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Experience and Expectations of Muslim Gender Roles in the Baltics: The “Subaltern” Voices in the Face of Public Discourse[1]

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ABSTRACT: Women of Muslim background living in the Baltics, like others, are often confronted with images of perceived gender roles in Muslim communities and societies. But they, unlike non-Muslims, have their own take on these images, partially stemming from their personal experiences and religious convictions but also as responses, sometimes unrealised, to the public discourse. Through their narrations, these women, using their own examples, apparently seek to deconstruct the images of gender relations among Muslims. On the other hand, it is mainly through mass media that ordinary citizens become familiarised with the cultural traditions and habits of distant societies. In the Baltics, much of the reporting on Muslim societies and cultures is conducted by journalists who often lack an informed understanding of the complex realities of the societies they report on. Reports on sensitive issues, such as gender relations and sexuality among Muslims, are especially in demand. Based on in-depth interviews, the present paper shows the plethora of positions women of Muslim background living in the Baltics can hold related to Islam and gender roles and compares how their positions oppose or conform to the images held in the public and recycled in the media.

KEYWORDS: Muslim Women, Lithuania, Latvia, Islam, Gender Roles, Gender Relations.

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> *Dilija: Anyway, there is a perception that women in Islam are very oppressed.*
> *But, in fact, you won't believe, everything is totally the opposite. They are free.*
> *[…]*
> *Interviewer: And whose word is the last in the family?*
> *Dilija: The husband's.*
> *Interviewer: When solving various questions...?*
> *Dilija: The husband's.*[2]

Introduction

Women of Muslim background[3] living in the Baltics, like others, are often confronted with images of perceived gender roles in Muslim communities and societies. But they, unlike non-Muslims, have their own take on these images, partially stemming from their personal experiences and religious convictions but also as responses, sometimes unrealised, to the public discourse. Through their narrations, these women, using their own examples, apparently seek to deconstruct the images of gender relations among Muslims.

On the other hand, it is mainly through mass media that ordinary citizens become familiarised with the cultural traditions and habits of distant societies. In the Baltics, much of the reporting on Muslim societies and cultures is done by journalists who often lack an informed understanding of the complex realities of the societies they report on. Reports on sensitive issues, such as gender relations and sexuality among Muslims, are especially in demand. Based on in-depth interviews, the present paper shows the plethora of positions women of Muslim background living in the Baltics can hold related to Islam and gender roles and compares how their positions oppose or conform to the images held in the public and recycled in the media.

As the Islamic researcher Roswita Badry aptly points out, women have been left out of Islamic research interests for a long time. Research was dominated by men at the beginning of the 20th century, and this lack of interest was largely because of the stereotypes that prevailed about the publicly invisible, supposedly passive Muslim woman, whose traces in history, religion and culture initially seemed imperceptible because attention was paid to the big data and facts of history – apparently the most important texts – and much less to history from below or social facts. These stereotypes were deeply rooted in the Christian-influenced world (Badry 2003, 209). Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a growing emphasis on exploring not just issues of gender but also incorporating women's perspectives into research. Women's experiences are now spotlighted, particularly with the active participation of educated Muslim women in research, thus contributing to the development of Muslim feminist studies (Roald 2001, VIII). One of the most impressive reference works, offering a broad spectrum of scholarship on gender in Islam, is the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, published between 2003 and 2007. It introduces readers to gender-related issues in Islamic lands (Joseph 2003-2007). In the context of Europe, research tends to focus on Islam as a dual phenomenon – both ancient and emerging – placing special emphasis on the changes brought about by migration and gender, which stand as acute issues in intercultural interactions (Blaschke 2000; Glas 2023; Klingeren and Spierings 2020). In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to Islam in both the global and various local contexts, closely examining different Muslim cultures, particularly the lives of Muslim women in different parts of the world, through empirical methods. This approach has revealed diverse forms of female micropolitics, encompassing "organisation, institutionalisation, as well as representation and competition within and around the public sphere" (Klein-Hessling et al 2015, 14, 18). Our study is also aimed at contributing to the understanding of the micropolitics of local Muslim women – their strategies, challenges and understandings of gender within the Muslim community – in the context of Lithuanian and Latvian society.

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[2] Language editor's note: all quotations from the interviews have been unofficially translated into English and, therefore, in order to preserve their most proximate meaning, no modifications have been made to them.

[3] In this article, rather than using the common 'Muslims,' the concept 'people of Muslim background' – which covers practicing Muslims as well as those who do not practice their (inherited) religion, including factual apostates – is employed.

Methodologically, the research has a double nature. First, it is based on 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews[4] (conducted in Lithuanian and Latvian) with female respondents (all natives in the respective countries), ten in Lithuania and five in Latvia. Of the ten Lithuanian women interviewed, five are converts, and five are Muslim-born (four Tatars and one Arab-Lithuanian). One of the converts has already apostatised (and considers herself an atheist), and one of the Muslim-born Tatars has been baptised and identifies herself as an Orthodox Christian. All five converts and one Tatar have previously had foreign husbands (and some still do), while some have also had an earlier non-Muslim husband. Seven of the interviewed women have children, some with their previous non-Muslim husbands. Two of the Lithuanian converts currently reside abroad (in the UK and Turkey), and one has also lived in Tunisia. The Arab-Lithuanian woman has had extensive exposure to Middle Eastern society. Of the five Latvian women interviewed, four are converts, and one was born into a convert family. Four are married to foreign husbands, and one previously had a non-Muslim husband. Four have school-age children. Though they all currently live in Latvia, two live part-time in Pakistan, and three have lived for long periods in the USA and Germany.

In the Latvian context, when inviting women to converse, the interviewer faced some degree of mistrust as soon as the word "interview" came up, which had to be overcome. Thus, when making contact, the interviewee was carefully ensured that these interviews were not intended for the press, where the information provided might be used to reflect negatively on the lives of Muslims. A recent incident may have heightened the atmosphere of mistrust: a young woman came into the Latvian Muslim community, showed interest in it and was invited to a community member's home. This woman turned out to be a TV journalist, and the footage of this meeting, captured via hidden camera, ended up on a TV program.[5] The research participants mentioned this event several times in off-the-record conversations.

The other methodological prong of this research is critical discourse analysis: tracing the prevailing images of gender relations among Muslims in national mainstream (online) media. Language choices and social and ideological assumptions were analysed in several texts written about Islam and gender within it. This analysis covers the past two decades, starting in late 2001 when public attention to Islam and its followers increased dramatically in both countries following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent occupation of Afghanistan by the US-led military coalition. Due to space constraints and the focus of the present research, this research does not provide a comprehensive picture of how local media discourses in Lithuania and Latvia present gender relations and roles among Muslims; this would require a separate research project. Therefore, what is presented below is a schematic explication based on a cursory survey of the online material of mainstream Lithuanian and Latvian online media –

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[4] The number of interviews was determined in the project proposal and is proportional to the number of interviews with women of other faiths.

[5] This concerns the broadcast on Latvian Public Television 'Aizliegtais paņēmiens: Operācija sieviete islāmā,' which was first aired on 18 January 2016.

that is, the contemporary 'national online newspapers' – representations of gender relations and roles among Muslims.[6]

This analysis of the relevant interview content against the backdrop of the prevailing images of Muslim gender relations found in the media provides a more comprehensive picture of the overlaps and contrasts in the image-making of Muslim gender relations by the two groups of actors.

Muslims on the Eastern Shore of the Baltic Sea: A Historical Note

The history of Islam in the region dates to the 14th century, when the first migrants – political refugees – from the Golden Horde (and later the Crimean Khanate) came to what was then known as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Račius and Bairašauskaitė 2016). Soon, they were joined by new arrivals, consisting chiefly of mercenaries hired by Lithuanian grand dukes and other refugees and prisoners of war who, once freed, chose to stay. The immigrants, a majority of whom were recently Islamised Turkic speakers (eventually called "Lipka" (Lithuanian) Tatars), settled in the Northwestern parts of the Duchy, mainly in village communities around the capital Vilnius. Despite, or because of, the fact that Muslims were only a tiny minority of the population of the Duchy,[7] they enjoyed most of the rights and freedoms that Christian citizens did. Throughout the centuries, with some exceptions during the Counter-Reformation, Lithuanian Tatars were allowed to publicly observe Islamic duties and rituals (Račius 2017). It is believed that mosques on the then-territory of the Grand Duchy were being built as early as the late 14th or the beginning of the 15th century (Račius 2018).

In interwar independent Lithuania, the Muslim population still comprised mainly Tatars. However, the numbers had been drastically reduced (the number hovered around 1,100) because Muslims living in Vilnius and the surrounding areas became citizens of Poland, which controlled the Vilnius region until the end of 1939 (Račius 2014). In the Soviet period, due to anti-religious state policies, Muslim communal life came to a virtual standstill despite a significant influx (in the tens of thousands) of people of Muslim background from the Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia. When Lithuania regained independence in the early 1990s, the Lithuanian Muslim Tatar community regained its surviving mosques and revived its communal activities (Račius 2022).

The history of the presence of Muslims in the territory of Latvia is quite different from that of Lithuania. Though Muslims (mainly Volga Tatar immigrants and other Muslims decommissioned from the Russian Tsarist army) started arriving and settling in Russian-ruled Latvia in the second part of the 19th century, the first Muslim congregation in Riga was established only in 1902 (Račius and Ščerbinskis 2012). By World War I, due to internal migration, it had grown to around 1,000 members, but by 1920, the Muslim presence in (by then, independent) Latvia, due to emigration during and immediately after the war, had shrunk to a mere 150 and further declined to about 60 by 1935.

Today, most Latvian Muslims are the settlers and their descendants from the Soviet period when scores of people from the Soviet Central Asian and Caucasus republics and the Volga region moved to the Baltics. The last Soviet census of 1989 reported more than 12,000 people of Muslim background (Tatars, Azeris, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, etc.) living in Soviet Latvia, although most did not practice Islam. Several chose to leave after Latvia regained independence in the early 1990s (Ščerbinskis 1998).

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[6] For Lithuania, these include delfi.lt, alfa.lt, lrytas.lt; for Latvia: delfi.lv, tvnet.lv, la.lv, lsm.lv. Besides that, we also use some of the publications that seemed important as original texts and are still available on the internet, for example, the research of Ringolds Balodis and Valters Ščerbinskis. For this analysis, we chose 30 publications of diverse types – interviews, reports and original research articles.

[7] Though precise data is not available, it can be safely assumed that at no time in history did the Muslim population of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania exceed 100,000 individuals.

Being Muslim the Baltic Way Today: A Socio-Demographic Background

Though people of Muslim cultural background comprise a small share of today's Lithuanian and Latvian populations, there is nonetheless a wide diversity among them. In Lithuania, people of Muslim cultural background fall into four broad categories: autochthon Tatars, Soviet-era colonists[8] (from the Caucasus, inner Russia and Central Asia), more recent expatriates and local converts to Islam. In Latvia, only the last three categories make up the local population of people of Muslim cultural background.

The sole source for demographic and statistical (though not necessarily reliable) information on Lithuania's Muslim population is the official census carried out every decade, which routinely includes a question on religion. The 2021 population census recorded 2,165 self-identified Lithuanian residents as Sunni Muslims (Statistics Lithuania n.d.a). No official public data is available on Muslim groups other than Sunnis, as the published census results only include them (as an officially recognised "traditional" faith community in the country). There is, however, a more than 500-person-strong Azerbaijani community (Statistics Lithuania n.d.b), some of whom may be (at least nominal) Twelver Shi'is. There are also several dozen Shi'i immigrants from Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, but no specific Shi'i congregation or registered religious organisation exists. Of the total number of Sunni Muslims in 2021, just over half (1,128) were ethnic Tatars, while over a fifth (451) were ethnic Lithuanians; there were 239 Sunni Azerbaijanis and 86 Sunni ethnic Russians.[9] Additionally, at the time of the census, there were 214 ethnic Kazakhs, 126 ethnic Uzbeks, 85 ethnic Chechens, 78 ethnic Turks and 48 ethnic Arabs residing in Lithuania (Statistics Lithuania n.d.b). Gender-wise, based on decades of personal observation, while the male-female ratio among autochthon Tatars and Soviet-era colonists appears equal, males dominate in the expatriate group and females in the local converts' segment.

No official data on the number of Muslims in Latvia is available, as its national census does not include a question on religious identity.[10] According to the Latvian Statistical Office, there were 1,832 ethnic Tatars, 1,516 ethnic Azerbaijanis, 1,227 ethnic Uzbeks, 292 ethnic Turks, 269 ethnic Kazakhs and 233 ethnic Tajiks living there in mid-2021; there were also around 700 people from Muslim-majority countries (Latvian Statistical n.d.). Many, if not most, of these people may have a Muslim cultural background. There also is a segment of ethnic Latvian and Russian converts to Islam, estimated at several hundred. If all the above groups were counted as people of Muslim cultural background, the total number would be just above 6,000. In the Latvian case, the gender distribution among its population of Muslim cultural background is similar to the Lithuanian: the male-female ratio among the Soviet-era colonists and their descendants, the overwhelming majority of people of Muslim background in the country, is roughly equal, and males dominate in the expatriate group and females in the local converts' segment.

However, figures covering individuals of Muslim cultural background do not coincide with the numbers of practising Muslims. Anecdotal evidence suggests that only a tenth of individuals of Muslim cultural background are devoted Muslims who regularly perform religious duties.

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[8] Internal mobility in the Soviet era was strictly controlled by the authorities.

[9] Private communication with an official at the Ministry of Justice, 2 January 2023.

[10] There are annual reports by the Ministry of Justice on religious organizations in Latvia. According to the 2021 report, there were eight registered Muslim communities with just over 150 members in Latvia (Zeile 2022).

The interviewed women represent a wide variety of religiousness – from what might be considered deep religiousness (conservative, revivalist, Salafi) to moderate (naturally, with its various shades) to shallow or even post-religiousness (in the case of apostasy). The mere fact of this diversity debunks the widely-held public trope that all Muslims are deeply devout and conservative. At the same time, the differences in their attachment to religion allow us to record the plethora of understandings and presentations of gender relations among Muslims.

The Presentation of Muslim Gender Relations and Roles in the Local Discourse

There is very little original analysis or reporting on Muslim societies and their cultures in either Lithuanian or Latvian mainstream media, which is due, in part, to a lack of correspondents based in Muslim-majority areas. Consequently, what might be seen as "original" reporting from the field is primarily based on the travel experiences of individual tourists or journalists. Translated reports and analyses of political issues dominate, with occasional translations on 'lived' Islam or pastimes in the Muslim world. There is a clear predominance of texts on political violence/terrorism. One of the observations for Latvia is that the articles published around the year 2000 are rather informative (e.g. presenting Islam as something new, as something still unknown that you need to learn about, or about Islam in the Baltics) (Balodis 1999; also, Reča 2004). These articles show much greater openness than those from 2015 and 2016, even from 2018. Against the backdrop of the refugee crisis, which began in 2015, various problematic tones emerged in publications.

In the Latvian case, one of the narratives repeated in publications is that the presence of Islam in the country will only increase. This is linked to the projected immigration of people of Muslim background. As early as 1999, lawyer Ringolds Balodis wrote: "So far, there are no religious refugees in Latvia, but taking into account that most refugees are from Islamic countries, it is expected that the 'issue of Islam' will become an issue in Latvia after a relatively short time." He predicted that those who adhere to the Islamic faith would not integrate into the existing culture. In his opinion, this is neither good nor bad but should be something the state takes into account, carrying out educational work to reduce tensions (Balodis 1999). In 2016, a national (LTV) program – and a publication based on it – found that the number of representatives of Islam in Europe (and Latvia) continued to grow due to immigration (No author 2016b). The rise of Islam is associated with uncertainty and fear about how it might influence society and its customs.[11] This is also amongst scholars; for example, in 2016, the online portal jauns.lv quoted Asian Studies Professor Leon Taivāns of the University of Latvia: "...any attempts to create an Islamic society or state in Latvia must be strictly controlled, ideally banned" (No author 2016a).

On the other hand, in the past two decades, dozens of texts on gender relations among Muslims (mainly focusing on gender roles, sexual behaviour and domestic violence) have been released in both countries' mainstream media. Concerning the presentation of gender relations and roles among Muslims, the dominant aspects are the alleged lack of rights or general agency for women, the obsession Muslim men have with sex and the issue of domestic violence in Muslim families.

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[11] That this is a sensitive issue is also shown by a short publication (that uses comments from the website formerly known as Twitter) on the fact that the inscription "halal" appeared on a package of food produced in Latvia. On the website, this fact, insignificant in its own way, appears under a title asking if this is "an invitation to representatives of the Islamic faith [to] settle down in Latvia?" According to this publication, the Twitter user wrote, "You know, I was completely angry. I don't understand what 'halal' has to do with pasta at all? Is wheat now slaughtered in Dobele according to Islamic traditions? (...) In my opinion, Latvia is not a country overrun by Muslims, where this type of information must be put on top of every package'" (Majevska 2020).

There are also reports on local women marrying Muslim men in the local media, and this category can be divided into two: reports on failed marriages and sour experiences, sometimes including quotes from the women concerned[12] and reports on success stories, often in the form of interviews with the women concerned.[13] The presentation of gender relations and roles differs starkly between these two types. In the first, Muslim men and their religion are vilified; in the second, it is quite the opposite, and both are often idealised. Even the presence of this second type in the mainstream local online media suggests that reporting on this issue is not entirely one-sided and that local audiences are exposed to alternative presentations of gender relations. It remains unknown, however, what share of audiences familiarise themselves with (and believe in) this content.

Let the Subaltern Speak: Muslim Gender Roles as They (Should) Work

The women in this research fall into two broad categories: Muslim-born and convert. One might expect that they have different starting points – Muslim-born women must have been brought up in a Muslim family environment, even if only nominally; converts lack the experience of having observed Muslim gender relations and family roles (however circumscribed, e.g. more by religious norms or cultural forms) in action in their families. Consequently, it might be expected that converts are more likely to have constructed images of these relations and roles based on outside material (like texts or other peoples' experiences) or their own experiences with their partners and peers. Another relevant aspect is that marriage to a foreign national has its own effect on the experiences and image-making of gender relations and roles among Muslims. The analysis below covers these aspects of gender relations and gender roles, first by showing what is dominant in the local Latvian and Lithuanian media, followed by what the interviewed women had to say about them.

Gender Equality

As indicated above, in the media and, by extension, the public discourse in Lithuania and Latvia, it is generally held that there is an ingrained and persistent lack of gender equality in Islam. The women of Muslim background who were interviewed were asked what they think about gender equality. Their replies constitute a range of differing positions. Some maintain a natural (God-decreed) difference between the sexes that warrants certain physical and social inequalities. Others do not see why physical differences should translate into social inequalities. Some distinguish between what the religion of Islam demands of men and women in terms of gender roles and the actual gender roles coming from cultural inertia in Muslim societies.

The very concept of "gender equality" seems to be problematic for some of the interviewed women: "If we talk about modern Western feminists, then they try to achieve this, let's say, equality, to a certain extent with men – that they have equal rights and that they can do everything equally" (Ilze, 51, convert). For some, there is too much emphasis on gender equality: "It is already heard more or less all around us. But to be honest, in my opinion, we also have to learn here in Latvia to let a woman be a woman and a man to be a man. Because considering we've had wars and all, then…and strong women. Then, in my opinion, it is much more difficult for a man in this society than a woman. Because women can do everything, want everything, and they achieve everything" (Valda, 35, convert).

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[12] For Lithuania: Stanislovaitis 2022; Kairytė 2022; for Latvia: LTV and lsm.lv, No author 2016b; Kalve 2016.

[13] For Lithuania: No author 2021; No author 2013; Rukaitė 2008; for Latvia: No author 2006; Kokarevičа 2016; -kura-izvelejusies-islamu-liga-fatima; No author 2017.

Some respondents held the position that physical and social differences (inequality) between men and women are natural (God-given). So, for instance, Julija (37, Muslim-born) argues, "The woman and the man, they can never be equal. Because men are the stronger sex and women are the weaker sex." This distinction is justified by a religious belief: "The man was created from the dirt and the woman was created from the man's rib. So how can we compare to each other if we are made of different substances?" Fatima (38, Muslim-born) reasons that for men, one expects "more stamina, responsibility, such a backbone that if he says it, he says it. And the woman, she is so flexible, gentle." Similarly, while striving for equality, Valda (35, convert) still asserts: "...it is said that man and woman are equal, but man is placed higher because he has to provide for the family, take care of the family."

For Erika (38, convert), with a relatively liberal attitude toward religious practices, however, it is not so much the equality that matters but the feeling of being oneself and free: "For me, it is not that, for example, that I am equal to a man, that my rights are equal to a man's. It doesn't matter. I can be significantly lower than him or have significantly higher rights, it is important for me that, with him, I feel myself and am free. That is important to me." Yet, some others, for instance, Yasira (22, Muslim-born), insist that the woman and the man should be equals. Aina (35, convert) believes that a woman should be able to cope with a stressful situation just as well as a man: "A woman can do what a man can do, and a man can do what a woman can do. Because no one can ever guarantee that a woman will not be left alone with three or four children."

Several informants believe that religiously, women and men are equal in Islam. They are equal in their religious practice – men and women hold prayers. "And that's why the home, practice at home, plus/minus is the same for everyone; if we pray five times a day, at least five times, that's mandatory. You can also do additional prayers, yes. That's right, it's fasting, whether you fast at home, let's say, it's not important. And what should be tried very hard, if practised, well, is reading the Quran, in other words, acquiring knowledge" (Baiba, 38, convert). It was noted that physiology plays a certain role here, though, because women do not pray or fast during menstruation and after giving birth. Menstruation is also indicated as an obstacle to a woman becoming an imam or being able to lead the prayer for men (Baiba). This assumption is not criticised; those who mention it at all also seem to accept this physiological "impurity" (Baiba, Ilze).[14]

The youngest research participant, Arta (18, Muslim-born), expresses the following opinion: "Overall, yes, I do feel equal. There are certain times where…for example, I would not go out at night, but my brother will…So there's these little things that sometimes make me feel like a kind of inequality, but then I remember it's to protect me because I'm a woman, so then I feel not. It's still equal." But even she emphasises women's equality: "For women in Islam, it's… they have complete equality to men. Some might say that they [women] are held in higher regard as well because there's this saying that a daughter is worth five sons. And, I think, that's [a] really good part for some, because you won't see this kind of equality in most places."

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[14] Purity is significant concept in Islam; bodily discharges are interpreted as follows: "menstrual blood, postpartum bleeding, and semen are regarded as primary ritual impurities (janāba), while gas, urine, and feces are deemed minor impurities (hadath asghar)" (Anwar 2023). Menstruation is a specific topic in Quranic exegesis, although it is mentioned in the Quran only once (Al-Baqarah 2:222), directing abstention from sexual relations during the menstrual period. In that context, menstruation is referred to as "adhā'," which can be variously translated as a "state of vulnerability," "harm" or "illness," leading to the understanding that a woman who is menstruating cannot take part in prayers and fasting. However, there are also more positive interpretations that emphasise that the Quran positively affirms women's sexuality (Anwar 2023). The understanding of menstruation and its associated restrictions is also a subject of discussion among Islamic feminists, who often evaluate this exclusion as discrimination associated with these issues (See Naguib 2009).

The spectrum of responses to the question on gender equality reveals that the interviewed women espouse varying positions; however, one commonality is that they embrace whatever their chosen image of gender (in)equality in Islam and among Muslims is, and they do not appear to question it. This is apparently natural in the case of the converts – after all, they consciously chose the religion. But for Muslim-born women, it also appears that they are comfortable with what they see as the Islamic explanation of gender differences and the ensuing inequalities, not only physical and physiological but also social.

Gender Roles

The question of gender roles emerges out of the question of gender equality. Most interviewed women espouse traditional (apparently patriarchal) views on gender roles, which they incidentally identify with Islamic norms. For instance, Julija sees that "the man is the woman's protection. She is more protected. Because the woman is more of a housekeeper and child raiser. And the man, in Islam, is more like a receiver, the one who receives money, where he plays his masculine role, makes decisions. Because in our Islam, the man is the head of the family, the woman is already created to make life easier for the man, to put it simply. […] And the woman has to fulfil her duties as a woman – she has to look after the house, raise children." She further argues that "the husband's main duty is to provide for the family. It is he who must earn well in order to maintain and cover the needs of the family. […] And the main duty of the woman is to raise children and […] to do everything to make her husband happy. […] The woman has to adapt and do what pleases the husband. Because her main duty, as I say, is to make, well, her husband happy. If he is happy, then the woman will also be happy in marriage."

Khadija (44, convert) also ascertains that "It is the man's duty to provide for his family, and, for example, to be good to his family; the woman's duty is to take care of the house, children, to listen to her husband, not to rebel, of course, if everything is... from the man's side, if he does not exceed the obligations of Islam... There is a verse there that the man is a step higher than the woman."[15] Indrė's (34, convert) reasoning is similar: "The woman, well, she plays a very important role in society, because she is the basis of the family. Children [too], women are also mainly responsible for raising children." Khadija also insists that women play a significant role in society because of their role in the family: "She is a mother, a wife, a sister. The main child educator, teacher, protector of the family, the harmony and well-being of the family depend on her. And anyway, in Islam, it is strictly recommended for a woman to stay at home with her family, and if she is engaged in some kind of social activity, there should be also appropriate conditions – so that she does not mix with male strangers, so that it is in a more segregated environment." Fatima's position echoes this when she argues that one of the duties of the wife is "to cherish her husband's wealth. We usually have a tradition that men go to work, they are obliged to provide for the family. Not only for the wife, but also for the children, so they devote most of their time to their work. Therefore, it is the woman's duty to take care of what the man brings home. He doesn't demand the same from her that he does. There is simply an agreement that she supervises. To protect, to take care of, to clean, to maintain order. And for everyone to have peace and harmony." Dilija's (36, Muslim-born) position, though generally in line with that of the women quoted above, has a specific twist as, according to her, "[t] he woman, she, you understand, causes, how to say here, she is responsible for the family atmosphere, for cosiness. The man is responsible for providing for the family. […] And a woman only for cosiness."

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[15] Khadija is likely alluding to the Quranic verse found in Surah An-Nisa 4:34, which discusses the authority of men over women based on the provisions granted by Allah and their responsibility for financial support. The verse is problematic in Islamic discourse, as it can imply that beating one's wives is a form of discipline, and it is a context where belief in hierarchical gender roles is widespread (both among scholars and the devout), which we also see from our interviews. A broad and detailed study on this issue can be found in Chaudhry (2013).

As evidenced by the above quotes, the interviewees represent the opinion that each gender has its own role – men are given more to do in the public sphere while supporting the family, whereas women's first task is the home. Though a woman can work and hold leadership positions, this should not be the first thing in her life. The popular justification for this division of roles is the physiological and psychological differences between women and men; for example, women are more emotional and, therefore, more easily drained at work, which means the public sphere, with all its problems, is not meant for women – they have to be protected from taking part in it (Baiba, Ilze). As Ilze argues, "[t]he idea why women should not be in these positions is that they are more emotional than men sometimes. And for them, let's say, that burden, that burden of negativity – maybe God wants to protect us from it."[16]

On the other hand, looking at personal experience, all the Latvian and some of the Lithuanian women emphasise that they would like to work or are currently working. For instance, Valda admits that life at home does not satisfy her: "Well, in my opinion, there should also be a woman who, living at home, cooking, cleaning and taking children everywhere, only feels good about it. Because somehow I got bored."

When it comes to who has the last word at home, most admit that their husbands are dominant and that they would submit to their husbands' decisions: "Every ship needs a captain" (Ilze). Baiba and Arta add that a husband's decision must be reasonable enough to accept. Aina, describing her personal situation, explains that "[f]or me, my husband is the boss, as I said, both at home and at work, because he simply likes being the boss, and I don't think that it is, from us, related to religion or from culture, but the relationship is already, that's the way it is, that one accepts, and the other kind of adapts, and so on." Yet, some women emphasise that decisions in the family are made by mutual agreement.

There are also those critical of a strict division of roles by gender. Šarūnė (38, convert) identifies as a conservative Muslim and, notably, argues that "a woman can actually do a lot if she manages to bond with and marry a man who is not controlling. Literally, I think that because, again, that control depends on the man's personality. If he wants to control, then he can open a text in Islam or basis on which to base it. But if he does not want to control, then the text does not oblige him to control." She further reasons that "taken generally, the division of labour, I would say, is so traditional patriarchal, I would say, not really related to on Islam. Such smoke common to all societies in which we are."

Although the husband is seen as the family's leader, the interviewed women reject the idea that the husband has the right to demand that his wife does all the housework. The Prophet Muhammad himself serves as an example: he lived a modest life, was able to take care of himself, respected his wives and was always making decisions in consultation with them (Baiba, Dilija). The interviewees emphasise that housework is divided (Ilze, Aina, Dilija, Julija), though still ultimately on the woman's shoulders; they expect their husband to be involved in the housework and raising the children: "Essentially, the husband must participate in raising [the] children and help[ing] one's wife with housework" (Valda). Fatima is blunt on the division of labour around household chores in her home: "If I prepare the food, then it's certainly 100 per cent that the [my] husband will wash all the dishes. I will surely not wash. Because I cooked, put everything in order there, everything else." Julija intimates that "a couple of months ago, we had a calendar showing when someone was on duty. And who and when is on duty in the kitchen, who and when washes the dishes, who – one day me, the next day the [my] husband, another day the [my] daughter."

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[16] It is interesting that similar arguments were used in the public debate held on 3-4 June 2016 at the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, in which the ordination of women was abolished, arguing in favour of the assumption that women cannot be a pastor – women are too emotional, therefore the position of a pastor is too heavy, and she should be protected from this heavy burden. This assumption is not supported by the newest psychological studies (Weigard et al 2021).

Some of the interviewed women clearly distinguish between Islamic requirements and cultural practices. So, for instance, Khadija finds cultural traditions to be the problem when it comes to gender roles. Likewise, Erika argues, "There is Islam and there is a purely cultural thing, Arab cultural matter. My husband was a complete Arab who did nothing at home because he was brought up that way. So, I used to try in the beginning like, well, I don't know, I would order him, I would say 'go vacuum clean [the floor]' there, he would say 'if my mother sees that I am vacuum cleaning, her heart will stop.'" Yasira, having observed gender roles in the households of her relatives in the Middle East, is adamant that it is not right that women do all chores and practically serve men. She would instead follow the example of her parents, who divide household chores, and both proactively engage in them.

Domestic Violence

One of the thornier issues in gender relations, and certainly not only among people of Muslim background, is domestic violence, which in Latvia and Lithuania is experienced by more than a fifth of women (the overwhelming majority of whom are non-Muslim) (WHO 2018). Yet one of the topics perpetuated by local media is the idea of the brutality of Muslim men and the submissive reaction of Muslim women. The interviewed women, practically in unison, are against husbands' raising their hands against wives and maintain that domestic violence is a breach of Islamic rules. Fatima even sees domestic violence as a good enough reason for filing for divorce – "She can file for divorce immediately. She can initiate because of domestic violence" – but admits that "usually the woman is silent, she doesn't say anything. Because she is afraid of being condemned by society, that she might be a bad wife, disobedient. She is immediately afraid to stick such labels on herself. So, usually, the woman does not say."

On the other hand, a few of the interviewed women justify certain types of violence against women, which, in this view, appears to be condoned in the Quran (4:34). For instance, Khadija maintains that the striking (*daraba*) spoken of in 4:34, rather than being an endorsement of heavy beating, is meant more like a warning sign for the woman to come back to her senses: "Well, and what is that beating, that is, well, as a sign for the woman. ...That is just a gentle strike. A sign that everything is over, that all means have been exhausted, that the next step will be divorce." She sees the verse as a simple confirmation that men have a certain weakness: "I understand that this is a sort of weakness of masculinity, let's say. It, that weakness of masculinity, is recognised, that men are like that, that they are, well, maybe less patient. This is true. There is such a weakness, it is recognised and it must be limited and that's it." Similarly, Indrė also finds this Quranic verse to be more of a limiting than permitting: "I, for example, understand that it is at the same time a prohibition to do something more – whether to hit, to hit with a fist, or to push or to kick."

Julija, though she is also of the opinion that domestic violence among Muslims is prohibited, has no qualms about women being sentenced to capital punishment when she reasons that "there are countries where they live according to the Quran, well, Sharia, and it is allowed to kill a woman for her unfaithfulness to her husband, for example, by stoning. It's allowed because it's, well, I don't know if you can say it so here, it is violence, but it's your punishment for your sin, which is sanctioned by the Quran."

Sex and Reproductive Rights

As indicated above, sex and sexuality among Muslims feature prominently in the local media's reporting on Muslim gender relations. The interviewed women's perspectives on sex varied, usually correlating with their level of religiousness – the less religious women appear to be more liberal about sex. For example, in Lithuania, Yasira has a non-Muslim boyfriend with whom she has intimate relations. She admits that Islam forbids premarital sex but does not personally subscribe to this norm: "I think it's just plain wrong that two people can't have sex before marriage. I really don't agree with this approach, because I think that, well, there is, well, there is... How to say... There is a natural process, it's not some kind of shameful process or, I don't know, something that is shameful to talk about."

On the other hand, the married Latvian informants assert that they did not have intimate relations with their husbands until the wedding (Ilze, Aina, Valda). According to Ilze, deviating from these norms is understood as a deviation from one's religion – they are not real Muslims if they do not observe certain morals in these matters. Arta is not as strict as Ilze and sees the Western influence behind young people's desire to try different things: "They're not bad Muslims, they've just wrong ideas because the Western world influences teenagers a lot. And they see that, and they want to do it as well. They want to be Western because it's a dream, right, the Western world. And since they're young, they don't understand it's not right yet." Baiba, for her part, argues, "In order to avoid such situations, as it happens, even in today's situation, there are abortions, abandoned children and so on, if there is a chance, then you should get married as soon as possible." However, some of the women are also of the opinion that the issue is much more complex than what Baiba's statement implies – of course, in the ideal case, young people would get married and then develop their sexuality together, but there may be other issues involved in the matter. For instance, Valda, as a mother, is concerned that there might not be harmony in that kind of sexual relationship and, therefore, believes that this is an ambiguous question.

There is more ambiguity when discussing reproductive rights, particularly contraception; even the interviewees who express the most conservative views on other issues say that they do not fully understand this issue. Health is indicated as the primary factor in these decisions: if, for health reasons, a woman should not become pregnant, then contraceptives, except for extreme ones (like sterilisation), are acceptable (Baiba, Ilze, Khadija). For some, a couple should not choose to simply live without children (Ilze); however, many respondents perceive contraception as acceptable birth control in the family (Arta, Aina, Valda, Yasira, Fatima, Simona, 28, ex-convert). Some point to other, more natural, methods to control pregnancy, like Fatima: "In Islam there are certain methods that are allowed, and they do not harm either the woman or the man at all. If intercourse is interrupted or condoms are used."

Most of the respondents were stricter on the issue of abortion. Some emphasise that abortion might be permitted for health reasons (Baiba, Ilze, Aina) but not, for example, if a woman has been raped. In this case, an unknown good for the woman could be hidden in the child (Baiba). Some informants believe that abortions are entirely forbidden (Arta, Valda, Šarūnė), like Valda, who mentions her experience: "I am a child whose mother wanted to have an abortion for a moment but changed her mind. And that's why I'm unequivocally against abortion." Šarūnė claims that her "view on abortion is even stricter than Islam's. Because Islam is a bit more liberal than my, I'm totally against against against it." On the other hand, there were also those, like Yasira, who opined that abortion up to a certain period of pregnancy should be allowed.

As seems evident in their answers, a majority of the respondents appear to hold conservative opinions on sex, sexuality and reproductive rights and base their judgements on their understanding of Islamic regulations, often referencing the primary Islamic sources – the Quran and the Prophet's example. Though they do not emphasise this, their position varies tremendously from the prevailing one among the general public and certainly the local media.

Personal Experiences Versus Media Image-Making

Some of the interviewed women, particularly in Latvia, repeatedly emphasised that the local media portrays Islam very negatively, which is indeed (partly) the case. In the media review, we were able to establish that some publications are based on prejudices that emphasise Islam's connection to violence and the subordination of women or double standards in the behaviour of Muslim men. But we also saw some positively oriented publications and signs of genuine interest in the reports about Islam, its customs and the women living as Muslims in Baltic countries. In general, however, Islam appears in the media as a threat; perhaps the publications here reflect public attitudes, especially in the context of the refugee crisis. It is no wonder that in some media interviews with Muslim representatives, there is a discursive separation with refugees – "not all of them are Muslims" (Avotiņš 2015).

It seems only natural that the interviewed women are more positive in their assessment of Islam than that found in the media. But what exactly is Islam? There is a plurality of answers. Regarding specific gender-related issues, we found that the interviewed women tend to express different opinions that form a broad spectrum, ranging from comparatively liberal to rather conservative. For example, concerning the division of roles, the women's opinions vary from traditional, patriarchal ideas to the defence of gender equality. Another example can be found in their answers about sexual relations outside of marriage, contraception and artificial insemination: some see them as entirely acceptable, while others think these things should be (at least partially) restricted.

We have seen that women construct Islam as an ideal; the negative aspects of gender relations in the Muslim environment are explained as cultural features, which the religion would be distinguishable from. For example, Baiba expresses this clearly: "Either they are not religious, there are more local somewhat mixed traditions that kind of blend with Islam, and are considered Islam, but in reality, it is not Islam at all." This distinction enables the women to separate their idea and their ideal of Islam from everything negative, and this, as could be seen in the answers of the converts, allows them to "justify" the adoption of a "foreign religion" (especially in Aina's case: that religion is not culture, meaning that it is about existential experience and truth).

Conclusion

Both sides of this examination – the media and the interviewed women – are primarily guided by images, which have little to do with expert knowledge. On the media's side, one can see the intention to denigrate, while, on the interviewed women's side, there is a desire to idealise the religion of Islam. However, when we put the different statements of these interviews with Muslim women together, then the experiences of these women, each in their own way, can help us form a picture from the perspective of those involved and provide material for a critical evaluation of the publications circulating in the public space. The different women's answers to the questions allow us to see that even in a relatively small group, there is a great diversity among Muslim women in Baltic countries. Thus, one of the most salient results of this study is a reminder that there is no such thing as a singular, uniform "Muslim women's view."

The differences could be due to the backgrounds of the women interviewed, which relates back to the history of Islam in the Baltics. The analysis of the interviews partially confirms the expectation that converts are generally more conservative in their interpretations of Islamic norms pertaining to gender relations and gender roles than Muslim-born people are.

Age and marital experience are two other important factors. The younger (unmarried and childless) respondents appear more emancipated, more open and less dogmatic, while those with children tend to be more religiously conservative and culturally traditionalist. Though the respondents were not directly asked about their upbringings, one possible conclusion is that those born in the communist period (and most of them indeed were) carry that period's patriarchal images of gender relations and roles. In other words, these images were apparently inherited from their non-Muslim or non-practising-Muslim parents and the wider (traditional and patriarchal) society and have stayed with them all the way into their newly discovered religion and lifestyle (and this applies equally to both the converts and the Muslim-born).

The interviewed women actively differentiate religion and culture. Of course, most religious scholars would disagree, pointing out that it is nearly impossible to draw a boundary between the two. The fact that the women attempt to create this distinction shows an essentialist understanding of religion. Behind the various practices is Islam as the ideal religion, the Prophet Muhammad as the ideal role model; Islam itself is good. Thus, as is often the case in (emic) understandings of religion, these women lack the (etic) tools to evaluate their own religion, including its intersections with culture.

Based on the publications and the women's stories about how they are perceived, this study has revealed that Islam is not simply one of the religions in the Baltic countries, even if it is recognised as a traditional religion in Lithuania. It seems there is still much work to be done to shed public light on the realities of Islam in the Baltics.

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