

Gender, Migration and intercultural Interaction
in South-East Europe
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Synthesis Research Design for “Gender and Religion” (WP6)

Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey

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5. 1. State of the Art Literature Review on Thematic Work Package

The relationship between religion, women and human rights has been the focus of attention for some time, as Susan Moller Okin's 1997 article *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* and the reactions to it highlight. However, for many years scholars have paid attention to the effects of religion on women's status. Less attention has been devoted to women's roles in performing religion, particularly in the context of migration. Only recently academic literature started to analyze the role of religion in migrant women's lives.

While in the course of the 70s gender studies focused on women's status in non Western countries, and post colonial studies in the last decades have called the presumed Western women superiority into question, by proposing new feminist epistemologies (Abu-Lughod, 2001), it is only since the end of the 90s, and the beginning of the 21st century, that scholars started to investigate the religiosity of migrant women outside of their countries of origin. A new generation of scholars is filling up the lack of studies on these issues, a gap that was highlighted by Yvonne Haddad in her: *The study of women in Islam and the West: a select bibliography* (2005). The relationship between minority religions, particularly Islam, and ethnic minority women and their descendants' predicaments in 21st century Europe has been the object of a recent body of scholarship, particularly in France, Germany and Belgium. (Jouili, 2008; Fernando 2005; Fadil, 2008).

By extending the earlier work of Saba Mahmood (2004) this research has looked at the complex ways in which pious Muslim women in France and Germany construct their subjectivities and their own notions of empowerment, aspiration for participation in the public sphere and resistance to patriarchal traditions but at the same performing religious duties, submission or obedience to a transcendent will, seen as the ultimate agent. Instead of reading these seemingly contradictory elements as a sign for a still unachieved emancipation process of women torn between 'progress' and 'tradition', this body of work proposes to read them as the specific articulations of female

pious selves who strive to exist as Muslim pious women in specific modern contexts. Such a reading challenges some of the basic assumptions of liberal western modernity as well as its dichotomous worldview of modernity versus tradition. Jouili shows how pious female Muslims challenge (intentionally or unintentionally) both the hegemony and the normativity of the liberal, secular subject which assumes an inherent human desire of liberating itself from social conventions and a claim to autonomous agency and the common patterns of traditional patriarchal oriented Islamic traditions.

Nadia Fadil, instead, explores the performance of a pious and secular self - male and female - and how it helps us to unveil the particularity and hegemony of the liberal-secular architecture of the public sphere. Drawing on Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2004) 's arguments that secularism is less about rejecting religion from the public sphere, but more about redefining it, reshaping the kind of religiosity and religious subjectivity which is 'allowed in', Fadil's attempts at exploring this throughout the analysis of discourses on what she describes as 'transgressive practices', i.e. the practice of praying at work.

Also Ruba Salih (2001, 2002, 2003), since the 90s, focused part of her research on women and Islam in Europe. In her work, she suggests that a way of looking at some of the tensions we are observing in Europe, around the emergence of, or the "becoming public" of Islam would gain if analysed as consequence of a particular historical conjuncture characterised by the transformation of citizenship from a notion linked to a homogenous ethnos to a post-national (and to an extent post-secular) conception. Key issues are linked to how transnational Islamic identities - and the specific political cultures they embody - challenge a nationally bounded conception of citizenship and of the public sphere.

Gender lies at the heart of the frictions occurring as a result of contemporary transnational challenges. Muslim women's bodies are becoming a sort of public space itself where different agendas and rhetoric of modernity, secularism, tradition, and authenticity are inscribed. Yet, women are also taking an active part in the process of making manifest the post national constellation which characterizes contemporary Europe in various ways, by challenging the secular

notion of the public sphere through specific body techniques, on the one hand, but also by making visible their multiple identities and affiliations and mobilising for a reconceptualization of citizenship and the “public sphere” on the other hand.

In her work, Salih shows how the quest for recognition of Muslim women and young Muslims in the political and public spheres of the European countries where they reside witness to the existence of very lively and gendered “counter publics” whose crucial role in processes of redefining democracy should be acknowledged rather than repressed.

Peggy Levitt’s work on second and third generations (2002) helps to better understand the complex ways in which religion redefines European public spheres. As she underlines the children of earlier generations of migrants are increasingly turning to “inherited religion” as their primary source of identity, perceiving it as a channel through which to integrate themselves into civic and political life rather than as a tool for exclusion.

Finally, Jocelyn Cesari’s work on Islam in the West (2004) underlines the changes in religious practices, the political factors affecting Western perceptions of Islam, the emergence of moderate voices and claims of women’s rights into an Islamic framework. According to several Muslim women religion, rather than be an obstacle in the path to obtaining women’s rights, represents the main tool for empowering their struggles. The so-called Islamic feminism offers one of the most powerful illustrations of such a repositioning of religion and claiming of women’s rights (Badran, 2005). Since the end of 20th and beginning of 21st century this movement shows the emergence of a new, complex, female self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings (to be woman, Muslim, a practising believer, modern, etc.). By questioning both liberal categories of femininity, sexuality and emancipation as well as dominant orthodoxies which are drenched in a patriarchal tradition (Badran 2005, 2006; Moghadam, 2004), this re-positioning of religion in the struggle for women’s rights represents one of the main challenges to both modernity and to Islamic orthodoxy. The intentionality and consciousness of this process is a straightforward one: many women in their statements openly and overtly emphasize the concept of

“challenge”: challenge to re-categorise concepts, find new epistemologies, to question Islamic orthodoxy and Western values alike.

2. Topic Area of Research

2.1. Goal of the research

An ever-growing number of women are crossing the planet following family projects or long emancipating individual journeys. Many of these women, once arrived in Europe in search of a better life and often emancipation and autonomy, re-position their own religion in the center of their lives and in the public sphere of the countries where they start a new life. Also, second and third generation immigrant meaningfully participate in this process of reconstructing the private/public religious sphere. For them religion can be a form of marginalization but can also be a way to claim a place in European societies.

The workpackage therefore analyses the relationship between women and religion in the XXI century, with the aim of assessing similarities and differences in the ways in which migrant women of different faiths negotiate their religious identities and publicly perform religion in the European public spheres. The research addresses the issue of the new forms of revivalism in an Islamic and in a Christian framework and the ways in which women contribute to the repositioning of religion at the local, national, transnational and sovranational levels, challenging hegemonies and powers inside both their national/religious communities as well as inside European countries. We do this by focusing on those multiple dynamics that have for a long time been branded as a ‘fundamentalist’ rejection of modernity (certain code of dress, certain ways of eating, meeting, praying...), which in fact represent the strongest contemporary challenges to settled hegemonies and orders (Salvatore, 2004; Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2004).

Our research studies also interreligious dialogue and intercultural relationships to better understand how women from different religions and cultures interact using religion and spirituality as common field.

2.2. Hypothesis

Even if, when analysing migrations and the repositioning of religion in the European public spheres, the mass media and academic research focus only on Islam, the reconstructing of the religious sphere is a phenomenon concerning also other minority or majority religions. All over Europe we see, in fact, the emergence of different religious revivalisms that are challenging the idea of a secular Europe as well as hegemonic powers such as the Catholic, the Protestant and the Orthodox Churches. The process of making religious identities visible in the public affects all religions but attention, in particular after September 11th, is concentrated on Islam. It seems that Islam is more “public”, more “challenging” than other religions, and the debate on women’s rights and Islamic values obscure other discourses. We propose to challenge the notion of an “exceptionality of Islam” by carrying out a comparative study that will allow us to observe similarities and differences in the process of becoming public of minorities’ religions, and the dynamics of secularism and religion within and across European and non European countries. The countries analyzed (Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece) offer striking elements for comparison: Islam is a majority religion in Turkey but a minority religion in Greece, Italy and Bulgaria. In Bulgaria, however, there is an indigenous ancient Muslim population with different outlooks on religion as compared to the newly arrived migrants. Italy, Greece and Bulgaria are home to different brands of Christianity with different histories of regulation between Church and State.

2.3. Objectives

This research has a twofold aim: on the one hand, it investigates the tensions between secularism and religion in European public spheres, and on the other hand, it analyzes the multiple discourses, strategies and activities migrant women employ in their life, both private and public. Moreover, it focuses on the construction of religious identities as a tool for incorporation/empowerment in local contexts and in transnational networks and public spheres. We are aiming to analyze how women (and men) engage with classic sites of civil society expressions, such as demonstrations and associations, but also their participation in religious contexts (mosques, church, religious education) and to assess how these spaces of expression are gendered. Moreover, we aim at exploring other less conventional sites of expression of religious identities such as literature, photo and video production and music. The general aim is to analyse how women are reconfiguring the interrelationships between religion, freedom and agency in contemporary Europe and beyond.

Our research also takes into account migrant women' bodily performances. In particular we want to pay attention to emerging kinds of fashion and styles of religious belonging among women of different religious background. We investigate the ways through which women articulate their double and simultaneous commitments to a transcendental will and to more mundane requirements of modern life, and to assess what kinds of reactions and challenges to normative secular regimes these performative practices engender (Moors and Tarlo, 2007). Through visible signs such as headscarfs, veils, crosses, "ethnic" or traditional clothes many women are getting visibility in the public sphere and are contributing to the emergence of new markets in the European cities and in the cyber-space. The analysis of new emerging kinds of "aesthetics of faith" (as we would like to call them) could provide a new interesting entrypoint into strategies of constructions of individual and collective identities, since bodily performances are often used to contrast assimilationist policies.

3. Basic Outline

3.1. Basic premises and concepts

Today religion appears as one of the many belongings and identities of migrant women, who are learning more and more how to live in transnational spaces. They are not passive victims - as are often described by mass media - but they are leading actors in the repositioning of religion in Western societies. For many women of first, second or third generation immigrants, religion, rather than an instrument of alienation, can become a way to have access to European public spheres, to redefine the idea of citizenship. According to these women, turning to religion does not mean turning to the past. Religion can be an expression of individual and collective re-invention, a strategy of relation with modernity that does not exclude the participation of the modern self. Often by turning to religion, these women reclaim a voice in a fragmented and multi-vocal post-modern and post-colonial era. Religious revivalisms across the world epitomise this new era and have also engendered new competitive demands for redefining moral projects and common good drawing increasingly from the religious realms (Levitt, 2002, 2004).

Contemporary religious revivalisms in fact do not only operate as a structural critique against assimilationist policies in Europe, they operate also as a cultural critique of both the liberal-secular traditions which stem from the Western Enlightenment and liberal tradition, and the religious orthodoxies. An example: the practice of veiling, which is performed as an act of piety by many Muslim women, can operate as a challenging and disruptive practice (El Guindi, 1999; Hoodfar, 2003). Seen as intrusive to the liberal-secular order by some, considered as a symbol of female oppression by others, this religious practice is also performed with the explicit intention of challenging and questioning a certain order.

3.2. Basic research questions

The research aims at analysing the following questions:

- The ways in which migrant women and their offspring reconstruct religion in the public sphere.
- Whether and how religion is used as a tool for simultaneously redefining and accessing citizenship.
- Whether and how religion can be a terrain for implementing and increasing women's rights.
- Whether and how Muslims pose "exceptional" challenges to the European liberal/secular traditions or whether and how there are historical and current continuities between Islam and other minority religions in Europe.
- Whether and how we could see religious claims for redefining the boundary between public and private realms as sharing terrain with other social movements who are questioning the normativity of the secular/liberal/majority religious sphere.
- Whether and how the religiosity of migrant women challenges the historical configurations and the close connection between religion and national/ethnic identity in the countries of the research.

3.3. National case studies

This Work Package addresses the issue of gender and religion in four countries: Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

In Italy the research team has been studying the relationship between female migrants and religion in the neighbourhood of Centocelle in Rome. Collocated in East periphery, Centocelle, with a surface of 208,16 ha and 55.000 inhabitants, is one of the neighborhoods in which the presence of immigrants is more relevant in the town. The presence of immigrants noticeably affects the neighborhood thanks to "ethnic" stores, call centers, local associations and places of worship of several religions. Beside Catholic churches, in the area there are infact a mosque - the second bigger mosque in Rome - and a baptist church - inside which "ethnic" churchs (Philippine, Korean, Romain) live one beside the others. The research have been focusing on groups of

women of different ages who habitually attend the mosque and the Baptist church.

In Bulgaria, the study has been focusing on the dynamics of gender and religion among recently arrived immigrant Muslim groups. The target group will comprise immigrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa with different status (refugees, temporary residents, citizens).

In Greece, the research has been focusing on studying the relationship between religion, gender and intercultural interactions among Albanian and Bulgarian migrants. The case study is located in Athens, Greece and examines religious practices of Albanian and Bulgarian migrants who identify, or have in the past identified, themselves as Christian Orthodox, Muslim, or Catholic believers. The study will analyse these religious practices in the everyday migrant lives and trajectories, as well as the varying attitudes towards Greek Orthodox Christianity, the officially recognized 'dominant religion of the Greek state'.

In Turkey, the research has been focusing on migrant women from ex-Soviet countries, and Central and Eastern Europe such as Moldova, Ukraine, Belarussia, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia, who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians and various levels of religiosity.

The goal of the research is to find out how these migrant women relate to their religiosity, practice their religion and interact in their Churches in a dominantly Muslim country and culture such as the one in Turkey. Moreover, the research will question how orthodox Christian culture coexists with a Muslim culture, what kind of transformations are observed in religious identifications during the migration process vis-a-vis their gender roles. The Turkish case study will be located in Istanbul.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Data collection

We base our research on analysis of the literature on women migrants and religion and on fieldwork. A multisited ethnography, developed in one or two towns within the national countries under study (Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey), will allow to highlight the specificity of the various local contexts in comparison with other European countries and other local contexts. We hope that the comparative dimension will help to re-examine and re-contextualise some of the debates that keep portraying the tensions between secular and religious spheres in terms of a clash between Islamic and European so called “civilizations”. The methodology is entirely based on qualitative rather than quantitative research techniques, our fieldwork takes place in traditional religious spaces such as mosques, Islamic cultural centres, churches, Christian centres, but also in schools, municipalites, women’s associations and private homes.

Moreover, due to the increasing importance of the cyber-space for transnational networks, religious debate, new markets, e-forums, blogs, internet sites will be analyzed through discourse analysis.

Moreover local and transnational meetings are being attended to study the interaction between national and transnational settings and scales in fashioning women’s multiple belongings.

In the Italian context, fieldwork has been conducted through participant observation and open ended interviews. Some of the 20 open ended interviews with women and men have been conducted. The participant observation so far represents the main part of our data collection, and it has taken place during prayers, discussion groups, demonstrations, collective meals.

In Greece the study include participant observation in one Albanian and one Bulgarian church, interviews with Albanian and Bulgarian priests, as well as 10 in depth interviews and 5 focus group discussions with migrant women and men of Albanian and Bulgarian ethnic origin.

In Bulgaria, up to 16 interviews with immigrants of both sexes from Muslim countries (Middle East, Central Asia, Africa) and with representatives of relevant institutions (e.g. mufti office, imams, etc) will be conducted. Moreover, the research team will work by organizing focus groups (comprising not more than 5-6 participants).

In Turkey, 10 in-depth interviews have been conducted with migrant women from each national groups, comprising ex-Soviet countries, and Central and Eastern Europe such as Moldova, Ukraine, Belarussia, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia. We will also interview the representatives of these Churches in Turkey.

4.2 Timeframe of research

During the period February-October 2008 the 4 research teams (Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey) addressed the issue of the state of the art in academic analyses and in policy making. On November 2008, the partners have started fieldwork in their respective case studies. In April 2009 an intermediate meeting on the research status took place in Bologna; a second intermediate meeting will take place in Sofia in October 2009. The empirical research will last until October 2009; after that, during the following six months, the research teams will start writing the reports.

5. Research Team per Partner

Bulgaria: Marko Hajdinjak, Mila Mancheva, Evgenia Troeva

Greece: Pavlos Hatzopoulos, Nelli Kambouri

Italy: Sandro Mezzadra, Renata Pepicelli

Turkey: Dilek Cindoglu, Saime Ozcurumez

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