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# Negotiating two worlds: An exploration of Moroccan Belgian youths' lived experience of gender identity

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the lived experiences of Muslim youth in Belgium regarding their gender identity. Based on a qualitative study with focus groups among Moroccan Belgian youths, we examine the usefulness of studying gender identity as a dynamic construct. Gender identity is not only shaped within and through different contexts, the state of Moroccan Belgian youths negotiating between two worlds also highly complicates this construction. Gender acts as a mobilising force to legitimate borders and to differentiate from another ethnic or religious group that does not share the same practices or perceptions. Finally, processes of stereotyping, which are mainly gender-based, evoke a diversity of reactions among these youths. The aim of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the construction of gender identity as a continuous process that acquires meaning in relation to minority/majority relations in society. Directions for future research are suggested.

## **Keywords**

Gender Identity, Muslim Youth, Minority/majority Groups, Public Discourse, Stereotypes

## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, gender-based issues regarding the presence and representation of a large Muslim community in Western countries have arisen as hot topics in public debate (Spierings et al., 2015). Several acts of terrorism involving young Muslim men as perpetrators (e.g. Charlie Hebdo, the 2015 Paris attacks, the 2016 Brussels attacks) have received considerable attention in the Western media (West & Lloyd, 2017). Furthermore, the behaviour of some Muslim men in public places is criticised, as it is experienced as inappropriate and an expression of hyper-masculinity (see for example the documentary 'Femme de la Rue' by Sofie Peeters, 2012). In 2015, after an incident with sexual harassments in Cologne, the debate on gender, sexuality and immigration rose across Europe. Another topical debate is the position of Muslim women in family and society, which in most European countries is dominated by the veil, taking the French (2010) and Belgian 'burqaban' (2011) as a guiding example. Despite the neutral language in the legislation, it is very clear from the surrounding societal and political debates that its actual target is the Islamic face veil, which is usually – yet wrongly – called a 'burqa' (Brems et al., 2015). When taking all these gender-based debates together two observations can be made. First, in the majority of these media representations gender identity seems to be approached in a rather static way, ignoring the complexity of the negotiation of gender identity (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Herz, 2019; Dunne & Crossouard, 2020). Second, in spite of this attention in public debate, research into the lived experiences of Muslim youths regarding their gender identity remains an emerging area (see for example Abo-Zena, 2019; Maske, 2017; Mir 2011). Based on these two observations, this paper reports on the findings of a focus group study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of Muslim youth in Belgium. The purpose of the study is twofold. First, we examine how these youths construct their gender identity within different contexts. Second, we analyse how the construction of gender identity acquires meaning in relation to minority/majority relations in society. Here, we are particularly interested in the way Muslim youths experience dominant representations and processes of stereotyping in public discourse.

## **Constructing Gender identity in Muslim Youth**

Gender refers to the characteristics, ideas and associations people ascribe to men and women. It is a human construction that organises our behaviour and thoughts and so it is different from sex, which refers to the biological nature of men and women (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). While men are expected to display 'masculine' behaviour, 'femininity' is the trait of behaving in ways considered typical for women (French, 1985). Throughout the evolution of this concept, two dominant directions can be outlined. On the one hand, gender has been considered as a static and innate concept, whilst on the other hand gender is looked upon as a rather complex and contested social phenomenon (Francis, 2006). As suggested in the work of Butler (1997, p. 520) there is no basis for our gender identity, as gender is constituted through 'a stylised repetition of acts'. Drawing on this second, nuanced and holistic definition, existing literature documents how gender identity of Muslims in Western societies is constructed within different contexts. Within this process, adolescence appears to be a crucial period, as young people become acquainted with their adult sexual urges and prepare for their gender-differentiated roles as men or women (Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). Racial, cultural, religious and immigrant attributes are implemented and/or covered contextually (Mir, 2011). In the following, we therefore consider Muslim youth identity not as a singular state but as a 'complex site for the workings of culture, religion, class, gender and national identities' (Theodorou, 2011, p. 6).

A first context of influence on the construction of gender identity concerns the domestic sphere and the family (Demant & Pels, 2006; Kretschmer, 2018). Parents and relatives pass on their gender-related values, norms and behavioural repertoires through child rearing. In this vein, differences are observed between the raising of boys and girls (Röder & Mühlau, 2014). Girls, for example, may be kept under stricter surveillance by their parents,

while boys enjoy greater liberty. Sometimes, values and norms passed on in the family are in opposition to those dominant in society. This might give rise to a dual conflict concerning the construction of gender identity: on the one hand within oneself and on the other hand between generations (Ahmed, 2005). For example, in the case of marriage, Muslim parents may prefer a family-oriented marriage, while youths may prefer a personal partner choice (Sterckx, 2013). Current literature points out that there are important alterations in the intergenerational transmission of gender role attitudes in Muslim families (Kretschmer, 2018). For example, in comparison to their parents and elder relatives, young women tend to marry later, continue their studies more often and work more frequently outside the home, while young men are more involved with childcare. At the same time, virginity and marriage remain highly valued in many Muslim families and may, in the context of migration, even acquire greater significance in the symbolic marking of boundaries between one's own ethnic or religious group and a western, secular environment (Demant & Pels, 2006).

Islam strongly envisages the family as a context where religion is handed down. Likewise, the family has an important role in religious texts, such as the Quran (Demant & Pels, 2006). However, a clear distinction should be made between the normative teachings of Islam and the diverse cultural practices among Muslims (Silvestri, 2008). In essence Islam concerns equality between men and women, but in reality Islamic readings are sometimes interpreted in a discriminatory way by means of a gendered double standard (Sterckx, 2013). The chastity rule, for example, is especially applicable to women and to a lesser extent to men.

In addition to the family as the primary socialisation context, school constitutes another important context in the construction of gender identity (Van Klingerren & Spierings, 2020). Even though Muslim parents perceive school as providing great potentiality for the youths' future, there also arises a certain ambivalence toward this assimilative institution which promotes the values of Belgian society. Especially with regard to girls, parents may foster a fear that their daughters will acquire certain values and knowledge that do not correspond with their own culture (Echeverria, 2012). One of the main concerns is linked to the control of sexuality. Like friends, peers and media, school is an important medium for Islamic youths to be informed about sexuality (Coleman, 2008). However, literature points out that Muslim girls are often absent when sexuality is discussed at school (Smerecnik et al., 2010).

### **Dominant Discourses in Public Debate**

Additional literature documents how the construction of gender identity acquires meaning in relation to dominant discourses and public, collective representations (Mir, 2009; Olivius, 2016). Here, we draw attention to the post 9/11 era, which has sparked a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment that has been perpetuating up until today. In current public discourses, it is indeed still noticeable how Muslims are portrayed as being different from the Western majority group and even more represented as a threat for Western economic, social, cultural and political life (Ramadan, 2021).

In relation to such collective representations, Said's (1981) notion of Orientalism points to an understanding of these representations as specifically Western constructions. Said describes a certain understanding of the relation between the West and the East, which starts from the idea that a particular representation of the East is inextricably tied to the construction of a Western identity. In this process, the West appropriates certain values which the East would not have. This general Western 'cultural consensus' (Said, 1981, p. 1) feeds processes of stereotyping, as the other appears in a narrow and negative perception. In the same vein, a gender-based approach of Orientalism focuses on the construction of masculinities and femininities according to race. Kutty's (1997) study on the image of Muslim women in Western culture found three stereotypical images attributed to Muslim women: the 'mysterious and sexualised harem belly dancer', the 'oppressed Muslim woman' often represented with a veil, and the 'militant Muslim woman' with a veil and military

clothes. As Lutz (2010) pointed out, a similar process is applicable to how Muslim men are approached in the West. Except for their role as the patriarch and/or the perpetrator, there has been a lack of interest in investigating other patterns of social practice among Muslim men. These constructions, in which asymmetries of power remain concealed (Charsley & Liversage, 2015), often result in a dichotomy between the civilised, female-friendly, moral masculinity of the West and the barbaric, oppressive, violent masculinity of the Other; the liberated Western femininity and the oppressed, subjugated Muslim femininity (Khalid, 2001). Moreover, this dichotomy is regularly thought of in terms of Islam, where the latter is blamed by Western society as the cause of gender inequality.

However, according to Buruma & Avishai (2004) it is equally important to consider another, similar mechanism, described as Occidentalism. This refers to an inversion of Orientalism; a counter discourse implying stereotypical views of Western moral standards. Like Orientalism, it is a typically gendered mechanism, in which the East in turn rejects Western values and behaviour as dissolute, frivolous or decadent.

In light of the above described observations that (1) dominant discourses in public debate often seem to neglect the dynamic way in which gender identity is constructed and (2) research into the lived experiences of Muslim youths regarding their gender identity remains an emerging area, this article aims to fill this gap by means of a focus group study. In the following, we first examine how Muslim youths construct their gender identity within different contexts. Second, we analyse how the construction of their gender identity acquires meaning in relation to minority/majority relations in society. Here, we are particularly interested in the way Muslim youths experience dominant representations and processes of stereotyping in public discourse.

### **Methodology**

Two reasons legitimised the use of a qualitative methodology. First, gender identity is dynamically constructed within multiple contexts. Answering the above described research questions therefore requires an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences in relation to these different contexts. Second, the focus on Islamic youths demands a method that interprets gender identity as a culturally mediated phenomenon. Gender identity is always constructed in the shared meaning structures of a particular cultural context (Echevarria, 2012). Our research aimed to shape a dynamic approach to socially and culturally mediated phenomena which we wished to explore from the self-understanding and meaning-making of those who are involved. We preferred a focus group design to individual interviews because it enabled interaction and in-depth explorations during the discussions (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

The fact that the study was conducted by two Flemish women, belonging to a majority group in Belgium, has influenced the interaction. Especially male participants were sometimes trying to outdo each other. Furthermore, as researchers we were not able to draw upon knowledge about Muslim communities from our own experiences and sometimes had to ask participants for clarification. However, this may have contributed to the respondents' confidence that the data provided to us would remain confidential (Mohammad, 2001).

### **Procedure**

Obviously, there is a large degree of heterogeneity among Islamic communities. In this study, we focused on the Moroccan community, as it is one of the largest and most debated ones in Belgium (Saaf et al., 2009). Since the rise of extreme right in the early 1990s, the 'criminalisation' of Moroccan youths, who would render certain neighbourhoods 'unsafe', has been a sad reality (Van San & Leerkes, 2001). A qualitative study with a focus group design was set up with Moroccan Belgian youths in three Belgian cities demographically characterised by the presence of extended Moroccan communities (i.e., Genk, Brussels & Antwerp).

Recruitment was set up in cooperation with secondary schools with a high population of migrant pupils in Flanders. Ninety-three school administrations (i.e. all registered schools in Genk, Brussels and Antwerp) were contacted with an initial request for participation; three agreed to participate. Consent at school administration level was followed by recruitment of pupils, initiated by an introductory meeting with all candidate-participants, conducted by both researchers (for two schools) and by the school administration (for one school). Selection was based on pupils' age, Moroccan background and Islamic religion: students between age 16-21 and belonging to Moroccan communities living in Belgium were invited to participate. Only participants who self-identified as Muslim were included in the analysis. The majority of participants were second generation Moroccan youth, some were third generation. Fifty-eight pupils attended the introductory meetings; thirty-three agreed to participate (twenty young men and thirteen young women). There were at least two reasons for declining participation at school level. First, secondary schools are overrun with requests to participate in research projects. Second, schools are reluctant to pick out a group of students because this might feed processes of stereotyping. Strikingly enough, in contrast to this reluctance of the schools, the pupils themselves were rather willing to participate.

Participants came from general secondary education, as well as technical and vocational education (see Table 1). Informed consent was obtained in verbal and written form before the start of the focus groups. For each school, two gender-homogenous focus groups were conducted, with a duration between 1,5 – 2 hours and with both researchers acting as focus group facilitators. In the first school, the focus groups consisted respectively of 5 young women and 7 young men, in the second school of 5 young women and 10 young men and in the third school of 3 young women and 3 young men. Each group discussion was structured on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide, delineating six themes that were identified on the basis of the above literature review: (1) a general self-understanding of gender identity, (2) contextual factors influencing the construction of gender identity, (3) the role of religion in the negotiation of gender identity, (4) the perception of family and the gender roles in the current family and future family situation, (5) the meaning of sexuality and (6) the negotiation of gender identity in relation to minority/majority discourses within Belgian society. Questions were all open and general, mostly advanced as propositions. To shape the last topic, different quotes that had appeared in the media were presented in order to open the discussion. All focus groups were administered in Dutch, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

	Male	Female	
Age	16-21	16-21	
School			
1	7	5	technical – vocational education
2	10	5	technical – vocational education,
3	3	3	general secondary – technical education
Total	20	13	33

### **Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis with qualitative analysis software in order to identify salient themes. Researchers began by reading the transcribed focus groups, recording their initial impressions, and generating a list of open codes. Subsequent team meetings (two researchers and supervisor) led to a discussion of insights and biases vis-à-vis the data, recognition of baseline sensitising concepts, and a comparison of open codes. This resulted in a first descriptive analysis. Through an in-depth interpretative analysis of the open codes, researchers generated an agreed upon list of axial codes. Each transcript was coded using NVIVO software (NVIVO 10 QRS, 2012) by the two first authors of this article, after which coders met to finalise consensus versions.

## **Results**

The results are organised according to three major themes. The first theme addresses the different dynamics in the construction of gender identity. The second theme describes how Moroccan Belgian youths negotiate their gender identity in relation to minority/majority relations in society. A final theme discusses how the youths deal with processes of stereotyping in public debate. The results are supported by quotes, with M referring to a man and W referring to a woman. The focus groups are indicated with a number from 1 to 6. Individual respondents in each focus group are referred to with a number from 1 to 10 (parentheses).

### ***Gender identity dynamically constructed***

The findings affirm that different dynamics are at work in the construction of gender identity: family expectations as well as young people's experiences with contexts such as family, school and religious community.

First, both young men and women understand the family as a constitutive force of their gender identity. Their perception of masculinity is built on a strong conviction of masculine responsibility. They perceive a man as a husband and father who takes care of his family:

If you are a man, I think that you are indeed the head of the family. [W-3(5)]

Imagine, I am 18 years old – they say that from 18 years on you have to become a man – but I still live at home. My father still supports me, so then I am not a real man. From the moment that you stand on your own feet – you have to do your own shopping, you have to pay your fines yourself – only then, you are a real man. [M-4(6)]

The interpretation of femininity in the familial context mainly revolves around the perspective of the mother as caretaker and responsible for housekeeping. However, the youths believe that those duties might be shared, depending on whether or not the mother goes out to work. They emphasise that the latter is a choice for the woman herself to make, influenced by the economic situation of the family:

Yes, girls are a symbol of the housekeeping. [W-6(2)]

A man should help even though he is tired because he has been working. But it depends, if your wife doesn't work and you have worked all day and you are tired... [M-5(4)]

This is reminiscent of what Connell (1987) has described earlier as the construction of a 'hegemonic masculinity'. Men's role as breadwinner seems to be important not only in shaping masculinity, but also in preserving male privileges. The hierarchical relationship between women and their husbands as head of the family grants the latter authority and status.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that men display a strong rejection of homosexuality. The majority of young men perceive homosexuality as an unnatural phenomenon and a threat to masculinity:

I will not make a choice for someone else, but if you are born as a boy or as a girl, I think you should stay heterosexual. If you become lesbian or gay or bisexual, it is your choice okay, but I do not agree with it. [M-5(2)]

There is a boy in my class, who behaves like a girl, even though he is a boy. That is not normal, that is just unnatural. [M-5(1)]

In the above citations, heterosexuality appears as a key element to the establishment of dominant masculinity. Homosexual men disrupt heteronormative constructions of masculinity because they are too effeminate. They represent 'subordinate masculinities' which can easily be 'symbolically blurred' with femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and, in this way, disrupt dominant gender roles. However, clinging to this idea of hegemonic masculinity in the institution of marriage as well as the patriarchal social relations attached to it, might provoke a struggle for Moroccan Belgian men in a society that attaches less importance to this notion of male responsibility and where divorce rates are increasing.

The interpretation of masculinity and femininity shaped within the familial context intertwines with the context of the school. For young men, school attendance is strongly related to their idea of masculine responsibility. Degrees or higher education are not that important, as long as they find a good job. Therefore, it is better accepted when men start technical or vocational education. Young women, on the other hand, are expected to enroll in higher education and to get better results at school. In the interaction between school and family there seem to be two issues at work. First, we observe that for young men, in the prospect of taking care of their family, making money takes precedence over obtaining a degree. Second, many young men have the impression that women are more supported to pursue their studies, both by their families and at school level:

No, but I mean at school they see more of a future for the girls than for the boys.  
[M-5(1)]

For me that is indeed contradictory, because my mother, she would not mind if my brother was in vocational education, but with me she would mind. I really have to graduate, go to university, get a good degree and my brother, he can go and do electricity or heating [Laughter]. [W-1(2)]

Building on the work of Connell (1989) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) this different perception of schooling may also have another reason, as high academic achievement is often conflated with femininity and thus interpreted as a non-hegemonic version of masculinity. Whereas being clever is considered effeminate, rejecting schooling may be part of the construction of a dominant masculinity.

A third context influencing the construction of gender identity is Islam. Parents and close relatives pass on religious values and norms. In the same way, youths want to pass on these values to their own children in the future. Even though Islam states that men and women are equal and all participating youths are aware of this symbolic gender equality, men and women show signs of an actual gender inequality. This inequality is expressed in the (dis)obedience of religious prescriptions concerning issues such as smoking, use of alcohol and sexuality. According to Islam, everything that harms your body and health is strictly forbidden. Though, there is some disagreement among the youths whether smoking is 'haram' (forbidden) or not. A related issue on which the youths are unanimous is premarital sex as forbidden and virginity as the guiding principle. However, here an ambiguity appears because although the youths are aware of the prescriptions of Islam and have recourse to them in their meaning-making, their behaviour is not always in line with these prescriptions. Another ambiguity appears in terms of a gendered double standard. Disobedience of religious prescriptions is more tolerated from young men than from young women. Whereas smoking and alcohol use are generally not tolerated from women, there seems to be a tacit tolerance for men. Therefore, young women start to drink or smoke secretly, while young men are aware of this tacit tolerance and dare to act openly:



I smoke, but nobody knows. My mother doesn't know, my father doesn't know, in my family they do not know it either. For me smoking is not as bad as drinking alcohol. [W-1(2)]

Boys smoke a bit more in public than girls. Sometimes girls will sooner do it in secret than boys... [M-5(1)]

Concerning virginity, there appears another double ambiguity. Many youths admit to not follow the chastity rule that prohibits premarital sex. As becomes clear from the quotes below, it is striking that especially men break those rules or at least dare to admit that misbehaviour:

Yes for men, I am no longer a virgin and I regret that. It was a stupid thing I did, because the girl and the girl's parents want the man to be a virgin. [M-2(2)]

There are many boys who are not virgin anymore, but who say like: "my wife has to be a virgin, even if I have to get her myself in Morocco." [W-1(2)]

The (in)visibility of virginity is crucial in order to explain this gender-based difference in their sexual behaviour. The youths refer to the maidenhead of the women as a visible symbol of virginity. Therefore a loss of virginity is more easily tolerated with young men, as one cannot verify this:

Normally the rule also counts for boys, they also have to stay virgin. But just because you cannot see it with them, they think they can do it. [W-3(5)]

Regarding religious prescriptions, making mistakes is accepted as long as they are put straight afterwards. Yet, this seems to count mainly for men, which again reinforces the gendered double standard. Besides this gender biased (dis)obedience to religious prescriptions, gender also seems to acquire meaning in relation to processes at societal level. More specifically, in the case of Moroccan Belgian youths, the relation between minority and majority groups is at stake.

#### ***Gender as constitutive force in the relation between the minority and majority group***

Moroccan Belgian youths express a constant fluctuation between the minority and majority group. They refer to this as managing "two worlds", which concerns on the one hand their Moroccan origin, inclusive of their Islamic religion, and on the other hand Belgian society. It becomes apparent that their parents and elder relatives represent their Moroccan heritage, while their Belgian peers and the public opinion represent Belgian society. This negotiation of two worlds might be a source of tension. Most of the Moroccan Belgian youths state that their parents still live according to the values of their Moroccan origins, which are strongly inspired by the Islamic religion, while the youths themselves act more in line with the values and habits of the environment they are living in.

Because they veil and I go out sometimes and they have never been out [...] They are always at home. They are more... Moroccan [Laughter]. Sometimes they say to me: "You should be more like us. We are Moroccans and you forget that sometimes." [W-1(2)]

In dealing with this constant fluctuation of two worlds, gender appears as a specific response. Moroccan Belgian youths seem to construct their masculine and feminine identities as a manner of coping with the struggle between the minority and majority group, or between their Moroccan origin and the Belgian society. Although the quotes in the previous section

do not reflect how the majority group approaches gender and sexuality, our findings also reveal an engagement with fragments of Belgian culture and gender perceptions – defined by the youths as “Western” – for example with regard to issues like smoking, alcohol use, freedom, clothing or sexuality. Yet, for women, the active engagement with fragments of this Belgian culture, especially when they are freedom-related, is perceived in a mostly negative way:

A girl who lives alone, she does whatever she wants. She goes out whenever she wants, she brings everybody home [...] Those are some ideas we have about people who live alone. I think it is very cool to have your own apartment. I know every night is a party [Laughter], but when I tell to my parents [...] A girl to whom you give pure freedom, for Moroccan parents that is not okay. [W-1(3)]

It is a striking observation that the engagement of young women with fragments of Belgian culture is described by some of the youths in terms of gaining a position in Belgian society. In the following quotes, both young men and women present sexuality at an early age as something 'proper to' Belgian women. As a result, Moroccan Belgian men will take advantage of this frivolity and make sexual contacts with these Belgian women. That some Moroccan Belgian women engage with this “Western” behaviour to attract the attention of boys is regarded by the respondents as gaining a place in Belgian society:

I think that even Moroccan-Moroccan girls had to earn their place just by giving their body [...] That is where it started with “Moroccan girls are whores”, because they just wanted to have a place in this world and the only way they found was to give their body. [W-1(3)]

Because nowadays Moroccan boys also want a girl at an early age and then they go out with Belgian or Spanish girls. Moroccan girls probably also want this and then they think that if they are cheap or easy, they will also get attention. [M-4(3)]

From the above quotes, it becomes clear that particular constructions of femininity gain meaning in relation to the majority group. Though, it should be emphasised that there is a high degree of heterogeneity in the way Moroccan Belgian youths understand the engagement of women with Belgian culture. Some youths will perceive this engagement as a normal process, while others will reject such behaviour. Especially peers seem to have an impact on this engagement.

When it comes to the engagement of Moroccan Belgian men with Belgian values and habits, a different pattern appears. While “Western” behaviour of Moroccan Belgian women is mostly rejected by men, for themselves, Moroccan Belgian young men perceive this more readily as something normal and even as a reinforcement of their masculinity:

Yes, we are among boys, everybody smokes. That is normal, I start smoking. Or when I go out, everybody starts drinking and I will start drinking, because I am a boy. A girl cannot do that. [M-2(2)]

When you go out with a boy, you have to get engaged immediately because otherwise you do not follow the norms of Muslims. So I know that mostly all Moroccan girls keep it secret when they have a boyfriend, but for boys... No, they take their girlfriends home, we eat together and then... But that is a boy, right. [W-6(3)]

Here it becomes clear how the negotiation of two worlds consists of a very complex process, as well as how gender is at work in dealing with this struggle. To elaborate on this, we focus

on the different ways in which youths understand the practice of veiling. Considering the veil as an important religious symbol, the youths value it only when it arises from a woman's own choice, when it is worn with respect and it is in relation to God. In this way, the veil appears as a symbol of autonomy and authenticity. For that reason they strongly reject women who veil out of fashion or docility towards their father, boyfriend or other persons:

The veil, for me, that is between her and God. If she wants to veil, then she can. But my wife does not really have to veil, as long as she has respect for me and for herself. [M-5(4)]

There are girls who veil because they are obliged, girls who veil for boys, girls who think it is fashion. They just play with it.... And then you have girls who veil for God.' [W-6(2)]

These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g. Ekström et al., 2020) in which the practice of veiling appeared to be the result of a woman's deliberate choice and understanding of her religion rather than an act of submission. The most striking understanding, however, appears when the veil is combined with "Western" gender perceptions. The fact that Moroccan Belgian women start behaving according to Belgian culture is not received well by participating youths. This is particularly the case when they veil in order to conceal a certain "Western" behaviour. So, not only do Moroccan Belgian youths reject the hypocrisy of veiling, they also express an understanding of the veil as a symbol of Western decadence, thereby inverting the imagery of the veil as a symbol of suppression as often proclaimed by Western media.

I prefer a woman who is serious, dresses normally and doesn't veil, than a Moroccan woman who veils and is a first-class slut. [M-4(3)]

It seems as if nowadays the veil is the passport to offer assurance to the father at home, but outside the home it is like: "Hurray, party!" [W-1(3)]

In the foregoing quotes, a quite remarkable connotation linking the veil with the image of a Moroccan woman as a whore comes to the fore. Here it appears as if there is an implicit rejection of "Western" norms and values, which are considered as a stain on Islam. The ambiguous position of the veil provides an indication of the struggle of Moroccan Belgian youths – and especially women – in managing two worlds. It reflects how gender is at work in the marking of borders and acts as a mobilising force for groups to identify themselves in an ethnic or religious way and/or to oppose themselves to other groups:

If girls are from our culture, then I like it if she dresses respectfully. But if she is from another culture, I do not mind because she is not from our culture. They do not have the same values and norms as us, so she can do whatever she wants. [M-5(1)]

The above quote clearly shows an "us-them thinking", whereby "their culture" is strongly opposed to "our culture" and gender appears as a specific response to deal with this struggle. Though, it also shows that for these young people, veiling is above all a conscious individual choice and that their main focus is on values that go beyond the superficial.

### ***Dominant representations: Between powerlessness and resistance***

As mentioned in the introduction, the relationship between minority and majority groups is strongly dominated by certain representations in public debates, whereby the minority group is often stereotyped, mostly in a gender-based way. Participants are aware of the existing stereotypes in Belgian society and some of them are confronted with these almost daily:

Moroccan and Muslim men as criminals, terrorists and extremists, and Moroccan and Muslim women as oppressed are only a few of the gender-based stereotypes that are frequently encountered by the youths:

Moroccan men with a beard and women with a veil who stay home and take care of the children, have to cook and cannot go out to work; that is the stereotype we see. [M-2(1)]

These stereotypes give rise to different feelings and reactions. The diversity of responses reflects a tension between understanding, internalisation and powerlessness on the one hand and indignation, anger and resistance on the other hand. During all focus groups, Moroccan Belgian youths seemed to understand how these stereotypes arise and why they exist. Some youths even go further indicating that they can imagine why Belgians become racist:

In Brussels, they do, they steal. It is normal that Belgians afterwards... Sometimes I agree. Sometimes there are Moroccans who are really bad and therefore Belgians become racist against Moroccans and I also agree with that. [M-5(7)]

When they speak about this form of understanding, they are not speaking from an identification with this group. They seem to distance themselves from this group and they regret the extrapolation of this image to themselves and other Moroccan Belgians:

I would say I am part of the Moroccans, but I do not necessarily feel like the Moroccans who are portrayed everywhere in our society. So, when they say: "Moroccans are aggressive", I say: "Yes, that is true when you see what is happening on the street, but there are also Moroccan people who are not aggressive." [M-5(1)]

The above described understanding attitude towards existing stereotypes reveals something more. Some youths have started to internalise these negative images. They adopt the words of others and start to speak about themselves in stereotypes.

Existing stereotypes might also lead to a feeling of powerlessness. Moroccan Belgian youths state that they do not know how to deal with these one-sided representations in the belief that in the end they cannot do anything about them. Certainly in the context of school, they express a feeling of powerlessness as the school assumes a specific hierarchical relation between pupil and teacher, wherein the latter sometimes abuses his or her hierarchical position.

The media plays an important role in these stereotypes, they only show bad images of Moroccans, of migrants. So what can we do? [M-2(1)]

I was walking upstairs with another girl and there were two girls wearing those long clothes and then she [cf. the teacher] said: "Oops, she didn't take her bathrobe off yet" [...] We absolutely do not think that is funny, but we nod and smile, because you cannot say anything, it will be always the word of the teacher against mine. [W-3(1)]

On the other hand, a highly indignant attitude towards these dominant representations prevails. Youths express feeling hurt, angry or being outraged. Among some male youths a kind of hyper-masculine culture appears, whereby male characteristics are fortified as a reaction towards stereotyping. Other youths realise, however, that this masculine behaviour is not always an appropriate reaction as it might strengthen certain stereotypes. In this way, there occurs a double bind in their reactions; if they become angry, they reinforce the existing stereotypes; if they do nothing, the stereotypes will remain. This double bind again

contributes to a feeling of powerlessness. This reflects how Moroccan Belgian youths are continuously moving in this tension and how the two sides of this tension are interwoven.

Some of the youths adopt a more passive resistance strategy, namely one of ignorance. Being convinced that they cannot do anything about the stereotypes in circulation, they rather keep their cool instead of getting agitated.

You cannot do anything about it. The only thing, if you really want to kill them, is stay calm and cool. [M-4(3)]

Some youths display a resistance strategy that takes the form of confirming and reinforcing existing stereotypes. They believe that if people perceive them in a certain way, they can better behave accordingly. Another resistance strategy along the same lines is one of becoming stronger in their religion.

Because we are so stereotyped, some people will behave like that, but that is more the case with boys than with girls. They think: "Oh, whatever, in the eyes of the Belgians I am a criminal anyway, so I will really do it, then it fits. [W-1(1)]

A final noticeable resistance strategy is one of mockery. In their way of speaking, some youths reveal a humorous attitude to these stereotypes and to prominent people who stereotype them. By means of mockery, they seem to put things into perspective and find a way to deal with hurtful stereotypes.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

We started this article from the observation that, in spite of the attention in public debate, research into the lived experiences of Muslim youths regarding their gender identity remains an emerging area. By conducting focus groups with Moroccan Belgian youths we aimed to explore their lived experiences of gender identity. In this final part, we provide some concluding remarks by recapitulating the three main themes of our findings. We also make some suggestions for future research, to end with a brief discussion about the limitations of our research.

First, our data affirm that gender identity is dynamically constructed through different contexts such as family, school, religion and society, which all intertwine. In this way, our findings provide empirical evidence for a dynamic approach of studying gender identity. However, there seems to be something more at stake, as the relation between minority and majority groups has an impact on the construction of gender identity. In our findings we described how gender acts as a mobilising force in the negotiation of two worlds. For Moroccan Belgian youths, gender is at work in the symbolic marking of boundaries. Certain practices and perceptions concerning gender (e.g. virginity, smoking, alcohol use, veiling) are used to legitimate borders and to differentiate with another ethnic or religious group – in this case represented by a mainly secular Belgian society – that does not share the same perceptions. These findings are reminiscent of the 'Occidentalism' mechanism as described earlier (Buruma & Avishai, 2004), whereby Moroccan Belgian youths reject "Western" values and behaviour as dissolute, frivolous or decadent. This results in a representation of their own gender identity as more modest, pure and decent. Further research might be useful to deepen these mechanism in relation to the construction of gender identity. Regarding the way in which Moroccan Belgian youths deal with dominant representations in public debate, we described a tension between powerlessness and resistance. Concerning powerlessness, our data revealed a process of internalisation of negative representations. This can be related to the concept of social mirroring (Doucet & Suarez Orozco, 2006), which states that people are dependent on the reflection of themselves mirrored by the majority group. In the case of Moroccan Belgian youths, our study revealed that this reflection is generally negative. Confronted with a negative image, they start to recognise themselves in

it and internalise it as a negative collective identity. Future research should investigate this issue in relation to the construction of gender identity. This is also the case for further research into resistance strategies. Mir (2011), for example, describes how some young Muslim women decide to unveil to protect themselves from racism and symbolic violence, while other women explicitly start veiling to express their Muslim identity and to make themselves more confident. Along the same lines, Archer (2001) states that masculinity can be influenced by a shared solidarity against racism, as resistance to whiteness.

When it comes to enhancing our understanding of how gender-sensitive support systems can be developed in the context of migration, we can conclude that gender identity is constructed in a much more complex way than dominant discourses would suggest. Our findings reveal that gender identity is not only actively constructed within and through different contexts, but also within and through minority and majority relations as well as processes of stereotyping. In the debate on gender-sensitive support, we therefore call for a dynamic approach to gender identity, taking into account its constitutive role in the struggle between minority and majority groups.

Some limitations of our research have to be taken into consideration. As mentioned earlier, the fact that the research was conducted by two Flemish women belonging to a majority group in Belgium has inevitably influenced the interaction in the focus groups as well as the data analysis. Therefore, the knowledge produced through the focus groups should always be situated within the racialised and gendered interactions between researchers and participants (Archer, 2001). For that reason, we initially wanted to organise both homogenous and mixed focus groups, but due to both the wishes of the participants and unforeseen drop-out, we were unable to conduct mixed groups. Mixed focus groups and/or focus groups led by male researchers could be interesting tracks for future research. Lastly, we have to be aware of a possible bias due to the issue of self-selection of participants. Here the question arises as to which youths were willing to participate and which were not.

#### **Declaration of conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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