claim that this universal Islamic identification is compatible with being a good Swedish citizen. Third, the youth often question and sidestep traditional authorities, such as parents and '*ulamā*'. For instance, many of these organized young Muslims find appeal in the idea of a state-funded educational program for training of *imāms*. They call for religious authorities that are familiar with Swedish language and society, and oppose the 'imported' *imāms* from former home countries.⁹

There is a relatively high tolerance for difference within youth associations. The same organization can contain members of Palestinian background inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood working side by side with young peers of Somali background adhering to Salafist

⁸ Established in 1991, it was originally called Sveriges Muslimska Ungdomsförbund (SMUF), <http://www.ungamuslimer.se> (accessed May 9, 2011).

⁹ In 2009, a government-appointed investigator recommended that the Swedish government drop plans for state-funded education for *imāms*. Although organized Muslim groups admitted that there was a demand for training in language and knowledge of Swedish society, they still strongly opposed the proposal that the state should itself engage in religious teaching. See Larsson, *Islam in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*.

interpretations. They are influenced simultaneously by a wide range of sources, from Tariq Ramadan's *To Be a European Muslim* to international authorities such as Hamza Yusuf and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This relative tolerance within Muslim youth is actively recognized by members of these organizations. As one female respondent noted: "Personally I follow the majority of the Muslims. Then there are Salafis and Sufis. We can all share the same house. Yes, it is possible."

The young activists' bonds with the mosques show solidity, but they are not static. Rather, there is constant reflection and re-adjustment. An illustrative example is how the members of SUM use spaces in Stockholm Grand Mosque (Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan's Mosque) for prayers, festivities, teaching, and office work, but at the same time also have independent premises in another part of town where they often choose to pursue their activities at some distance from the older generation.

Mosques in Sweden are generally open to women; it seems reasonable to claim that the societal climate makes it difficult for mosques not to open their doors. Sweden today is imbued with debates, reforms, and legislation promoting equal opportunities for people regardless of ethnic belonging, religion, or gender. In order to qualify for grants from the SST the religious communities are required to maintain and strengthen the fundamental values of society, including equality between men and women.¹⁰ In new mosques, built in line with modern pan-Islamic architecture, special entrances and balconies guarantee the presence of women, although cementing their spatial separation from men.¹¹

Muslim congregations and organizations in Sweden are still dominated by male leadership and women continuously turn to male authorities. As a consequence of the lack of female influence, during the 1980s and 1990s Muslim women (mostly converts) established their own organizations and activities.¹² The members take initiatives to reinterpret Islam and choose which men to reckon as advisors.

¹⁰ The rules are vague and, for instance, there are no demands on how the communities elect their clergy.

¹¹ Renata Holod and Hassan-Uddin Khan, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons and Designs since the 1950s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 19–21.

¹² Anne Sofie Roald, "Evas andra ansikte: Muslimska kvinnoaktiviteter" [Eve's second face: Muslim women's activities], in Svanberg and Westerlund, *Blågul islam?* 123–39.

Several of these initiators are involved in children and youth activities and, thus, transmit their religious interpretations to young women. In this way, the younger Muslim women have come to have several adult women role models, showing that public engagement is both possible and worth striving for.

The women's activism in mosques in Sweden is, however, acceptable to the larger Muslim community as long as they do not claim the space to lead prayers or give the *khutbah* before men. Another condition for women's presence in mosques and other central Muslim forums is their respect for gender-separated spheres. Within the youth associations, the gender division results in clearly defined rules for collective prayers: the prayer hall either provides for separate women's spaces, or women collectively position themselves behind men. Islamic education classes are held in a joint room with men and women seated on each side, or in separate rooms with the women following a female instructor, or a male instructor via TV screen or loud-speaker. Socially, expectations regarding women's piety are visible in their modest clothing and behavior, with male and female members of the youth organization referring to each other as 'brothers and sisters in Islam.'

New Attitudes to Women's Religious Authority

Several of the young women interviewed for this study had, during their childhoods in the 1980s and 1990s, participated in Qur'an schools in local mosques. However, their narratives reveal a lack of continuity in their mosque attendance. There was not much space offered to the adolescent women within their congregations. This reflects the practices of the early establishment of Islam in Sweden, when there were still only a few larger mosques, and smaller premises rarely allowed any space for women. Thus, the exclusion of the young women from the mosques was also reflective of the differing perceptions and expectations of the appropriate roles for 'man' and 'woman.' Women were associated with the domestic sphere; they were not expected to play a role in religious rituals, social meetings, or decision-making in public forums such as mosques. Intimately linked to this division of labor was the understanding of sexuality as a destructive force if left unregulated. The identification of women as source of *fitnah* (disorder), because of their ability to arouse temptation in men, justified their exclusion from

the formal sphere of religious authority.¹³ To avoid any misconduct or distraction, women were better kept away from mosques.

However, as pioneers in the first Muslim youth associations during the 1990s and 2000s and the national organization SUM (established in 1991), the women experienced the mosque culture shifting from a 'mono-gender space' to a 'two-gender forum.' One possible explanation of this shift is the need to mobilize women in the Islamic revival. The perception of women as source of *fitnah* was weighed against the other dominant representation of women as *bearers of Islam*.¹⁴ According to this view, women have a central role in the propagation of Islam because as mothers they are the transmitters of Islam to the next generation. Hence, not just women but the entire Muslim community stands to gain from serious religious training for women. This shift in attitudes toward women has been noted in Europe and beyond.¹⁵

In their Islamic communities the young women share a reinterpretation of the concept of *fitnah*, which means that the woman is now understood as a passive temptation rather than an active temptress. Another reinterpretation claims that men can indeed be *fitnah*—temptation—to women, and not only the other way around. The intimate link between *fitnah* and 'woman' is thereby dissolved, paving the way for mutual responsibility of men and women in managing sexual attraction. Further, androcentric interpretations of the 'female' character are challenged, such as the *ḥadīth* declaring women as being deficient in intellect (*ʿaql*) and religion (*dīn*).¹⁶ References which support women's equal abilities in respect of *ʿaql* and *dīn* are instead more actively consulted. Importantly, the women are recognized as religious subjects, with the right—or rather the duty—to attend mosques and *madrasahs* in order to cultivate their piety and increase their knowledge of Islam.

¹³ Cf. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985), 31.

¹⁴ Ayşe Saktanber, *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 32.

¹⁵ Sylva Frisk, *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009); Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 617–42; and Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

¹⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Book of Menstruation*, discussed in Anne Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London: Routledge, 2001), 131.

The young women's narratives also evidence the influence of Swedish identity in the new forms of female engagement in the religious sphere. Their pious subjectivity is shaped not only by Islamic conceptions of good motherhood, but also by the demands of Swedish citizenship. The female respondents in this study talked about their duty to educate themselves within both the religious and secular spheres, and to show that Muslims—women included—can be represented at all levels of society and in all possible professions. In fact there is a great demand for the young women's public Islamic activism, from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Within the frames of mosques and youth associations they are needed as transmitters of Islam to the next generation, as well as motivators for the young to identify with Islam. Thus, even while they are students, the young women also take part in teaching basic knowledge of Islam to children and peers. As confirmed by the research of Dessing and Bleisch Bouzar (see Dessing, Chapter 2.2, and Bleisch Bouzar, Chapter 2.5, this volume), the lack of formally trained scholars among European Muslims produces a market for many less skilled teachers to contribute, women among them. The youth associations seem to be platforms for any individual with basic knowledge of Islam to become a religious leader. Here, charisma would first and foremost be a question of having an extrovert personality, and contributing to the sense of community and role-modeling of the new generation of Muslims. Further, the women are invited to act as leaders in the sense of being decision-makers and organizers. In their youth associations they are engaged in boards and committees, even as chairpersons. They organize courses, seminars, conferences, camps, and excursions.

In relations with broader Swedish society, which places demands on Muslim communities to move toward more egalitarian gender norms, the young women are requested by the Muslim community to act as public representatives or 'ambassadors' for Islam. This mindset is reflected in the views of one male respondent, who argued that there was a need for a 'super-sister' to defend Muslim women's interests, "because their own voices would be better heard than men speaking on their behalf." Thus, the young women act as guides in mosques and as invited public speakers and debaters. Their Islamic activism is in many ways compatible with what could be defined as identity politics: for instance, they take action in favor of specific minority rights, such as alternative diets in school and the establishment of mosques and Muslim schools; 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. Their commitment to Islam includes acting as participant citizens and they cooperate with non-Muslim organizations, institutions, and projects aiming at, for instance, inter-religious dialogue, charity, anti-racism, and temperance.

Challenges to Women's Religious Authority

A constant condition for Muslim women's participation in Swedish mosques is their acceptance that leading a prayer or giving a *khutbah* before men is purely a male prerogative. A few adult women call themselves *imāms*, such as Ethiopian-born Suad Mohamed, who was educated in *sharī'ah* in Jordan. For her the title '*imām*' signifies a role corresponding to that of the deacon in Christian congregations, and is concerned with advising and leading prayers for women. Mohamed has experienced exclusion from mosques, but claims to be increasingly invited to perform her services. However, she does not aspire to conduct marriages or funerals, or work as an advisor for an entire congregation in the near future.¹⁷ The women participating in this study did not claim the kind of authority that Mohamed demands; instead they were more oriented toward teaching children, peers, and non-Muslims. They were therefore not as provocative to male Muslim scholars as Suad Mohamed seems to be. However, even these women faced challenges in maintaining their mere presence in mosques and in defending their public Islamic activism.

Within the congregations and the Muslim associations, there were individuals who found the women's presence in the public sphere disturbing. When visiting mosques the women could be met with harsh glances and rebukes which restricted their movements. These competing gender norms made the women ambivalent. On the one hand, they unhesitatingly affirmed their right to participate in mosques; on the other, they expressed feelings of discomfort. A young woman named Hawa said:

¹⁷ Marie Eriksson, "Kvinnlig imam utmanar normer" [Woman imam challenges norms], *Paraplyprojektet* [The umbrella project], online newsletter, 2007, <http://www.paraplyprojektet.se/nyheter/suad/>.

- Hawa: It's a sensitive matter. I don't know how far I can go, or what I can do. If I can go to the guys when they pray... these things.
- Pia: Can you do that in your mosque?
- Hawa: Yes, but it's at your own risk [laughter]. Well, you *can* do it, but it's not so funny if there're some grumpy old men who scold you. But it is kind of permissible.
- Pia: So, it's mostly old men who... are grumpy, or may there be some younger people too?
- Hawa: There are some types there. I don't know, they are probably middle-aged... who think that... well, who somehow have something against women... I can stay in the women's room and on the balcony. Of course, at times I can go into the main prayer-hall as well. And if I have a necessary errand I can go to the other side too, where the men are. It's not that I'm not allowed to go there at all, but... sometimes it might feel a bit embarrassing.
- Pia: Go where?
- Hawa: If I go to the other side, where there are a lot of men... then it feels... at least *I* personally think... messing around there, like... there is no need for it. It doesn't have to be anyone saying so, it's more something one feels.

The young women have to confront not only the others' attitudes, but also the expectations and norms ingrained in their own embodied *habitus*.¹⁸ Even when the women are convinced of their right to participate it does not always *feel* right. The mosque is still mainly male territory; men use it as an obvious resource, which improves their piety and authority. Women might enter and participate, but they have partially accepted that this access is bound up with certain conditions.

The women's uneasiness about being in the 'wrong' place is coupled with concerns about doing the 'wrong' duties. The women are exposed to contradictory femininities. One affirms their right to public activism; the other makes them wonder if their legitimate role is actually within the confines of the home, and questions their presence in mosques and other central Muslim forums. In order to illustrate the notion of 'public' femininity, I return to the young man who was calling for an outspoken 'super-sister' to publicly defend herself and her co-sisters in Islam. His assertion that the positive testimonies of women have greater impact than men's (re)presentations made one of the young women willingly embrace the role of 'ambassador of Islam.' Hawa told me about her perception of this extrovert task, referring to

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

herself as a capable and courageous person fighting for Islam: “Sometimes we say, ‘She’s a real *mujāhidah!*’ That is, someone who fights.” The denomination *mujāhidah* is a feminine form for ‘freedom-fighter.’ To the women of my study it signaled agency. Hawa clenched her fist, but immediately chose to clarify herself:

I mean, not *jihād* like violence. Everyone seems to believe that *jihad* is only about *war*, but it is more like *struggle*. So, a *mujāhidah* can be someone who does her best. Like Amina, my friend, who studies to become a physician and has children at the same time. Or like me, who struggles for people to understand Islam.

However, Tariq, a young man from her youth group, expressed a view on femininity fairly different from that of the resourceful ‘super-sister.’ In a critical tone, Tariq reminded Hawa about the divergent roles of men and women, likening men to ‘foreign ministers’ and women to ‘domestic ministers.’ He thus pointed to the ever-present perception of the home as the woman’s proper place, to the conception of femininity as shy and private, and to needing to be protected from public situations and people’s gazes. “It is such an effort that you should not need to be exposed to,” Tariq declared to Hawa, who was about to participate in a TV program about the use of *hijāb*. This example of two conflicting positions on femininity illustrates how the young women’s public activism was not a neutral fact, but an issue constantly renegotiated and challenged.

Another obstacle to the young women’s Islamic activism is the ever-topical issue of women’s movement and travel. At the core of this debate is the issue of the need for men to act as women’s guardians. Again, there is a tension between a femininity built on the perception of women’s need for protection and the capable femininity of the *mujāhidah*—one of being recognized as a pious subject, capable of self-control and personal responsibility before God. They wear *hijāb*, signaling decency to the world; in fact, their pious dress-code is often regarded as a compensation for the lack of a male escort. The women appreciate the fact that they are ‘traveling’ persons, making everyday journeys to and from workplaces, universities, gyms, and *da’wāh*-activities. But there are limits, as illustrated by the following account of the negotiations over Latifa’s plan to participate in an Islamic course abroad.

Last year Hamza Yusuf held a course in England and I really wanted to participate. But it is a sensitive matter, traveling. Different schools and alignments claim different things. Some say that women can’t travel

on their own. You have to go with someone who is *mahram*, like your brother or father or husband. And I can understand that in today's world it's dangerous to travel as a woman. Many think so. So I sent an e-mail message to a *shaykh* here in Sweden and asked if it would be okay for me to go to that course. He answered that: "First of all, if you don't have the company of *mahram* you should preferably go with a group." That is, with friends, or, well, a group of Muslims. But I was like: "I don't have any *mahram* available. And there is no group going, just me and one brother [in Islam]. But I can't go alone with him, because he's not *mahram*." Then the *shaykh* said: "If there is no person like Hamza Yusuf in Sweden, then you may travel to this course on your own. Since you are searching for knowledge. That is permissible. But it would really be the ultimate solution." He really didn't want me to go by myself. He said so.

Latifa never went to the course in England. She could not convince herself that her search for knowledge was strong enough a justification for such a long journey alone. The negotiation was performed with her own conscience, with God, and with Muslim collectives, under the pressures of the dominant religious discourse which painted her journey as suspicious, dangerous, and unnecessary.

In fact, the young women are in a position where their religious activism could at any time be challenged by duties with higher value for family members: duties of modesty, obedience, and domestic work. They are supported by some religious authorities and family members, and countered by others. When turning to elders or peers for answers, the young women are met with ambiguity. Sometimes they get support for opposing the demands of relatives by defining these demands as 'non-Islamic cultural traditions.' However, often they are told that women's *da'wāh* is a voluntary activity, while obedience is obligatory and her first priority.¹⁹ Ultimately, the possibility of undertaking many of the women's projects of pious activism would likely turn on a single man's approval or disapproval.

Exercising Religious Authority

On becoming practicing Muslims engaged in youth associations, the young women wish to have an impact on Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The women have experienced conflicts associated with both such categories. In fact, all the women's narratives contain descriptions

¹⁹ Cf. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 178–79.

of teenage crises that threatened their bonds to Swedish society and their families, as well as to Islam. Besides possible conflicts that young people might endure, these women explicitly tell about processes of 'othering' in connection to gender, religion, and 'race'/ethnicity, processes that subordinate them as both 'Muslims' and 'women.' In the end they chose not to break away, but to challenge prevailing norms from within—that is, by enrolling in the Islamic revival.

In mosques and youth associations the women are presented with the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts and to reflexively choose what interpretations to adhere to and disseminate to others. They are critically considering the possibility that some interpretations result from androcentric readings. To counteract bias they circulate references reflecting women's interests. They dismissed misogynist *ḥadīths* as weak or even false, and evoke the wives of the prophet Muḥammad as role models—Khadijah as a businesswoman and 'Ā'ishah as a leader in knowledge, society, politics, and war. In this way, the young women defend their subjective piety, public activism, and their right to make their own decisions regarding their life plans, for instance concerning their education, professional career, and marriage.

As organizers and lecturers for youth classes, the young women put gender on the agenda. In Suad's youth association they decided to take away the curtain dividing them from the male teachers and peers, a decision which she appreciated as an improvement: "I mean, you actually don't learn well if you are only listening. One also wants to see the speaker and to be able to put questions to the teacher." The issue of Islamic clothing provides another illuminating example of gender issues on the young women's agenda. They draw attention to the religious aspect of wearing *ḥijāb*: that is, they do not only frame it as an identity marker but also as an all-inclusive package of pious intention and behavior. They argue that the *ḥijāb* must be taken on after serious considerations, as a personal choice. If the decision is not made independently of others' pressures it fails to be morally valid before God. By emphasizing piety and defending free choice as a basic moral category, the women generate tools to combat forced covering.

Further, by stressing the tendency to make women adorn the visible symbols of Islamic identity, the young women push for their contribution to be recognized. Their primary call is not for clear-cut justice between the sexes, but rather for *respectful* gender complementarity.²⁰

²⁰ Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima*, and "Becoming a 'Practising' Muslim."

This model presupposes two absolute genders—man and woman—to which different characteristics and duties are ascribed. Ideally, the two should complement each other harmoniously, but often the female contributions fail to elicit proper recognition. By putting Islamic dress on the youth associations' agendas the women explicitly share their experiences of wearing *ḥijāb* in a non-Muslim society. In doing this they are partly asking the young men to fulfill their own obligations to adhere to the Islamic dress code, but, more importantly, through this they gain respect as critical agents in the joint project of living Islam.

The women's notion of respectful gender complementarity involves what I call *tactical orthodoxy*:²¹ that is, temporary allusions to one's own perceived higher degree of piety in order to realize personal preferences (within, of course, the frame of what the individual in question understands as true Islam). By *tactic* I refer to Michel de Certeau's notion of the "fragmentary and fragile victories of the weak" within the framework of a power order that they cannot (or do not want to) escape.²² With the religious scriptures in their hands, the women claim their rights by emphasizing *all* Muslims' duty to realize Islam—men included. That is, if men want obedient women who accept their protection, they themselves must accomplish their duty as providers and escorts. Should kinsmen fail in this task, the women felt it legitimate to let themselves be escorted by pious peers in their Islamic associations, or even to move around on their own.

Tactical orthodoxy makes it possible for the women to provisionally redefine and displace power. They charge the female need for protection with new meaning. Rather than associating the limitations of their mobility with subordination or vulnerability, they associate them with men's shortcomings. In line with Mahmood's theorizing regarding the politics of piety,²³ I would argue that the women of my study do not let discrepancies between ideals and their own practices lead to consciously subversive acts. Rather, they interpret these as personal shortcomings that could be corrected through pious self-discipline. However, their own successful performances of Islamic ideals could expose the failures of others, and here the women allow themselves to be subversive. Thus, Hawa challenged the privileges of her male kin:

²¹ Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima*, and "Becoming a 'Practising' Muslim."

²² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii–xx.

²³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 164–65.

- Hawa: Cook for my brother? Why should I?
 Hawa's mother: He's tired when he comes home.
 Hawa: He doesn't work, does he? He doesn't earn money for me. [Turning toward me] Yes, I know. I should be kind now during Ramaḍān, but apparently I'm not. It isn't fun to be kind when they take it for granted.

The example shows Hawa asking for recognition of her contribution in line with respectful gender complementarity. Also, she is altering a dominant interpretation of *qiwama*, that is, the divinely prescribed leadership position of men over women and children. The position implies responsibility for the supply, protection, and morals of the dependants.²⁴ Hawa and the other women deny that this duty legitimizes unlimited command or that it should be understood as assigning men general superiority over all women. Further, they argue for an increase in women's influence and a modification of the division of labor, in case the male supplier should fail in his task.²⁵ Like the women in Minesaki's study (see Minesaki, Chapter 3.2, this volume), Hawa and her peers use arguments and textual evidence to resist attempts by family members to control their daily lives, be it a matter of the division of labor, the right to pursue public Islamic activism, or to choose a future spouse.²⁶

Absorbing the influence of the surrounding society, the women also aim at altering their own position within it. A crucial ambition is to change the widespread image of Muslim women as passive victims vulnerable to sexist or racist oppression. Rather, they are keen to create an image of 'normality,' in which Muslim women are seen as well-spoken, humorous, capable of maintaining a public presence, and 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. During interviews, many talked about their desire to 'shock' people, in the sense of positively breaking with

²⁴ Roald, *Women in Islam*, 145–84.

²⁵ It is worth noting that Hawa did not cook that day—yet her young sister-in-law did. Not only did Hawa have Islamic authority working in her favor, she could also capitalize on her status in the family hierarchy. In pointing this out, I aim to emphasize that women's empowerment is often dependent on other women's subordination.

²⁶ As mentioned above, there were limits to the success of the women's negotiations. If family members did not share the same Islamic frames of reference as the young women, they could put an end to the women's negotiations at any time. There was the threat of violence for some, and the fear of repudiation for all.

negative stereotypes. For instance, during an open seminar on ‘the position of women in Islam,’ organized by a non-Muslim student association, Hawa challenged the speaker, an exiled Iranian atheist feminist. When the speaker talked about Saudi Arabian women being prohibited from driving cars, Hawa turned to the audience with an ironic wink and said loudly: “I drive a car!” With this comment she opened the floor for her peers to inform the audience about the difference between ‘true’ Islam (which they argued was open to allowing women to drive) and Saudi ‘cultural traditions.’

The young women use a particular discursive strategy, informing the general public about the ‘new-generation Muslims’ and their proper position in a modern democracy. This positioning is constituted by dissociating themselves from ‘cultural’ Muslims and their ‘customs and delusions,’ such as bans on women driving, ‘honor-killings,’ or genital cutting. In fact, the women see themselves as seeking to prevent Islamophobia through providing information about ‘true’ Islam. This view is illustrated by the young woman who, with reference to the physical abuse of women, said: “This is, in fact, a matter of so-called Muslims doing stupid things, and then the Swedes cannot understand that this is actually not Islam.” Through their informative activism she and the other women hope to put an end to Islamophobic sentiments and discrimination.

From the majority society there is a demand for the young women to act as cultural and religious mediators and icons of ‘good’ Islam. To illustrate this demand I will offer two examples of women from the Muslim youth movement appointed as TV hostesses. Nadia Jebri’s career as a TV personality was fuelled in 2002 after she was denied an appointment as a host of the multicultural TV program *Mosaik* because of her wearing the *hijāb*. Later she became a program leader of the cooking show *Ät!* and the travel show *Packat & Klart*. She has managed to stay in the business, showing preparedness to keep a low profile in the debate, not emphasizing Muslim exceptionality, but talking reflexively and understandingly about her conflict with the board of Swedish Television.²⁷ She has lifted the *hijāb* at times and embodies a ‘good,’ liberal Muslim in line with non-Muslim mainstream expectations on mediation.

²⁷ Jonas Otterbeck, “The Legal Status of Islamic Minorities in Sweden,” *Journal of Conflict and Violence Research* 5, no. 2 (2003): 46–47.

In the autumn of 2008, Swedish Television launched a talk show called *Halal-TV*, with three hostesses all wearing *hijāb*. It was broadcast in prime-time with the explicit aim of giving voice to women committed to Islam. It was cancelled after one season, after strong criticism not only from those normally negative to the mere presence of Muslims in Sweden, but also from people who initially looked forward to the program. Part of the critique made reference to the hostesses having given an impression of double-speaking and as having an unclear agenda. Were they ‘extremists’ rather than ‘good’ Muslims? Why did they refuse to shake hands with a non-Muslim male guest? Did one of them, a student of law, reject the death penalty and reject stoning as an execution method or not?

In line with other contributions in this volume, the example of the TV hostesses shows the multiple platforms through which Muslim women are exerting their authority. The example also sheds light on the failure of non-Muslim audiences to grasp the complexity of young women’s representations of Islam. In order to cast further light on such complexity, in the next section I will discuss two important aspects affecting the young women’s representations of Islam: namely, (1) their dependence on religious authorities and consensus, and (2) their primary loyalty to a male-dominated community engaged in postponing women’s rights.

Recognizing Complexity

It is indeed empowering for the women to take part in the re-reading of original Islamic texts. However, reinterpretation is not supposed to be carried out according to individual initiative, but developed in relation to authorized representatives and the general consensus on what should be recognized as ‘authentic’ Islam.²⁸ These conditions explain why the women would confidently proclaim female genital mutilation to be an un-Islamic cultural custom—thus, positioning themselves in line with the Swedish mainstream rejection of this practice—while at the same time hesitate to denounce physical punishment of women and children, which is likewise illegal in contemporary Sweden. The rejection of female genital mutilation is safely based on the consensus

²⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 115–17; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, “Knowledge, Empowerment, and Religious Authority,” 634.

of their Islamic community, while an absolute denial of corporal punishment of women and children is not. Not surprisingly then, women and their peers are more eager to discuss the former issue than the latter (or the death penalty, for that matter) before non-Muslim audiences.

The women's obedience to religious authorities results not only from their understanding of the religious texts, but equally from their loyalty to the wider Muslim community. The young women's relationship to Muslim religious authorities is influenced by their perception of Islam as being under attack and of the Muslims in diaspora as being in vulnerable positions. Researchers such as Schirin Amir-Moazami and Nadia Fadil have illustrated how Muslims are deprived of authority and pressed to submit to what is perceived as the majority's national values in order to be recognized as citizens.²⁹ The minority has to adapt to the practice of hand-shaking with the opposite gender, while the majority does not need to realize the coexistence of diverse ways of greeting. My analysis adds an emphasis on how such domination may result in the young women acquiescing to the restoration of (male) Muslim authority through the suspension of critical public debates on the organization of gender within their Muslim community.

When the Prophet Muḥammad—allegedly married to nine-year-old 'Ā'ishah—was portrayed as a pedophile by non-Muslim debaters, the young women's activism focused on combating blasphemy rather than child marriages. When Amina Wadud led prayers and preached before a mixed-gender congregation, the young women did not primarily consider the implications for gender equality, but chose to adhere to the dominant rejection of this initiative as causing *fitnah* in the Muslim *ummah* (see Hammer, Chapter 3.5, and Lehmann, Chapter 3.6, this volume). When Stockholm's new grand mosque was reported for gender discrimination by a woman member of the Swedish parliament to the government agency Jämställdhetsombudsmannen (The Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, EOO), it was hardly on the young women's agenda to compare their position with men or to measure their status by the amount of square meters offered on the balcony.

²⁹ Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Dialogue as a Governmental Technique: Managing Gendered Islam in Germany," *Feminist Review* 98, no. 1: 9–27; Nadia Fadil, "Managing Affects and Sensibilities: The Case of Not-Handshaking and Not-Fasting," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no. 4 (2009): 439–54.

In order to better understand the young women's priorities when negotiating gender dynamics within the Muslim community, I propose that the concepts of *frontstage* and *backstage* actions are helpful. According to Goffman, frontstage actions aim at presenting a coherent self before a broader audience, while keeping all incoherence backstage.³⁰ In critical frontstage situations, as in the case of the Stockholm Grand Mosque being reported for gender discrimination, the young women did not prioritize debates on alternative gender orders; instead they stood together with the traditional religious authorities to protect the prevailing order. However, in less formal situations—i.e. backstage, within the Muslim communities and out of sight of broader Swedish society—these women constantly debate and renegotiate gender roles. If in frontstage performances the women are seen declaring their separate balconies in mosques to be adequate, backstage they are negotiating for greater visibility and presence within the formal affairs of the Muslim community, including the arena of religious authority.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on young women who have seen the Swedish mosques transform from mono-gender male spaces to forums capable of accommodating both genders, though with continued contestation. As members of Muslim youth organizations in Sweden, these women are faced with expectations to embody and represent Islam. They are invited to act as teachers for the community's children and their peers, and as decision-makers and organizers on boards and committees. Given the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts, these women offer reinterpretations that are changing their daily lives as well as their position vis-à-vis the Muslim community and Swedish society as a whole. However, in the process they are not directly challenging the traditional authorities within the Muslim communities. Like other organized Muslims in Europe, these young women are using their mosques and youth organizations as platforms for securing the rights and needs of the growing Muslim minority (see Kuppinger, Chapter 2.7, this volume).

³⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

In fact, both fellow Muslims and non-Muslims place demands on the young women to function as cultural mediators and public representatives of Islam. Acting as guides in mosques, public speakers, and writers for newsletters and websites, their Islamic activism is pursued beyond the confines of the mosques and classrooms and turns into identity politics in civic centers, TV studios, and cyberspace. Their tendency is to prioritize the male-dominated Muslim community's interests and deflect the attention of broader Swedish society away from the stigmatizing issues of women's rights in Muslim communities. However, internally—i.e. within the Muslim communities—they are questioning and renegotiating existing gender norms. Mosques and Muslim organizations in Sweden are still male-dominated and there are no strong signs that women will soon become prayer leaders or advisors to men. Yet, in more informal situations, backstage among their peers, these women are engaged in reflexive deliberations and are testing alternative norms and practices. They are indeed negotiating for greater visibility and presence within the formal affairs of the Muslim community, including the arena of religious authority.

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