The gendered dimension of Islamophobia in Belgium

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This chapter asserts the underlying mechanisms of the gendered dimensions of Islamophobia in Belgium and states that historically rooted narratives contribute to modern-day ‘othering’ and paradoxically simultaneous alleged saving of Muslim women in the country. These points are contextualised and developed via the consideration of recent evidence from Belgian grassroots associations, national monitoring bodies, and also policies and practices at institutional, local, regional, national and supranational levels to illustrate both the direct and indirect forms of Islamophobia experienced by Belgian Muslim women. These include features particular to Belgium, such as the national face veil ban, or the French-style headscarf ban in schools in the francophone region of Verviers, and the recent controversies surrounding wearing the headscarf in the workplace. The chapter concludes with an examination of the modes of countering gendered Islamophobia in the country as led by self-identified Belgian Muslim women themselves.

Introduction

Like many other countries in western Europe and beyond, Muslim women in Belgium continue to face disproportionate consequences of already growing rates of Islamophobia. This significant targeting of Muslim women in the nation transgresses boundaries of age, ethnicity, appearance, among numerous other factors. Key Belgian Islamophobia monitoring bodies, including the Belgian Counter-Islamophobia Collective (Collectif Contre l’Islamophobia en Belgique, CCIB; or Collectief Tegen Islamofobie in België as they are locally known in Belgium), Muslim Rights Belgium (MRB) and UNIA (Centre Interfédéral pour l’Égalité des Chances – Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities), for example, repeatedly report growing rates of Islamophobic acts against women, or women presumed to be Muslim1 (CCIB 2017; MRB 2014; UNIA 2017b). For example, in the month following the terror attack on the Belgian capital, Brussels in March 2016, the CCIB recorded thirty-six Islamophobic attacks; of these the majority impact Muslim women and especially visibly Muslim women. Quantitative evidence clearly indicates a significant and concerning dimension of the ways in which Islamophobia in Belgium is borne out. This chapter seeks to go beyond the statistical
evidence to provide a detailed exploration of the numerous factors that give rise to disproportionate rates of Islamophobia against Muslim women in Belgium and in particular, to specifically consider the modes of gendered Islamophobia in the nation.

**Background**

Belgium represents a perhaps unique case in western Europe; the federal nation is primarily comprised of two linguistic regions: francophone Brussels capital regional and region of Wallonia in the south of the country, and Flemish speaking Flanders in the north. In addition, the country is also made up of a small German speaking minority. These distinct linguistic regions add to the inherent cultural diversity of the nation and also shape the normative attitudes, normative structures at play across the country, with francophone regions being more likely to be influenced by neighbouring France, whereas Flanders is more likely to inherit features of the Dutch normative model. Understanding the normative differences that arise in the Belgian linguistic regions contributes to the understanding of not only the ways in which Islamophobia is borne out through the nation, but also and in particular it facilitates the comprehension of its gendered dimensions and manifestations throughout Belgium. In short, generally speaking the French secular model influences francophone Belgium while Dutch models are more likely to shape narratives in Flanders; however, this is becoming increasingly fluid.

The Belgian Muslim community makes up approximately 6% of the wider national population (Pew Forum 2015), although official statistics are not recorded. The Belgian Muslim population is largely made up of ethnically Turkish and Moroccan migrant communities (Zibouh 2011a), and also a significant number of ethnic Belgians who have converted to Islam (Karagiannis 2012). Understanding that the Belgian Muslim community is predominantly comprised of individuals from ethnic minority origins contributes to the wider understanding of the intersectional racial and religious composition of the manifestation of gendered Islamophobia in the country.

In terms of socioeconomic status, generally speaking multiple sources have shown that Muslims and especially Muslim women are more likely to face discrimination in seeking employment and maintaining work in the Belgian context (Mescoli 2016; UNIA 2017a). By extension, the increasing likelihood of exclusion of Muslims from the Belgian workforce then contributes to worsening the socioeconomic status of Belgian Muslims and importantly their prospects in the nation. Undeniably, this situation is likely to deteriorate further in the future given the recent preliminary judgements regarding the permissibility of dismissing Muslim women from employment on the grounds of the headscarf, as detailed in this chapter.

With regards to the status of Islam in Belgium, like other populous religions in the country, under Article 24.1 of the Belgian constitution Islam has been afforded official state recognition since 1974 (Kannaz 2002). In this regard, we see that Belgium differs significantly from neighbouring France for example, where there is a blanket alleged blindness to faith under laïcité, instead Belgium has a national policy of recognising religious groups with a significant number of adherents in the country. This official recognition afforded to Islam in Belgium means that Islam is represented at the state level by the Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique/Executief van de Moslims van België (Belgian Muslim Executive, EMB). The EMB is made up of two distinct, but cooperating, linguistic offices (Francophone and Flemish corresponding to the Wallonia and Brussels regions, and the Flanders regions respectively). The EMB comprises elected Muslim representatives (both male and female, from across the diverse Belgian Muslim community). The organisation is intended to act as an interlocutor between the Belgian state and the Belgian Muslim community. The representative body is also charged with coordinating Islamic religious
festivals, coordinating Muslim chaplaincy, Islamic religious education provision in state schools. In fact, the EMB is responsible for 50 imams, 300 registered mosques, 1500 Islamic religious education teachers and 30 Muslim chaplains across the country. While this model and approach to religious affairs differs significantly from many seen across western Europe, it is the norm for officially recognised religions in Belgium. Notwithstanding, framing the likelihood of Belgian institutional Islamophobia solely in terms of the official state recognition of Muslims and Islam does not shed light on the structural and institutional nuances of the problem, nor does it elucidate Islamophobia’s gendered components at these levels. Put alternatively, the recognition of Islam at the national state level does not mean that institutional factors are not significant in the wider discussion of gendered (and non-gendered) manifestations of Islamophobia in Belgium.

Gendered manifestations of Islamophobia in Belgium

In many ways the way in which Islamophobia manifests in Belgium is comparable to that observed in other western European cases, namely in neighbouring countries such as France or the Netherlands, thus rather than representing an isolated Belgian phenomenon, it is part of the broader global pattern of gendered Islamophobia.

In this chapter I argue that the Belgian brand of Islamophobia functions on two principal bases: namely the argument of threat and secondly the often-employed argument of the subaltern subject in need of civilisation and a saviour. Notwithstanding, while there remain numerous ways in which the ideological bases of Islamophobia may be classified (see The Runnymede’s Trust’s 2017 report, *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All* (Elahi and Khan 2017), the distinction between threat and the construction of Muslims as being in need of a (often ideologically western European) saviour fits well with the examples of Islamophobic racism that emerge from the Belgian context. However rather than posing distinct categories, the examples of gendered Islamophobia presented within this section of the contribution, via detailing and analysing various examples of Islamophobia against women demonstrates a fluid moving between possible categories, in short gendered Islamophobia in Belgium is a fluid rather than static phenomenon. Furthermore, although very much influential in the present, I would also argue that these narratives of threat and saviour as the basis of Islamophobia are informed by historical and colonial narratives of Orientalism (Said 1978). Historically locating Islamophobic narratives in this way helps understand their origins and ways in which they may be deconstructed or effectively countered.

**The narrative of threat: Muslim women and alleged demographic, cultural and violent threat**

The narrative of Islam and Muslims as a source of threat functions in numerous ways. The argument of threat is not limited to but primarily conceptualises Islam and Muslims as a source of demographic threat, as posing a threat to local culture, customs, traditions and the general Belgian way of life and finally as perpetrators of physical threat. As stated above, these narratives of threat do not function independently, instead are interconnected and overlapping. The construction of these narratives emphasises the ‘othering’ of Muslims and Islamic practices and therefore consequently legitimises Islamophobia by the state (and vice versa), in cultural productions and finally among the public. Rather than perceiving the relationship between the narrative of Islam and Muslims, and threat at state and public levels as a linear one, I would argue that it is more appropriate and useful to consider the relationship as a cyclical and non-linear relationship, meaning that the narrative of threat informs and is informed by state policies, culture and wider public opinion.
Examples of the narrative of threat as a form of Islamophobia and as an informant of Islamophobic practices are apparent in the following cases in Belgium. With regards to framing Muslims as a source of demographic threat in Belgium, we see exaggerated discourses of ‘Muslims taking over’ commonly cited by Islamophobes, particularly those on the right of the Belgian political spectrum. For example, recent comments made by Belgian interior minister, Koen Geens of the Christen Democratishce en Vlaams (CD&V) party (Christian, Democratic and Flemish), who in an address to the European Parliament stated that the number of practicing Muslims in Brussels would soon outnumber that of practicing Christians (Montay 2017). This argument levied by Geens is not dissimilar to the broader far-right, Islamophobic arguments seen across western Europe relating to an alleged ‘de-Christianisation’ coupled with an alleged Islamisation of the continent. For example, the same notions resurfaced in the Belgian press (Ponciau 2017) or see Ye’or’s (2005) Islamophobic ‘Eurabia’ hypothesis2 for an example of this type of argument.

Rationally speaking, although the Belgian Muslim population numbers around an estimated six percent across the nation (Pew Forum 2015), and the Brussels capital region is estimated to be made up of a twenty percent Muslim population (Hertogen 2008), with this figure rising to as high as forty percent in some areas such as Molenbeek (Easat-Daas 2016), the statistical evidence pertaining to Muslim populations underlines that at six percent nationally (Pew Forum 2015), the Belgium Muslim community is still not even the largest in western Europe, for example the French Muslim population is estimated to be at around eight percent of the total population (ibid.). These claims assume hyper-religiosity among Muslims without recognising the increasing secularisation of much of the general western European community. In short, the claims made by Geens, and others, do not function on the basis of logic or rationality, rather they serve to create national panic and promote Islamophobia.

With regard to the position of Belgian Muslim women in the often-unfounded demographic Islamophobic arguments, Muslim women are seen as significant since it is the presumed hyper-fertility of these women that allows (or will allow) for an alleged quantitative Muslim take over. Therefore, the female Muslim figure is central to the construction of national gendered Islamophobic narratives related to demographics. While this might not have direct consequences on public or legislative action against Muslim women in Belgium, the ideas that it nurtures are likely to inform wider hostility towards Belgian Muslim women which then may make them more likely to be subject to popular and/or institutional Islamophobia. Furthermore, I would also argue that notions of threat that emerge from the discourse of an alleged Muslim quantitative take over also feed into narratives of an alleged cultural threat posed by the Belgian Muslim population.

Discourses which frame Muslims as an ideological and cultural threat seek to promote the myth that Muslim presence endangers the ‘Belgian way of life’.3 Under this trope, Muslim practices are explicitly targeted through the use of legislative measure, campaigning, via popular culture and the Belgian media. Examples of this are apparent in the coverage of the halal meat saga, or particularly in relation to Muslim women, controversies concerning Muslim women’s dress. Regrettably, Belgium is no stranger to affaires des foulards (headscarf affairs) or burkini hysteria as detailed in this section. Muslim practices are targeted under Belgian Islamophobia also. For example, 2017 saw extensive controversy surrounding the right to ritual slaughter (or halal and kosher slaughter) in Belgium. In May 2017, the francophone Walloon environment committee voted unanimously to prohibit ritual slaughter. If left unchallenged, this proposed and agreed ban will mean that it will no longer be possible to slaughter meat according to halal or kosher customs in the nation as of September 2019. The vote provoked outrage among Belgian and western European Jewish and Muslim communities, including strong and explicit condemnation from the European Jewish Congress (Osborne 2017). Support for the bans largely came from an animal rights and protection narrative which portrayed ritual slaughter as barbaric.
Although not clearly gendered the targeting of Islamic practices in Belgium clearly ‘others’ Belgian Muslims (and in this case the Belgian Jewish community also). In addition, the evocation of barbarism and violence also feeds into wider Orientalist inspired narratives which see Muslims as a potential source of violent threat. The narrative of violent threat not only includes Muslim women as carriers of threat but also commonly provokes revenge attacks against Muslim women in the country. Thus, here we see the interrelatedness of Islamophobic ideas and the eventual gendered manifestations of Islamophobia in Belgium. Aside from non-gendered practices, Muslim women’s dress is commonly discussed under the frame of posing a cultural threat. Perhaps, the explicit and perceived ‘Muslimness’ of the headscarf or face veil are seen as stark reminders of the Muslim presence in Belgium and therefore as a result are more commonly focused on in the Belgian national imagination. However, while notions of cultural threat are often evoked in national and local controversies pertaining to Muslim women, these national debates also cross over into debates of the saviour and therefore as a result, I have chosen to detail these further in the next section of this chapter.

Finally, and as previously stated, under the narrative of threat Belgian Muslims are constructed as posing an alleged source of physical threat. Under these arguments, the narrative of Muslims as a source of violent threat is exemplified by terror attacks committed by so-called Muslims in the nation. For example, and perhaps the most striking example in recent Belgian history, on 22 March 2016 Maalbeek metro station in central Brussels and the Brussels Zavantem international airport were struck by terror attacks. The terror attacks led to 35 fatalities and caused in excess of 300 injuries (Easat-Daas 2017). The perpetrators of the terror attacks were all linked to Daesh and were all male, yet, as discussed further in this article, Muslim women largely bore the majority of Islamophobic attacks (CCIB 2016). For example, in the one-month period following the attacks, the CCIB reported a total of 36 Islamophobic attacks, indicating a sharp rise in anti-Muslim attacks following so-called ‘Islamic terror’ (CCIB 2017). Furthermore, given their comparatively higher levels of visibility – Muslim women are more likely to be subject to this increase in attacks. Therefore, rather than confirming the oversimplified narrative of Muslims being a source of threat, the statistical evidence points to a complex narrative of alleged Islamic extremism that subsequently leads to increases in Islamophobia against Muslims, in sum there is an overall increase in violence and this cannot solely be attributed to Muslims.

**Between threat and saviour narratives: Belgian Muslim women’s bodies**

Controversy surrounding Muslim women’s dress in Belgium is not only framed under the banner of posing a threat to Belgian and Western norms, rather I would suggest that it is also often constructed under the colonial saviour tag, which sees Western normative constructs, particularly those concerning White Eurocentric feminism, applied as the standard to which Muslim women’s bodies must conform. Put alternatively, prohibitions surrounding Muslim women’s dress are constructed as measures taken to save Muslim women from enforced vestimentary practices allegedly enforced by Muslim males and as a result bring Muslim women into the folds of modern femininity. This argument also functions to confound Orientalist stereotypes, which frame Muslim men as violent and patriarchal, and Muslim women as passive subjects in need of saving. These type of ‘saviour actions’ evoke Spivakian notions of ‘the white men saving the brown women from the brown men’ (Spivak 1988).

In recent years in Belgium the face veil (or *niqab*), the headscarf (or *hijab*), long skirts and burkinis have been subject to intense scrutiny, controls at the local and national levels and also significant attention in popular culture. In particular veiling by Muslim women, has been framed as posing a security threat to the nation. After receiving almost unanimous political support (Brems
et al. 2012; Haspelagh 2012) the ‘Law concerning the wearing of all clothing that completely or partially conceals the face’ (Legifrance 2010), or niqab ban, was introduced in Belgium on 1 June 2011. Those found wearing the veil in Belgium would be subject to a fine amounting to between fifteen and twenty Euros. The ban was put in place, in spite of remarkably low estimates of Muslim women who actually wore the veil in Belgium5 (BBC 2011; Brems et al. 2012), indicating that the measures were in fact disproportionate and perhaps unnecessary.

In France, similarly low estimates concerning the number of women who wore the veil are reported (BBC 2011), the Loi contre la dissimulation du visage (Law Against Face Covering) was introduced in the preceding year was constructed as a threat to French laïcité.6 Similarly, the image of the French matriarch Marianne was invoked in the period surrounding the proposal and introduction of the ban, implying that this essentially French figure would not cover her face and therefore nor should any other French woman in the country. Given the national centrality afforded to laïcité (Fayard and Rocheron 2009) and the figure of Marian, the Loi Anti-Niqab (or Anti-Niqab Law), as it was known in popular parlance, constructs Muslim women who adopt this level of cover, or men seen to be forcing such women to cover, as external to French normative values, thus further emphasising the alterity of the Muslim figure in popular French culture. In turn, this alterity contributes to legitimising Islamophobic discourses and actions. This alterity in the French sphere was underlined by the obligation imposed on those caught wearing the face veil to pay a fairly sizeable monetary fine (€150) and to have to take French citizenship classes.

Contrarily in Belgium, as stated the veiling ban centred on security discourses and did not carry the same extent of ‘otherising’, rather primarily functioned on the basis of security and to a lesser extent emphasised the alterity of Muslim women. The Belgian ban was also preceded by similar regional bans, particularly in Flanders (this national disparity in preceding legislation is possible in Belgium given the federal make-up of the nation) (Haspelagh 2012). Thus, the prohibition, arguably directed towards visibly Muslim women, is not entirely novel in the Belgian context. Nonetheless, in both cases, arguably regardless of the background narratives employed, the controls on Muslim women’s dress send a clear national signal related to the position and ‘otherness’ of Muslims, Muslim practices and especially Muslim women in the national imagination. The ban clearly illustrates how Muslim women’s bodies are indeed the cultural and ideological battleground.

Additionally, in certain Flemish Belgian towns the burkini is currently prohibited from public pools. UNIA has been approached numerous times regarding the legitimacy of such interdictions, and this has resulted in the organisation concluding the burkini bans could constitute discriminations. Prohibiting women from wearing the burkini, UNIA stated, did not pose hygiene or security risks nor did it contradict gender-equality principles (Khan 2017). These Belgian controversies, I would argue, constitute gendered Islamophobia. Importantly, they do not exist in vacuum, rather they echo similar controversies that have taken place in neighbouring France and even as far as eastern Europe (Čada and Frantová 2017).7

Similar tropes are employed in other forms of regulation of Muslim women’s dress. These controls vary in nature and include the ‘long-skirt affair’ of summer 2015, whereby school girls wearing long skirts were stopped from entering their school on the grounds that the attire contradicted Belgian secular principles (Easat-Daas 2016). The long skirt affairs were problematic and irrational in the Belgian context for a variety of reasons, firstly and perhaps most obviously while one might classify the headscarf or face veil as examples of ‘Islamic dress’, the long skirt is in no way only worn by Muslim women, instead it is something worn by individuals of diverse ethnic and cultural background and therefore arguing that the long skirt is ‘too Muslim’
is not coherent. Additionally, although French secularism has increasingly combative and Islamophobic dimensions which many advocates argue are inherent to its nature and the alleged complete separation of state and faith, constitutional Belgian organised secularism in fact permits recognition of religious groups and allows for religious practices. Therefore, arguing a ban on long skirts in Belgium on the grounds of secularism is at odds with national state led practices. Instead, the sagas only serve to ‘other’ and demonise Muslim women and in themselves are acts of Islamophobia that nurture and normalise further Islamophobia against Muslim women.

Similarly, the ban on young girls from wearing the headscarf to school in the francophone Belgian area of Verviers (Verviers Conseil Communual 2013) incites principles of Belgian secularism. In this case, and in the long skirts example, notions of secularism (or laïcité) to legitimise limitations of Muslim women’s clothing played out in francophone Belgium. However, in the Belgian context, in spite of using the French term laïcité, secularism does not carry the same meaning or indeed origins as seen in the French context. Rather in Belgium, as mentioned previously, religious groups with a sizeable national body of adherents are afforded official state recognition, funding and provisions, whereas in France no religious group is legally recognised or funded in anyway; instead the French state sees itself, perhaps erroneously, as being entirely separate from all religious groups in the nation. Unlike in France, where there is a historical trajectory to laïcité, the Belgian incitement of secularism, I would argue, represents a move towards the adoption of French secularism and its current Islamophobic tendencies, demonstrating the fluidity of Islamophobia and Islamophobic discourses between national contexts.

The ban imposed in Verviers represents a ban on young Muslim women in compulsory schooling. However, this type of gendered Islamophobic control is not limited to compulsory education; during August 2016 students who wore headscarves were prevented from taking access course exams in the francophone municipality of Uccle on the grounds of secularism. (Here, again we see the fluid movement of the secularism argument between the francophone French and Belgian contexts). The students were subsequently permitted to take their exams, but in rather confusing fashion, in early September 2016 a formal ban on the hijab in access courses was issued before being overturned a fortnight later (Easat-Daas 2017).

The aforementioned controversies across the varying levels of the Belgian education system not only represent examples of clear legislated and organisation led gendered Islamophobia. However, such types of direct targeting of Muslim women and the clothing that they chose to wear are not limited only to Belgian schooling, instead similar controversies can be seen across numerous fields, such as employments or politics. On 14 March 2017, the European Court of Justice issued its preliminary judgements regarding the permissibility of dismissing women who wear the headscarf from employment. The preliminary judgement follows a joint hearing of two cases heard simultaneously by the European Court of Justice, that of Belgian, Samira Achbita, and Frenchwoman, Asma Bougnaoui. Previous cases pertaining to faith symbols in Europe have been heard by the European Court of Human Rights (Howard 2017), therefore in the first case of its kind heard by the European Court of Justice, the court was asked to judge the extent of direct or indirect discrimination in each of the cases presented before it.

In Belgium, having already worked for G4S for three years, Samira Achbita announced her decision to adopt the headscarf in the workplace. She was informed that due to an ‘unwritten rule’ concerning employee ‘neutrality’ she could not manifest religious, political or philosophical insignia. Achbita declined to remove her headscarf and was subsequently dismissed by her employer. The case was heard by Labour Courts in Antwerp and rejected. Following appeal, the case was referred to the European Court of Justice by the Belgian Court of Cassation. French Micropole design engineer, Asma Bougnaoui was required to visit clients on site as part
of her responsibility. After having received a complaint regarding her headscarf from a client, Bougnaoui was asked to remove her headscarf on client visits. As she also declined, Bougnaoui was dismissed from the company. Her case was heard by the Parisian Labour Tribunal before being passed onto the European Court of Justice by the French Court of Cassation. General Advocate Sharpston concluded that the Achbita case stemming from Belgium did not constitute direct discrimination, whereas Bougnaoui’s dismissal in France represented direct discrimination. In spite of the technicalities of the preliminary judgements, the European Court of Justice decision sparked condemnation, split opinion and led to significant coverage. Most notably, in her analysis of the case Brems (2017) highlights the incoherencies of this Muslim centred case in which no reference was made to the growing climate of Islamophobia and hostility towards Muslim women.

In Belgium, civil society actors were quick to speak out. Carlos Crespo, president of the Belgian organisation Movement Against Racism, Antisemitism and Xenophobia (Mouvement contre le Racisme, l’Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie, MRAX), stated ‘The decision will result in the facilitation of the already significant ostracisation of European citizens who are Muslim and who want to participate in the labour without necessarily having to denounce (or remove) their headscarf’ (Crespo 2017). Like many others who decried the potential carte blanche for the harassment and dismissal of visibly Muslim women employees, I too would argue that takeaway message from the European Court of Justice could be seen as legitimisation of gendered forms of Islamophobia in Belgium. While it may be argued by Islamophobes that these types of judicial decisions, along with the array of controversies linked to Muslim women’s bodies and what they choose to wear constitute a protection/saviour for Muslim women, they in fact work much to the contrary and serve to ‘otherise’ and exclude Muslim women from society both in the present and thus effectively contribute to society. Furthermore, exclusion of Muslim women from education and employment in particular undermine the ability of Muslim women in Belgium to project themselves into the future (Sayyid 2014).

Notwithstanding the social, political and legal legitimacy of these measures that explicitly seek to control and regulate the outward appearance of Muslim women in Belgium have been repeatedly criticised (Brems 2017; Easat-Daas 2018; Howard 2017; Khan 2017; Ringelheim 2017). Regardless of these rational and logical responses that encompass an understanding of Belgian normative factors, politics and law, gendered Islamophobia in Belgium persists and continues to grow across multiple facets of society and is manifest in a range of ways.

Countering gendered Islamophobia in Belgium: Muslim women’s responses

Belgian Muslim women’s responses to the growing and intensifying levels of gendered discrimination that they face is diverse and perhaps innumerable and thus cannot be covered in depth within the scope of this chapter. Rather below is a brief insight into some of the measures championed by Belgian Muslim.

In terms of politics, Belgian Muslim women have enjoyed among the highest rates of representation at the national and federal level of Belgian politics (Easat-Daas 2015; Sinno 2009; Zibouh 2011b, 2013), with a combination of political opportunity structures – such as gender parity quotas, compulsory voting coupled with demographic concentrations of Muslims, along Muslim women’s political motivations give rise to this perhaps unique configuration. Nonetheless, Muslim women in politics continue to face disproportionate levels of gendered Islamophobia also both via direct
attacks and as a result of the more general Islamophobic narrative (Easat-Daas 2017). However, rather than retiring from the political arena, Belgian Muslim women continue to strive to be engaged and represented in the Belgian political sphere, since it constitutes a means of expressing Muslim women’s voices, being part of the Belgian decision-making process and also as a means of ‘creating a better understanding of Islam’ (Easat-Daas 2015).

Muslim women in Belgium are also highly active in the civil society level counter-Islamophobia scene, and their representation can be seen in groups such as the CCIB, ENAR (European Network against Racism) MRB, UNIA. Belgian Muslim women have been involved in the direct monitoring (CCIB 2017), researching (Mescoli 2016) – for example in between 2015 and 2016 ENAR led their ‘Forgotten Women’ project which provides a detailed insight into gender-based Islamophobia with specific reference to employment. Muslim women are active in contesting gendered dimensions of Belgian Islamophobia, while also challenging Islamophobia more broadly. Finally, Belgian civil society groups also pursue legal redress when appropriate (Jacobs and Carpriaux 2016).

Artistic endeavours as a means of countering the gendered Islamophobia that they encounter are also led by Muslim women in Belgium. Bruxelloises et Voilées (Brussels woman and headscarf wearing) represents one such endeavour. The initiative was created by young Belgian women from the capital in early 2015. The group record and release a two-minute video on a monthly basis. In these videos, a Muslim woman who wears the headscarf is featured and details aspects of her life as a woman from Brussels (without explicit focus on the headscarf in her verbal discourse). These videos are then published on the group’s social media platforms and typically viewed over 4000 times each. Bruxelloises et Voilées representative Bouchra Saadallah states in the European Islamophobia Report: ‘The objective is to promote a multicultural society by fighting against discrimination and stereotypes, in particular against Muslim veiled women. It’s both an artistic movement and a militant initiative that aims . . . to show our diverse identities by speaking about everything but the hijab.’ I would argue that art-based measures constitute a more emotive means of countering Islamophobia and the narratives which underpin it, and thus may offer efficacy in areas which logically and rational responses alone may not have fully succeeded. In sum the value of a multi-faceted, multi-strategy approach to enable Muslim women, and Muslims more generally to reclaim the narrative that surrounds them cannot be underestimated.

**Conclusion**

At the outset, I posited that the examples of gendered Islamophobia explored within this chapter had Orientalist underpinnings and could be loosely categorised in terms of on notions of threat (be it demographic, cultural or physical) or via a saviour narrative, whereby Muslim women’s dress is regulated to save them from the alleged perils of Islam, Muslim men and gender inequality. These classifications are evoked, among other normative, political and legal ideals, as a means of determining Muslim women’s conduct and appearance in the country. However, these narratives that enforce the alterity of Muslims, and especially Muslim women in Belgium (and arguably beyond) while also further idealising images of Europe as the heart of civilisation and modernity. Alongside this, emphasis on the ‘otherness’ of Muslim women, at the theoretical and practice-based levels, results in the legitimisation of modes of targeting Muslim women. This chapter highlighted that these are borne out via methods such as legislated (or semi-legislated) exclusion from education and the labour force, and also as statistical evidence shows, via verbal and physical attacks on Muslim women in Belgium. In sum the examples detailed in this chapter paint an
increasingly bleak picture vis-à-vis Islamophobia against women in the country. Nonetheless, in
spite of the growing numbers of physical attacks on Muslim women in Belgium, increasing gen-
dered Islamophobic hate speech, prohibition of the headscarf in compulsory and non-compulsory
education, and Muslim women’s exclusion from leisure and employment, Muslim women con-
tinue to take a pro-active role in countering the gendered dimensions of Belgian Islamophobia
that they encounter – be it political, social or arts-based. Thus, in the face of a deteriorating situa-
tion for Muslim women, and especially for visibly Muslim women, these endeavours undeniably
constitute positive action.

Notes

1 Although these aforementioned organisations, among others, in Belgium consistently report both grow-
ing rates of Islamophobia, and in particular growing rates of anti-Muslim hatred against Muslim women,
such organisations often rely on self-reporting by those targeted by Islamophobia. Self-reporting bias will
often mean that statistics recorded do not fully or entirely accurately the scale and gravity of the problem
in question. Essentially relying on self-reporting only reveals the ‘tip of the iceberg’. Furthermore, the
acts reported often only concern verbal, written or even physical attacks against individuals and locations,
rather than dealing with the structural and ideological bases of Islamophobia in the country.
2 Ye’or posits that European, and in particular French, and Arab leaders are colluding to allow for the
alleged Islamicisation of the continent (Ye’or 2005, p. 24) and is thus perhaps better classified as a con-
spiracy theory. Much of her hypothesis draws on dominant Islamophobic narratives, including those
alleging inherent Muslim and Islamic violence and also Muslim ‘Judeophobia’.
3 The ‘Belgian way of life’, although not fixed or strictly definable as such, is often used within Islamophobic
rhetoric, to construct all that is related to Islam and Muslims as oppositional., Therefore for example,
Belgium (or indeed any other Western nation) is characterised as being in favour of gender equality,
while Muslims are shown to be sexist (often the hijab is most typically cited in support of this claim).
4 The so-called ‘Islamic State of Syria and the Levant’.
5 It was estimated that as few as 30 women across the whole of Belgium wore the face veil (see http://
news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8652861.stm).
6 Broadly speaking, laïcité translates to secularism. However, it is difficult to capture the undertones and
specific connotations of the term (Boussinesq 1994). In particular, current implementations of laïcité have
distinctly shifted from being a counter-movement which aimed to lessen the power and influence of the
Catholic Church in France, to one that is characterised by the distinctly Islamophobic goals of the project
(Baubérot 2012; Ramadan 2004).
7 For example, Čada and Frantová (2017) discuss the spread of the burkini affair to the Czech Republic.
During July 2017, images of Czech Muslim women at a water park wearing burkinis surfaced on social
media and sparked fierce, and familiar, gendered Islamophobia. Similarly, in France during the summer
of 2016 widespread national debate emerged surrounding Muslim women and burkinis. In each of these
cases, dominant narratives centre on ideas of national norms and identity, gender rights and equality,
security (and hygiene), and Muslim take-over.

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