

# Navigating and Countering Everyday Antimuslim Racism: The Case of Muslim Women in Sweden

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## Abstract

In a socio-political context where antimuslim racism has gained momentum, this article aims to understand Muslim women's everyday life experiences of racialization in Sweden. More importantly, it aims to highlight what strategies are developed in order to navigate and counter these experiences. By using the concepts of double consciousness, orientations, and respectability together with an understanding of Muslims as a racialized category, the article shows how experiences of antimuslim racism are handled by the women in different ways, both on individual and collective level. Being a Muslim woman in Sweden requires developing strategies and sometimes engaging in respectability politics.

## Keywords

sociology, Muslim women, Sweden, double consciousness, antimuslim racism, respectability

## Introduction

It's like having a subscription to something that you have forgotten about and then you get annual reminders on your phone about it and you go 'oh, this again'.

The above quote is from a conversation I had with Aisha. Over a cup of coffee, on the top floor of Stockholm's arts and culture center, Aisha was telling me about her engagement in the protests on the Labor day in 2018, when she, together with a group of young Muslim women, decided to demonstrate against the EU ruling making it permissible for companies to ban headscarves and other religious symbols in the workplace. Aisha, herself a hijabi in her 20s, reflected on the media climate regarding Muslims and Islam in Sweden. She recalled how the debate on the hijab has been a recurring one, likening it to a subscription that one has forgotten about. The debates Aisha referred to have often drawn on preconceived ideas and discourses of Muslim culture being potentially incompatible with a perceived Swedish way of living. The parallel drawn to being reminded

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of a subscription one had forgotten about highlights the discrepancy Aisha is made to continuously feel between how she views herself and what is thought of women like her by the society. It is a reminder of her being a potential outsider or someone who needs to defend her choice of clothing.

In 2017, the Muslim population was estimated to be around 700,000 (including asylum seekers) (Pew Research Center, 2017), making Islam the second largest religion in Sweden. Colonial discourses on Islam and Muslims as the outsiders and 'Others' have not been a foreign concept in Sweden. Studies on media, history, and policies show how antimuslim racism (commonly also referred to as Islamophobia) has been prevalent within the Swedish society (Gardell, 2010). Media portrayals of Muslims and Islam have often revolved around issues such as terrorism and oppression, based on the incompatibility of Islam with a presumed Swedish culture (Axner, 2015; Brune, 2006; Hvitfelt, 1998). In recent years, the political climate has also seen a heightened level of antimuslim rhetoric both in debates and through policy proposals such as those on calling for a ban on the hijab in school. In the Swedish general elections in 2021, the radical-right wing party Sweden Democrats became the second largest political party in Sweden, gaining significant power and influence on government policies. With its ethno-nationalist agenda, often manifested through their rhetoric against Muslim immigrants specifically (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019) the popularity of the party has also led to a general radicalization of the right wing parties toward a populist anti-immigrant direction.

Muslims in Sweden make up a significant part of the immigrant population. Whereas the first Muslims that permanently established themselves in Sweden came from Russia and Turkey (Sorgenfrei, 2022), the current population of Muslim Swedes is a diverse group. Given the current political development, in line with developments in other parts of Europe, there is a need to deepen our understanding of antimuslim racism within the Swedish context. This study focuses on how a particular group of Swedish Muslim women like Aisha, who has spent a large part of her life in Sweden and views it as her home, navigate antimuslim racism in their everyday life.

Through a thematic analysis of individual and group interviews, I set out to understand what kind of experiences Muslim women have of racialization in their everyday lives? In what ways do these experiences affect them and their understanding of their place within the Swedish society? An important part of this study is to highlight what strategies they use in order to navigate and counter racialization? These questions tie into a larger question of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Sweden today.

I will start by highlighting what we know about the situation of Muslim women in Sweden through prior research. By using Du Bois' theoretical concept of double consciousness, Ahmed's notion of orientations, and Dazeys' discussion of respectability, I will show in what ways experiences of everyday antimuslim racism effects how the interlocutors navigate their surroundings and understand themselves in relation to the society.

## **From the Discourses of the Submissive Muslim Woman to the Dangerous Activist**

Although several thought-provoking analyses of Islamophobia has been developed (Allen, 2010; Sayyid and Vakil, 2010; Werbner, 2005), Garner and Selod (2015) note that most of the work dealing with Islamophobia has focused on macro-theoretical discussions of historic and current events, policies, and media portrayal. In a Swedish context, apart from research highlighting historical, political, and media discourses and portrayals of Muslim men as aggressors and Muslim women as oppressed objects (Axner, 2015; Brune, 2006; Gardell 2010; Hvitfelt, 1998), some

studies also show how antimuslim racism impacts and have real consequences for Muslims in different societal spheres.

Studies based on interviews and surveys show that pupils who define themselves as Muslim have experienced threats in school (Otterbeck and Bevelander, 2006; Save the Children, 2021). Reports show how Muslims or presumed Muslims experience antimuslim racism at the workplace (Abdullahi, 2016; Olseryd et al., 2021). Having a Muslim sounding name can lead to exclusion of applicants from the recruitment process (Arai et al., 2016), also pointing to the possibility of people with Arabic names being discriminated both on the basis of ethnicity and religion. This also results in some opting for changing their names in order to increase their chances of employment (Khosravi 2012).

In a report from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Olseryd et al., 2021), a study based on interviews and analysis of police reports on Islamophobic hate crimes shows how these hate crimes often occur in public arenas. For Muslim women who publicly manifest their religious affiliation by wearing hijab harassment and micro-aggressive encounters are part of their everyday lives (Gardell, 2015; Listerborn, 2015). The fact that women wearing hijab are particularly prone to different kinds of exclusion is also shown in a study on White Muslim female converts who highlight their experiences of exclusion from a presumed White Swedishness upon donning the hijab (Jakku, 2018).

The research mentioned above brings forth how the problem of antimuslim racism can be found in various strands of the Swedish society, such as media, school, workplace including the recruitment process, and public spaces. Some research has also highlighted the work Muslims engage in, in order to counter antimuslim racism. For example, Karlsson Minganti (2014) sheds light on a younger generation of men and women using comedy as a tool to play with negative stereotypes of Muslims as well as young Muslim fashion entrepreneurs creatively countering stereotypes about the hijab (Karlsson Minganti and Österlind, 2016). Muslim women who, through activism, engage in antiracist struggle, taking on public debates and policies regarding Muslims and Islam in Sweden, have also highlighted the backlash they receive (Jakku, 2019). Reports and studies have also indicated how people who have experienced antimuslim racism use certain coping strategies including hiding ones religious identity and being overly conscious of one's behavior (Abdullahi, 2016; Olseryd et al., 2021). Current study aims to further deepen our understanding on a wide group of Muslim women's experiences of racialization and in particular the strategies they use in order to navigate and counter antimuslim discourses and practices in their everyday life.

### *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*

Over a century ago, WEB DuBois posed this question in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, on the oppression of Black people in the United States. In order to understand how racism affected the African American population, DuBois developed the concept of double consciousness. According to Du Bois (1903), double consciousness is a kind of double sight where people who experience racism come to see themselves through the gaze of the majority society. This, according to Du Bois, hampers the process of expressing a full sense of one's subjectivity. Being viewed as a problem ignites a process of regulating one's behavior according to how others view you. This discrepancy between the outer and inner idea of self causes a splitted sense of self and a heightened need to strive toward a sense of coherence.

The idea of double consciousness was originally used as a means to highlight the effects of racism on the African American community. Its objective was to understand how social structures of racism affected those experiencing the oppression. The concept has since been applied to various

minority communities' experiences of oppression including Muslim communities in Europe and North America (Bibi, 2022; Islam, 2020; Meer, 2010).

Nasar Meer (2010) uses the notion of double consciousness in order to understand Islamophobia in a British context. Inspired by this concept, he speaks of a Muslim consciousness emerging in the United Kingdom as a means to counter marginalizing structures. Meer argues for the importance of analyzing muslimness as a sociological category, especially during phases where process of objectification is heightened, which is the current case for Muslims in Sweden. Whereas Meer uses this concept in order to understand the situation for Muslims in a British context on a macro-level, I intend to make use of the concept on a micro-level, understanding women's own narratives within a Swedish context.

## Racialization of Muslims in Everyday Life

In this study, I use the concept of racialization of Muslims. Racialization is here understood as a process (Omi and Winant, 1986) but in line with further discussions and evolving of the concept, I comply with the idea that this process, besides race, can also be based on culture norms and values (Meer and Modood, 2010; Selod, 2015). In *thinking through Islamophobia*, Vakil (2010) concludes 'Religion is raced, and Muslims are racialized' (p. 276). This understanding is based on the idea that racialization, both historically and in current time, includes traits beyond biology where the notion of the superiority of a group has equally been based on religion and culture (Goldberg, 2006). Islamophobia has often been contested based on the argument that it is not a race. However, taking her point of departure from DuBois idea of 'race and religion constellation', Topolski (2018) argues that the intertwining of race and religion came to be masked in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War leading to a reluctance to acknowledge Islamophobia. While discussing racialization of Muslims, Meer and Modood (2010) highlight how categorizations of groups have far more likely been based on presumed group differences based on upbringing, customs, and traditions rather than biological differences. Racialization of Muslims can be based on appearance, one such marker being the hijab, but it can also be based on an Arabic sounding name, cultural traits, norms, and values. Muslims are continuously asked to clarify their stance on values related to secularism, homophobia, and sexism, values almost prerequisite in order to become accepted in society (Meer, 2010). In her study on how Muslim identity in the United States has become increasingly racialized, Selod (2015) notes how fellow citizens act as gatekeepers to social citizenship, by interrogating Muslims about their loyalty toward the country. This process can be seen as an important part within everyday experience of racialization as well as a kind of disciplining of Muslims (Sayyid and Vakil, 2010). According to Garner and Selod (2015), racialization of Muslims can be viewed as a process, whereas Islamophobia is a snapshot of the outcome. Whereas Islamophobia is about the study of how Islam as a religion is vilified, racialization puts the focus on the impact of Islamophobia on Muslims (Selod, 2015). In this study, the focus lies on *racialization of Muslims* as a process and the concept I make use of is everyday antimuslim racism.

### *To Study the Everyday of Muslim Racialization*

In a quest to bridge the gap between micro and macro understandings of racism, Philomena Essed (1991) developed a theory of everyday racism, which she defines as:

a process in which (a) socialized racist notions are integrated into meaning that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (b) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and

repetitive, and (c) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations. (p. 52)

The theory of everyday racism is based on the idea that structures are produced and upheld through interactions, hence emphasizing the importance of empirically studying the phenomenon. Everyday interactions follow scripts that are influenced by society's socio-historical context; however, it is through everyday practices that structures of racism are maintained. Although an extensive area of research, sociology of everyday life has not engaged much with research on racism. In an article on everyday life research and the subject area of ethnicity and racism, Andrew Smith (2015) shows how everyday life research has not been able to see racialization as an incorporated part of everyday life. He argues that the focus on everyday life can tell us a great deal about racism and above all about how racialization takes place and its effects on people's lives. The preconceived instructions (commonsense world) for how to speak and behave in everyday life are not neutral but are influenced by society's dominant ideology and structure (Essed, 1991). These instructions are shaped on the basis of society's structures including racist ideas resulting in different consequences for minority and majority groups.

In this study, the theory of everyday racism is used in order to understand how racialization of Muslim women takes place within their everyday life. Racialization puts the focus on the *process* of how everyday racism comes about. Here, I am focusing on what can be understood as *everyday antimuslim racism*. Everyday antimuslim racism is understood as being based upon historically developed structures and ideologies (Gardell, 2010). By recurring and familiar experiences and the fact that the women reflect on them, I will show how they impact on their understanding of themselves and their position within the Swedish society. Furthermore, the focus on racialization as it occurs within everyday life also opens up the possibility to explore the other central part of this study's aim, namely, how the interlocutors handle and resist everyday antimuslim racism.

## Tactics of Orientation

Meer highlights following two questions as central to DuBois' thought: *how can one achieve a mature self-consciousness and an integrity or wholeness of self in an alienating environment? If, in the eyes of another, your humanity is perceived as lacking self-evidential qualities, how do you go about showing its existence?* (Meer, 2019: 58–59). A central aim of this study is to understand what strategies the interlocutors apply in order to navigate or counter experiences of everyday antimuslim racism. In a way, this relates to the questions posed above on how to maintain and manifest one's own humanity within an alienating environment. Here, I will make use of the phenomenological concept of *orientations* as well as the concept of *respectability*. According to Ahmed, we are oriented toward things, values, norms, and people. This orientation toward something requires familiarity: 'the question of orientation becomes then, a question not only about how we "find our way" but how we come to "feel at home"' (Ahmed, 2006: 7). To be oriented is thus to recognize oneself and be comfortable in one's surroundings. Ahmed develops Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the concept of *lived body* by arguing that our gender and skin color also affect how we relate to our environment. To be oriented, Ahmed believes, is ultimately about feeling safe enough in an environment that the body 'merges' with its surroundings (Ahmed, 2006: 134). On the other hand, when people do not feel at home, disorientation takes place, where one feels out of place (Ahmed, 2006).

In order to navigate and handle these situations, people develop various tactics of orientations that can be personal as well as social (Sigvardsdotter, 2012). A concept that has been helpful while discussing some of these tactics is respectability politics. Originally coined by Higginbotham (1993),

respectability politics has come to be understood as a set of strategies mainly used by those possessing some socioeconomic capital within marginalized groups in order to counter negative representations and bring forth alternative images of these groups in public (Dazey, 2021). The strategies are often of reactive character as they are formulated in response to suspicion. They work to alter public behavior and images of marginalized groups (Higginbotham, 1993: 196 as referenced in Dazey, 2021). Often the strategies within this kind of politics include disciplining of one's body and speech into the social norms of society. The objective, however, is to advance the conditions of the whole group. Through the years, respectability politics have been subject to critique for individualizing social inequalities and leading to compliance with dominant social norms and structures. However, Dazey (2021) highlights how respectability politics falls between outright resistance and total compliance, often combining different ways of compliance, apathy, and resistance against marginalizing structures. Thus, actions of oppressed communities often lead to simultaneous effects of transformation and reproduction. They can both be enabling and limiting and points toward the complex nature of how groups handle oppressive structures.

In this article, I intend to highlight different tactics of orientation taking place on both individual and collective levels and discuss some of these tactics as strategies of respectability.

By using the theoretical concepts presented above, this study is a further contribution to the call for more empirically grounded knowledge on Islamophobia (Garner and Selod, 2015). It will highlight what kind of experiences Muslim women have of antimuslim racism within a Swedish context. Moreover, this study will put focus on the kind of tools and strategies the interlocutors use in order to navigate and counter everyday antimuslim racism.

## **Methodological Reflections**

This study is part of a project on Muslim women, arts, and activism in Sweden. The overall aim of the project has been to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the current Swedish context. The empirical data upon which the analysis for this particular study is based consist of interviews with in total 30 interlocutors; 21 individual interviews and 2 group interviews with a total of 9 interlocutors.

The recruitment process for this study was based on a snowball strategy where I initially contacted Muslim organizations, faith-based study associations, and social media group networks. Through these channels, I was given names of people to contact. I was also provided with contacts through my social circle and colleagues. The first interlocutors gave me further suggestions of people to contact. Not all the individual interviews were explicitly focused on antimuslim racism. The reason for this is the wider aim of the project where I was also interested in understanding Muslim women countering societal narratives through art and activism. The interviews done with artists, for example, mainly revolved around questions on art, identity, and representation which I have focused on elsewhere (Muftee, 2023; Muftee and León Rosales, 2022). However, antimuslim racism was in one way or other a topic present in most interviews, and as this was one of the most prevalent themes, I subsequently carried out further interviews with a specific focus on the topic. The two group interviews were carried out with the focus on antimuslim racism. The group interviews were carried out in collaboration with the Muslim Study Association Ibn Rushd that helped me find interlocutors through the associations' social media network channels. All the interviews were carried out in waves in 2019–2021. They lasted between 50 minutes and 3 hours. In some instances, I also re-contacted the interlocutors for follow-up questions.

One thing in common for the interlocutors is the fact that they all are, in different ways, actively engaged within the Swedish society. All but two of the interlocutors have gone through the Swedish education system which makes them well aware of their rights and obligations within the society as

well as articulate regarding various societal issues. Ten of the interlocutors were or had previously been engaged in the Muslim civil society. Six were students at a Swedish university. Other interlocutors were artists (engaged in visual art, poetry, and theater), one was a fashion influencer, two had been politically active, and ten of the interlocutors were also active in organizations and networks working with feminist and antiracist issues. The interlocutors were between the ages of 18 and 45. Two of the interlocutors were converts. All but four had grown up in the larger cities of Sweden. Many of them lived or had grown up in the suburbs of cities in Sweden, areas known as socioeconomically deprived. Many of the interlocutors have engaged in a process of upward social mobility.

## Becoming Aware of Racialization

Some of the earliest experiences of everyday antimuslim racism that most of the interlocutors bring up come from their school years. This is not a surprise, as educational institutions are where children are subjected and socialized into societal norms, discourses, and structures. This includes experiencing racialization and becoming aware of one's positioning in society (Phoenix, 2009). Furthermore, a recent Swedish report shows how antimuslim racism, in different forms, can be part of students' everyday experiences both in interactions with other students as well as teachers (Save the Children, 2021).

Reema, a social worker in her 30s, recalls her first experience of racialization when she was in the seventh grade:

(Example 1)

There was a poster made by students from the 9th grade for a school assignment. So, on one of the pictures it was stated that its permissible to hit women according to the Quran and that made me so surprised because I couldn't recognize that so I just remember thinking what a hostile and ignorant statement. [. . .] I just thought that they simplified everything, even the pillars of Islam, that it was so shallow, no spiritual aspect, or perspective of peace and justice which I grew up with. [. . .] I also remember there was an instance after 9/11. So, there was one person in my class. When he found out I was Muslim he blurted out 'You're like Bin Laden', something like that. He could just make such a comment. (Reema)

Reema's initial experience includes her realization of a discrepancy between her own understanding of her religious identity and how it is viewed by others, in this case other students who made the poster. This discrepancy can be viewed as an initial experience of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), where Reema becomes aware of how her religious identity is viewed as incompatible with the society at large. Reema gives us a recollection of experiences that took place in the aftermath of 9/11 when she was in her early teenage years. Although she never really countered these experiences directly, the fact that she still remembers them shows that they had an impact on her. Reema works in a socioeconomically deprived suburb and she has also been active in various organizations, working with issues related to different forms of racism.

Sahar, a woman in her mid-30s, works as an assistant principal in a school that is located in a socioeconomically deprived area. She recalls an experience from her childhood:

(Example 2)

My teacher asked me, when we lived there, how one converts to Islam. I was in the 4th grade and so I explained how it's done and that you recite the Islamic creed and he asked 'how does that sound?' and so I recited it in Arabic. He starts laughing, and says in front of the whole class 'It sounds like a really bad drunk song'. I will never forget that, it just left such a strong mark on me. (Sahar)

Sahar moves on to explain how when recalling the experience, she's still in a disbelief that one would go after a child like that. She goes on:

I work a lot with children and I'm passionate about children's rights. I think it has a lot to do with what I experienced as a child myself. The adults that were supposed to be adults but behaved like racists. (Sahar)

Sahar's initial experience of racialization comes from a time when she lived in a small town of Sweden, where her family was among the only Muslims in town. The instance she recalls includes a strong feeling of being shamed. Not only does the teacher mock her, but this process takes place publicly as 'He starts laughing, and says in front of the whole class', positioning Sahar as *Othered* in relation to her classmates. Like Reema, the early experiences of racialization impacted Sahar's career choice, igniting her passion for children's rights. Sahar later tells me, how she, as a 12-year-old, started wearing the hijab for a while to school as an act of resistance. This goes in line with studies that show how Muslim girls may early on position themselves as representatives of their religion in order to counter the narratives circulating in their school environment (see also Johannessen, 2021).

## The Stare

Another prevalent theme in the interviews is the experiences of being stared at by strangers. Studies show how Muslim women who visibly manifest their religious identity are prone to be targeted with micro-aggressive behavior and outright violence in public arena (Gardell, 2015; Listerborn, 2015). Mariam, a mother of two in her 30s, has been active in the Swedish Muslim civil society for many years. She reflects on this phenomenon:

(Example 3)

Sometimes it feels like you are someone and you feel a certain way but the other person doesn't think of you that way. For example, I went to pick up my son from his football practice. So we were walking through an area which is quite segregated and I noticed, the moment we entered the area there's a sense of irritation among people sitting there. They look and look, like they really stare at you. It's uncomfortable. You are out walking with your family. We are not doing anything that they aren't doing. They are out eating, we are out eating. They're eating ice cream, we are eating ice cream. It's just because of this image, I don't know. I noticed something during the parental leave which I don't think is good for the children. You cannot be heard too much, say thank you, say I'm sorry. You become like this, you cannot be seen, the children cannot be seen because we can be perceived as wild animals. And sometimes it can be like, this person may not be thinking like that but you just think like that automatically. (Mariam)

Mariam recalls a particular experience that revolves around being stared at while walking through an area and what processes this experience unleashed in her. Being stared at manifest a potential discrepancy between how she views herself and how she is being perceived by others. Again, as in the example from Reema, this discrepancy highlights the essence of double consciousness, that of becoming aware of the potential fact that others are viewing you differently than yourself (Du Bois, 1903). Whereas Reema recalled an experience that made her aware of becoming racialized, Mariam speaks of a reoccurring experience of being a woman who wears the hijab and moves through public spaces (Listerborn, 2015). This double sight surfaces as a sense of discomfort in her and she realizes that she is projecting this discomfort on to her children, through controlling their behavior. According to Sayyid (2010), antimuslim racism includes an element of disciplining. What we see here is how this disciplining takes place both by the stares that ignite discomfort in Mariam but also by Mariam regulating the behaviors of her children.



What is important to note here is the simultaneous self-reflection on the fact of not being sure whether the stares are hostile or not. According to Essed (1991), the reflection upon whether something is racism or not entails an inner argumentation regarding the different potential meanings of an experience. People who are subject to racism often develop an intuition regarding how to interpret a situation. Mariam also expresses her inner dialogue regarding how to perceive people's stares. Are they real or are they just in her head? Regardless, the implication of the stares unleashes a trail of actions and reactions. What thus matters in this case is to understand how this manifestation of double consciousness affects her decision to move through the area with her family, controlling her and her children's behavior.

Batul highlights an instance when she was out walking with her two other Muslim friends:

(Example 4)

This thing with being stared at. I guess it depends on how sensitive you are that day. Your own resilience. But sometimes it is enough that something has happened. Recently, there has been a lot about Afghanistan and the Taliban. I noticed a difference immediately. Me and my friend. We were out together with another friend. There were three of us and we look quite Muslim (laughs). I noticed a lot more stares that week. I asked, God how many looks there are. So, I asked one of my friends. She doesn't care, she's always like; I don't notice anything, people can stare at me for hours and I wouldn't notice a thing. Because she's just put on that attitude, I'm looking down. But she also said that there are a lot of stares. (Batul)

Batul relates her experience to the current events maintaining how she would notice a difference in attitude and a lot more stares after the media reporting on events going on in Afghanistan. She also highlights how her friend has developed a strategy in order to cope; that of ignoring and not being bothered by the stares or looking down when walking. But in certain instances, even that tactic doesn't work, specifically when something has happened; in this case, an event that in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on terror has strongly linked terrorism with being a Muslim. This process of double consciousness includes an understanding of how media coverage of world events affects Batul and her friends strolling around the streets. But it also shows an awareness of how she might be viewed by the onlookers. In another part of our conversation, she explains how one of her ways of dealing with being stared at is to say "hello", as a way to disrupt the power dynamics and taking control of the situation.

All these examples can be understood as moments of disorientation. According to Ahmed (2006), orientation requires a certain feeling of comfortableness in one's surroundings. The stare from the stranger ignites moments of discomfort and realization of potentially not belonging to the place one is in. The stare thus reminds the women of the impossibility for their bodies to merge with their surroundings (Ahmed, 2006: 134). The way the women navigate these experiences can be understood as strategies of respectability, these include monitoring and controlling one's own and the behavior of one's children, pretending not to notice, or saying hello in order to disrupt the suspicion of others. The strategies used here are reactive, as they are used as a response to marginalization. However, they play an important part in order to dismantle an uncomfortable situation and its potential to accelerate into something more.

## **The Good Muslim Woman – The Challenge of Representation**

Whereas the previous two sections highlighted experiences of racialization and how these experiences are dealt by the interlocutors, this section brings attention to a more symbolic struggle, that of representation. The women featured in this study have earned or are in the process of getting a University education in Sweden. Most of them belong to the first or second generation of migrant

families and are born or raised in Sweden. These women often find themselves among first and few, Brown, Black, Muslim women entering different spaces in their everyday lives in Sweden. Be it at their university programs, schools, neighborhoods, or workplaces. This actualizes questions regarding representation, a topic brought up by all interlocutors.

Nesrin is an influencer in her 20s. At a young age, she made a name for herself by taking a step into the Swedish fashion community as a hijabi woman. For her, the stare is an everyday occurrence in her work environment:

(Example 5)

Sometimes I feel really tired of this industry. I attend a lot of press events and it's just me who wears the hijab. All the staring going on. [...] I have felt so many times I would like to stay home and watch a serial. At the same time, I feel, the more someone like me is seen the more it will broaden the view of people. I try to think about those who will come after me. The future. That I should take the fight so we can see a change. (Nesrin)

Nesrin, like Mariam and Batul, brings up the issue of being stared at as something uncomfortable, but for her the position of being a representative outweighs the discomfort caused by being stared at. She is willing to take up this position for the sake of pushing the boundaries of who is to be allowed to enter certain spaces within her work field. The work of Nesrin can also be understood through the lens of respectability, where she highlights a big factor for her being that of bringing forth alternative images of Muslim women and thereby countering negative representation (Dazey, 2021). While discussing the question of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Sweden today in one of the group interviews, Kholod and Rania, both University students in their 20s, share their reflections:

(Example 6)

Kholod: I don't know why but the word that is coming to my mind is responsibility.

Rania: Yeah.

Mehek: Can you expand on that?

Kholod: It is a responsibility in a way, at least in this society because you have to think about how you behave, how you look, how you speak.

Rania: You feel like a representative. At least I do. Let's say you're a hijabi and you're having a normal conversation on the subway, and you raise your voice. People won't think 'oh these youngsters', they'll go 'oh these Muslims'. You can't really be a normal person, you're just a Muslim woman. And then you're a representative for.

Kholod: The whole of Islam. (laughs)

Rania: Yeah, Muslims around the world. (deepening her voice)

Taking up the position as a representative is sometimes done by the women themselves, as a conscious effort to counter stereotypes. Sometimes, however, it is felt as a positioning given by society. *To have to think about how you behave, how you look, how you speak* manifests double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) at work. The second sight, namely the awareness of the projections being made, also comes about when Rania reflects on how raising one's voice on the subway would spark the reaction 'oh these Muslims' rather than seeing them as normal teenagers. However, both Kholod and Rania brush off the burden of this positioning by laughing it off.

Nimo, a University student and a spoken word poet in her 20s, highlights the difficulty with becoming a representative of Muslims in Sweden.

(Example 7)

I think it's important that it becomes normalized that Muslim women are capable. People assume that I represent Muslim women when I'm actually only representing myself. Not all Muslim women think alike or want the same things. And Islam is such a vast religion, I don't know everything. People think that I know just because I wear the hijab. And they expect straightforward answers, direct answers to their questions. I often tell them that if they're interested in Islam, they can go and read themselves. Why am I to stand here and be a google search function for them. And I get asked typical questions like why do you wear the veil? Isn't that oppressive? And sometimes when I do not want to go out or do not want to be outside when it is dark, then it's like is it because you aren't allowed to? No, it's because I do not want to. Why do I not drink? These are questions that I actually do not have the strength to answer. (Nimo)

The example from Nimo manifests a positioning against being viewed as representatives of Muslims and being asked questions that they find too personal. The notions of not being seen as what Nimo calls to 'google search engine' are strong words used to explain what other people's questions and prejudices feel like. The constant answering up to others questions about one's religious identity in everyday life is an important aspect of being racialized as Muslim. In a study on American Muslims, Selod shows how the Muslim identity in the United States has become increasingly racialized and how this process often takes place when fellow citizens act as gatekeepers to social citizenship. This role of gatekeeping takes place through repetitive questions in regard to culture, norms, and values that interrogates and challenges their nationality and loyalty toward the United States. Selod argues that private citizens work as agents setting Muslim identity apart from American cultural community and simultaneously reinforcing what it means to be American. Questions about terrorism, wearing or not wearing the hijab, and alcohol consumption, regardless of being posed as curious questions or outright prejudice, when posed repeatedly in the everyday lives of these women, function as a way to position them as potential outsiders.

The interlocutors learn to navigate these questions or the gaze from the majority society. Sometimes, this process involves the work of becoming the good example. In order to represent one need to be representable and this representability entails as we have seen Kholod put it, having to: *think about how you behave, how you look, how you speak*. Saadiya reflects further on this:

(Example 8)

Saadiya: I think I'm good at being able to meet people where they are. Whether they are malicious or not, I'm good at dealing with them 'Okay, I see you, I hear you but it can also be this way or that way'. I have also used myself as an example many times.

Mehek: Used yourself?

Saadiya: Kind of like 'These people from X or Y are just hooligans', I'll respond 'There are people who are very good' and take myself as an example.

Mehek: You're from X?

Saadiya: Exactly. So I'm one of those hooligans. So I can say that I myself am a refugee, I'm Muslim. I am from X.

Mehek: How does that feel?

Saadiya: It's exhausting actually (laughs). It can be extremely tough and exhausting. I had to take a break for a few years. I kind of burnt myself out.

Saadiya, a women's rights activist in her 30s, has been engaged within both the Muslim civil society and wider Swedish civil society organizations. Again, we see a strategy of respectability being used; by using herself as an example in conversations and discussion, Saadiya engages in the work of bringing forth alternative images to counter the prejudice she meets. However, she explains how

the constant use of herself as the positive representative to being a refugee and Muslim from the suburb is an exhausting process. Exhaustion in one form or another is a common trait among many of the interlocutors (Muftee and León Rosales, 2022). What Saadiya and also Nimo highlight in a previous example, ‘These are questions that I actually do not have the strength to answer’, bring up another important aspect related to representation; the constant work of orienting and adjusting to the gaze of the other is a defensive state that also hampers one’s self-confidence (Du Bois, 1903). Respectability politics is a tiring process.

A report from Discrimination Ombudsman (Axner, 2015) shows how images of Muslim women within media discourses have somewhat shifted toward portraying them as strong, independent, and vocal. However, these stereotypes are often highlighted as exceptions to the rule. While discussing the recurring binaries between the notions of good Muslim/bad Muslim, Shryock (2010) argues that the idea of the good Muslim is equally problematic as it mounts from the same politics of fear from where antimuslim racism is hailing, a position of othering. Current study highlights how the pressure of being the good Muslim is experienced by women who in their quest to take up the position of representation ultimately find themselves feeling exhausted and not fully seen as the individuals they are.

## Strategies of Orientation

In the previous themes, along with examples of racialization, we have seen strategies used by the interlocutors when navigating and countering the various everyday situations they may find themselves in. In this last section, I would like to bring up examples of coping and countering strategies.

Sometimes the strategies used can be seemingly small but meaningful acts of coping. Sharing humorous banter is one such example. Studies show how humor, on a collective level, has played an important role, in creatively questioning societal stereotypes about what it means to be Muslim in the West (Bilici, 2010; Dakrouy, 2012; Karlsson Minganti, 2016). Whereas these are examples of humor being shared with a wide audience through media forums, humor is also used as a means to cope with everyday life encounters with antimuslim racism:

(Example 9)

- Habiba: That’s a thing with my friends. We joke about these things. We take it as a joke. We take racism as a joke. Because it is so absurd that its laughable.
- Mehek: Can you share an example?
- Habiba: It might be something about privileges, that it is a privilege as a hijabi when no one sits next to you on the bus. Eh or like. Just when you’re with friends. ‘Can I taste the cake from your plate?’ ‘No, you’re a hijabi, I don’t think you should touch my food’. Things like that. It’s really normal that we joke about these things. Usually it’s things that we have experienced or heard about.

To collectively banter and joke about common experiences is a way of coping with otherwise difficult experiences. We see this happening both in this case and the previous example where Kholod and Rania also laugh off the idea of representing a religion and Muslims around the world. In a way, humor can be viewed both as a way to connect with friends and a tactic of orientation. It helps creating a friendly space where one can feel at ease and make sense of what otherwise doesn’t make sense. Having no one sitting next to oneself on a full bus is an example of a situation where one is made to feel out of place (Ahmed, 2006). In certain everyday situations, the interlocutors

cannot engage in outright resistance. The prejudice or exclusion they may encounter in everyday life can be subtle. An important dimension of respectability politics is the role so-called 'safe spaces' can play in order to share experiences and build each others confidence (Dazey, 2021; Higginbotham, 1993). Here, the humorous banter among friends can be understood as recognizing each other as subjects. Reema highlights another way of handling disorientation.

(Example 10)

- Reema: I have a pair of golden earrings that I usually put on when I'm about to do something that feels a bit scary, to gain strength and courage to follow through and just remember that wow I never thought this is where I would be when I was a kid. [...] It's a small pair in gold that I got from my parents. That I always wore as a child. I wore them during the interview when I was a bit nervous, as a reminder of why I'm doing this and for whom. I'm doing this because it's important and that it's not about me as a person. Do you get it?
- Mehek: That you're doing it for your parents?
- Reema: No, more like for me, for my children and everyone else in society. In order to bring forth a voice that is seldom heard and represented. My driving force is my children.

For Reema, her earrings work as an anchoring device (Sigvardsdotter, 2012) a symbol that reminds her of what really matters, her life story of her coming to Sweden as a child of refugees, working her way to a University education, and building a decent life in Sweden. The example she shares with me is from an interview she gave in the media many years ago. Knowing how the Swedish media tend to depict Muslim women in a negative manner (Axner, 2015), Reema felt nervous before the meeting. By wearing a pair of earrings that hold alot of symbolic meaning to her, she could remind herself why she had decided to do the interview. The earrings can be viewed as a tool for orientation, a material thing that helped her take control over her own storyline and reminding her that she is opening doors for her children and others.

Sometimes the strategies that are made use of become outright countering of experiences of everyday antimuslim racism. Shirin, a woman in her 30s, has been engaged both within the Muslim and Swedish civil society for many years. She recalls an incident that led to a mobilized act of resistance:

(Example 11)

It was a librarian who jumped on me in a queue and claimed that I had stolen a book from the library [...] I had been on a meeting at the library, and so when I stand in line just to buy a sandwich from a place close by, a woman taps on my shoulder and says when are you going to return the Quran you have stolen? And I really did not understand what she was talking about. I hadn't borrowed a book but I came from the library. Then I understood that it was another girl in a headscarf who several years ago had borrowed a book without returning it according to this woman. I had a friend on the phone and she reacted strongly. She said this is a violation of library confidentiality. It's a crime. The loan protection is very strong. One should not reveal what book people have borrowed. I told this lady that now you have to stop because I have not borrowed any book. Then I actually called her boss and told her this has happened and it is problematic for all these reasons. Then they called me and asked if this woman could call me and I said yes and then she calls and she is incredibly ashamed and sorry. And I was very clear with her, you have done this and this wrong and it is problematic for these reasons. I said, it's racist, Islamophobic and it's a violation of the law. I chose to write about this on social media. [...] And I thought that was a pretty good strategy. Partly to be able to document a process and be able to strengthen others to be able to do the same instead of remaining silent. (Shirin)

This instance of racial othering is based on Shirin being accused by a librarian to have stolen a copy of the Quran from the library. Being viewed as a suspected thief is not an uncommon experience among minority communities. For some, it can be a part of their everyday lives when going shopping. But Shirin provides a detailed demonstration of how she decides to not let this instance slide by. She makes use of several anchoring tools in order to reorient herself from a humiliating situation of publicly being accused of theft. These tools include receiving support from her friend who tells her what the librarian actually did wrong, calling and filing a complaint to the librarians' boss, deciding to confront the librarian and let her know what she did wrong, and finally deciding to share her story on Facebook. Social media has become a powerful tool, not the least for minority groups to share and mobilize their voices and experiences (Brown et al., 2017). It can thus be seen as a platform where the interlocutors seek regaining of orientation, through their friends, fellow activists, and others with similar experiences. Being able to write what has happened, receiving likes and comments can be an important way in gaining support and recognition of what has happened. To share the experience on social media is also a powerful way to both highlight to wider society certain experiences and racist encounters Muslim women have as well as empower other women to share their experiences, knowing they are not alone.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have, together with highlighting Muslim women's experiences of everyday anti-Muslim racism, explored what strategies they use in order to navigate and sometimes counter these experiences. Experiences of racialization tend to be tied to the interlocutors' early school years. For some, these experiences have influenced their decisions to engage in the society in different ways. The everyday experiences of racialization include subtle micro-aggressive behaviors such as being stared at, experiences that forces the interlocutors to engage in internal dialogue. Often these dialogues are developed through several similar encounters that have helped them recognizing a situation as racism (Essed, 1991).

A range of strategies are used by the interlocutors. On an individual level, the tactics highlighted are to ignore the situation by looking away (Example 4), saying hello and initiate contact (Example 4), regulating one's behavior (Example 3), reminding oneself of the importance of opening doors for the next generation of Muslims (Examples 5 and 10), engaging in polite explanation (Example 8), using oneself as a positive example (Example 8), refusing to answer to other people's prejudice (Example 7), and getting information of one's own rights (Example 11). The collective strategies highlighted include humor and laughing it off with friends who share the experience (Examples 6 and 9) and sharing experiences on social media (Example 11).

Being a Muslim woman in Sweden today entails grappling with thoughts and feelings stemming from a double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903). The interlocutor's self-work, in order to lead a decent life in Sweden, includes actively navigating negative images, prejudice, and structural racism as part of their everyday life. This work is not easy and the interlocutors highlight exhaustion and tiredness as common states at some point in their life. This is particularly the case in relation to the work of representation which sometimes puts the interlocutors in a defensive state, having to answer up to others' questions and prejudice. The work of representation can be viewed as a two-fold process: it is both directed toward the majority as a way to counter negative images as well as toward the Muslim community as a way of opening doors, being a role model.

Meer highlights two questions as central to DuBois' thought: *how can one achieve a mature self-consciousness and an integrity or wholeness of self in an alienating environment? If, in the eyes of another, your humanity is perceived as lacking self-evidential qualities, how do you go about showing its existence?* (Meer, 2019: 58–59). In a way, the interlocutors seek answers to these

questions both on a personal- and collective level. Some of the strategies used by the interlocutors can be understood as engaging in respectability politics. The women engage in a countering of negative images, finding ways to react against societal prejudice and racism. They also sometimes alter their behavior as to navigate certain everyday situations. Respectability politics has received criticism for reinforcing societal norms and not really bringing about any structural change (Dazey, 2021). However, as we have seen some of these strategies are used in order to cope with situations the interlocutors find themselves in within their everyday life. The questions posed above have no straightforward answers. What the strategies used by these women show is how the work to counter antimuslim racism is carried out in myriads of different ways, everyday, on individual and sometimes collective level.

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