

## Islam and Gender in Europe

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### **Abstract**

Europe is today home to major Muslim populations because of a modern history in which the Ottoman presence over a part of the continent was accompanied by colonial domination of European powers, with its subsequent effects on economic migrations. Here we will examine three aspects of the relation between gender, Islam, and Europe. First, we will concentrate on the systems of representation built by European cultural elites with respect to Muslims, as well as their variation according to class, race, and gender. Second, we will broach the policies of nation states toward their Muslim populations, which have fluctuated between assimilation and stigmatization depending on the period and location, in addition to the responses of Muslim elites who juggled between religion-based community building and integration within broader national communities. Finally, we will concentrate on the ability to act of Europe's Muslims, which is reflected in the variety of their gender discourses and practices.

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### **Article**

During the beginning of the modern period, there were substantial Muslim populations in the territories of Southeastern Europe under Ottoman sovereignty, stemming from both conversions and immigration. Even though some Muslims were massacred or driven out subsequent to Istanbul's military defeats, major Muslim populations remained in the Balkan nation states established after 1878. Almost forgotten by Western Europe during the Cold War, when these populations lived mostly on the other side of the Iron Curtain, they were rediscovered in the late twentieth century, first as victims of ethnic cleansing and rape during the Yugoslav Wars, and then after September 11 as a European bridgehead suspected of global Islamic terrorism. In the states of Western and Central Europe, the Muslim presence came later, and grew only after 1945 as a result of economic immigration, which most often took the routes connecting former colonies and metropolises. Initially essentially male, this presence began to be feminized starting in the 1970s, thanks to family reunification as well as independent female migratory projects.

Since at least the nineteenth century, intellectuals, politicians, and artists from European societies built a system of representations aiming to imagine Europe and the Muslim Middle East as opposing

civilizational spaces. This differentialist discourse, referred to as *orientalist*, was based on the supposed superiority of the West, which was the land of progress and rationality, as opposed to the world of immobility and superstition. The imprisonment of women in the dual prison of the harem and the veil, or their submission through the institution of polygamy, were considered the most evident expression of their archaic gender relations. This representation of the East was also forged from a widespread sexual imagination—debauched and seductive women, and excessively virile and violent, or on the contrary effeminate, men—erected as a counter-model to the “healthy” family life of European bourgeoisies. In this antagonistic hierarchy that was conceived of in terms of race, the Muslims of South-Eastern Europe—at least those that spoke European languages such as Albanian, Bulgarian, and Serbo-Croatian—nevertheless occupied an ambiguous position halfway between civilization and barbarism.

This system of representations, which crystallized during the nineteenth century as an apparatus for legitimizing European domination, remained operational after decolonization, including with respect to the continent’s Muslims. It influenced the policies of European states toward the Muslim populations, which always hesitated between assimilation and stigmatization. In South-Eastern Europe, and especially in Albania, Turkey, and Bulgaria, governments conducted campaigns starting in the 1920s against wearing the veil and in support of schooling for girls, in the name of both women’s liberation and especially the integration of Muslims within the national community. In response, Muslim intellectuals and politicians debated via the “woman question” how to transform gender relations within their communities, juggling religion-based projects with a desire to integrate what was referred to at the time as “European civilization.”

The challenging of Muslim gender norms grew with regime changes and the implementation of “real socialism” in the East. Muslim family law, which had previously been maintained under the jurisdiction of Islamic law tribunals, was abolished in the name of equality between labourer-citizens. It was a period marked by isolation, the secularization of customs, and, when it did endure, a privatization of religious practice.

While the fall of the Wall brought about new religious liberty in South-Eastern Europe at the turn of the twenty-first century, enabling among other things the wearing of the veil in the public sphere, on the contrary its total or partial ban was debated in Western Europe. The traditional arguments—liberating women, integrating Muslims—were joined by a security-related discourse resulting from the fear of Islamic terrorism that marked all European societies. These discussions led to the ban of the full veil in six European countries: France and Belgium (2010), Latvia and Bulgaria (2016), Austria (2017), and Denmark (2018).

The idea that Muslim women were intrinsically oppressed surfaced regularly in debates surrounding

the integration of populations stemming from immigration, sometimes even within the feminist movement. The stereotypes associated with uncontrolled Muslim masculinity have also proven surprisingly enduring, for instance the vague fears sparked by young men from European suburbs, or more recently the refugees crossing the Mediterranean or the Balkans, who are always associated by the press with the threat of aggression ranging from rape to terrorism (see for example the press discourse following the 2016 New Year's assault in Cologne). These stereotypes went along with others, visible for example in pornography—see the success of the *interracial*, *Arab*,  *beurette*, and  *beur* categories on specialized online portals—which make Muslim bodies into objects of over-sexualization in European imaginations, both heterosexual and homosexual.

The Muslims of Europe, concerned about becoming the object of security, migratory, and demographic anxieties, engaged in community networks and social movements that were simultaneously rooted in the specificities of the various European countries of residence, while being open to the ideas and practices from the Maghreb and the Middle East. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the circulations and exchanges—in the direction of extra-European Muslim societies, but also between the Muslims of Western and South-Eastern Europe—have resumed with greater intensity than ever. On the one hand, Islamic movements, sometimes financed by states (Arabia, Turkey, countries of the Maghreb) or linked to transnational movement (Muslim Brotherhood, *Salafiyya*, *Gülen*), advocate strict observation of the wearing of the veil and the segregation of the two sexes. At the same time, these movements offer women new forms of engagement in the public sphere, in the name of building a society based on Islam. On the other hand, some, like the French-Algerian activist Houria Bouteldja (born 1973), have engaged more in the antiracist and anticolonial struggle, by seeking to denounce the contradictions of a proclaimed universalism, with its white, Christian, and middle-class character. In their diversity, a galaxy of women—the German lawyer Seyran Ateş (born 1963), the French sociologist Zahra Ali, the Bosnian academic Zilka Spahić-Šiljak—have become voices for what can be referred to as Muslim or Islamic feminism. They propose female emancipation based on a non-patriarchal interpretation of Islamic sources and they held their first international congress in Barcelona in 2005. With regard to LGBT movements, there are also groups of isolated Muslim figures—for instance Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed (born 1977), an openly homosexual imam behind France's first gay-friendly mosque, or the Open Center for civil rights in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The politicization of Muslim identities is therefore anything but homogenous, as it takes on different forms based on class, nation, gender, sexuality, and political convictions.

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