Beyond ‘the Stepford Wives Syndrome’

British Muslim Women Negotiating Secular Spaces

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Abstract

Moving away from politicised and institutional agendas, research on Muslims has now begun to document the voices and concerns of individual Muslim women. Based on two years of doctoral fieldwork in and around London, this paper raises methodological dilemmas in the study of Muslim communities. It then presents data showcasing how Muslim women are successfully creating hybrid identities, and navigating new sites and opportunities for mutual exchange with non-Muslims. It argues that their public interactions as religious women living in a liberal secular society provide hope for a plural Britain, built on a convivial and interactive model of integration.

Keywords

Muslim women – Britain – secularism – identity – hybridity

1 Introduction

It’s almost akin to the Stepford wives syndrome ... we don’t have a say, we don’t decide, we don’t choose. That said, I recognise that for a lot of Muslim women that is the reality. But that’s not all of us, that doesn’t take into account the diverse backgrounds. The fact (is) that some of us, many of us, have lived here all our lives, many of us are converts, many of us are professionals. I find that situation frustrating.

AMY, Black Muslim convert

While early studies documented the more macro-level, institutional and politically contingent aspects of Muslim life in Britain, recent research has presented a deeper engagement with the daily lives, motivations and voices of the individuals who make up Muslim societies. It is plain that we can no longer ignore the vast majority of Muslims who are living beyond official bodies and institutions (Jeldtoft and Nielsen, 2012; Dessing et al., 2013); a study of selective Muslim institutions, economic trends and radicalisation issues raised by the media leaves us with a partial and reductionist picture. Respondent Amy's plea, quoted above, for greater depth and diversity in the representation of Muslim women is now being heard. Recent anthropological and sociological ethnographies have begun to recognise that 'focusing only on the visual and the ritual narrows down Islamic identity considerably' (Bectovic, 2012: 21).

Instead, with regard to research on Muslim women in particular, we see greater nuance in settings and a desire to allow individual voices to 'have a say', with studies focusing on areas such as youth work with Muslim girls and participation in labour markets and civil society (Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Combining ethnographic methods with an iterative approach to research themes, these emerging studies are filling a long-standing gap; they highlight issues significant to Muslim women themselves, and document previously unheard, non-institutional voices.

Sariya Contractor (2012: 6) argues that 'in the British context it is important to explore these women's layered identities and the multifaceted contributions that they are making, and can be encouraged to make, within pluralist society'. In her book *Muslim Women in Britain*, she uses a feminist participatory methodology to emphasise the importance of working alongside her participants, rather than imposing researcher agendas; her work, she emphasises, is '*with and for* Muslim women' (ibid.: 37, italics original). As a result of her 'listening' to individual women, she identifies certain recurring themes within her data: their struggles to reconcile culture, nationalism and faith; the effect of encounters with media caricatures; and the ubiquitous issue of the hijab. 'When I initially began this piece of work', she tells the reader, 'I did not want to write about the hijab at all!... So, when participants *chose* to speak about the hijab, I had to reformulate the structure of this book' (ibid.: 2012:81–2, italics original).

More recently, Anabel Inge has followed closely the views and voices of Salafi women in Britain, in the first study of its kind. With the aim of understanding 'the world of Salafi women in rich detail' (Inge, 2016: 44), Inge conducted interviews, observation and textual analysis of women connected to various Salafi mosques, and succeeded in obtaining greater access women's study circles and private lives. Echoing the focus of previous researchers of Muslim women, she also examines their self-fashioning to meet Salafi ideals of piety. Inge uncovers the cognitive dilemmas associated with combining spiritual ideals with lived

realities; a major argument of her book is that these women were 'affected by the religious, moral, and gender ambiguities and uncertainties that characterise a contemporary, liberal, multifaith society' (ibid.: 2016:222). Relevant here is her commitment to the direct voices and views of the women; in studying 'the implications of Islamic beliefs in daily life' (ibid.: 2016:18), Inge has delivered an insightful and engaged ethnography of Muslim women's lives.

In the European context, Christine Jacobsen has studied extensively the lives and views of young Muslim, driven by her desire to 'place women at the centre of my inquiry, and to see them not only as victims of patriarchal structures and norms, but also as actors in their own lives' (Jacobsen, 2011: 67). Quoting heavily the direct words of her respondents, Jacobsen questions pre-conceived notions around Muslim women's subjectivity and agency, in a line of thought echoing the earlier arguments of Saba Mahmood (2012). Mahmood has argued that liberal-secular approaches fail to capture the self-formulated pieties of Muslim women who adopt Islamic performativity by choice, and fail to capture their agency. Citing directly young Muslim women growing up in Norway, Jacobsen (2011: 73) similarly argues that liberal assumptions about the autonomy of pious women can often 'prevent us from fully capturing what is at stake'. As in the case of Contractor's study quoted above, Jacobsen also defers to themes of Islamic self-fashioning that have been identified as important by the women themselves. Rather than imposing her own research agendas, she has showcased themes raised by participants: suppressing material and sexual desires in their quest for piety, navigating faith in secular spaces and the importance of freely choosing to practice Islam (Jacobsen, 2010, 2011). Combining nuanced themes with depth of analysis, Jacobsen (2011: 78) concludes that 'young Muslims are positioned at the intersection of different, ambivalent and sometimes contrasting discourses and traditions'. Her methodological approach involves the women as equal participants in the research process, and her conclusions reflect their concerns. Here, it is significant that she continues to challenge previous 'veil and victimhood' depictions of Muslim women.

2 The Present Study

This article is based on the results of my qualitative PhD study, and also explores Muslim culture through Muslim voices. Especially with regard to women, the study asks: what are Muslim women's *own* concerns, voiced in their *own terms*?

Methodological reflections and data related to two years of fieldwork undertaken between 2015 and 2017 are presented here. Working with a sample of twenty-five publicly active Muslim women in south-east England,

I documented their narratives of social contribution, experiences of British multiculturalism since the 1980s, and their underlying motivation and sources of inspiration. By selecting publicly active and engaged women for my sample, I also contribute to an understanding of how religious life may be compatible with temporal success in a secular society.

A main aim has been to explore factors that are empowering for these women. In particular, regardless of levels of practice, I have found faith to be a significant motivator in their activities. While recognising the problems inherent in measuring 'religiosity' (Hussain, 2008: 169), and the perils of defining 'religion' (Asad, 2012: 39), in keeping with my qualitative approach I privilege respondents' own description of the strength of their religious 'attachment' to Islam and wider Muslim communities.

An additional research focus has been on the navigation of public spaces by respondents, acting as religious individuals in secular spaces. The women gave detailed accounts of how they often shaped temporal settings to accommodate their practice of faith, without compromising either. Throughout my fieldwork, the women shared the creative and proactive ways in which they were taking charge of public encounters, and negotiating the complexities of sociability in ways that marked their own agency.

The research process also called for engagement with a number of significant methodological issues related to the study of Muslim societies. The discussion below first presents these methodological concerns. Following on from this, the article reports three significant findings arising from data returned: the significance of faith as a motivator in the lives of respondents, their increasing desire to mix across cultures, and the resulting hopeful visions they hold for the future of Muslim citizens in plural British societies.

3 Methodological Reflections

The challenge, then, is to develop tools that will allow researchers to enter into the experiences and meanings of another, to access the private moments of human perception, thereby enabling one to bridge the gulf between subject and object.

MCCUTCHEON, 1999: 3

In both considering how to study Muslim minorities generally, and developing the methodology of this study, a number of factors deserve consideration. The discussion here addresses, first, pertinent epistemological issues in the study of Muslim minorities more generally; second, this leads on to a consideration

of the particular methodology employed for my research. The aim throughout was to remain loyal to the voices of these women, while at the same time employing transparency and robust ethics in practice.

4 Studying Muslim Communities

Much has been written recently about the tendency to overemphasise the role of religion in the study of Muslims, and to ascribe a faith-related explanation to all phenomena (Schielke 2010; Jeldtoft, 2011; Sehlíkoglu, 2017; Panjwani and Moulin-Stožek, 2017). This is often contested with an appeal to the study of 'everyday Islam', an approach that emphasises 'the internal contradictions, ambiguities, and incoherences that inform the discourses and practices of ordinary Muslims' (Fadil and Fernando, 2015a: 60).

Scholars championing a more 'everyday' approach to the study of Muslims criticise what they see as an undue focus on piety and an oversimplified and uncritical presentation of Muslim pious self-formation. There is a clear sense, in a number of emerging academic discourses, that Muslims can too often be 'reduced to a function of their religion, and other dimensions of identity and experience have been ignored' (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 234). As a result, other significant narratives become obscured, and the homogenisation of whole communities ensues. With these discourses around the oversignification of religion in mind, I had set out neither to emphasise visible 'religiosity' in selecting the sample, nor to prioritise issues explicitly related to faith commitments.

The matter, however, is more complex than it may initially seem to the researcher trained in liberal traditions.

It soon became apparent from my data that the faith convictions of respondents could not be sidelined, and neither were they insignificant in their narratives. As Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando (2015b: 99) have eloquently argued, 'Complexities only become meaningful against the backdrop of normative entanglements.' In my own research, I soon found that the 'normative entanglements' of faith formed a core component of the women's selfhood, and did so regardless of their level of visible 'Muslimness'.

In her study of converts, Kate Zebiri (2008: 5–6) also notes this idiosyncrasy:

'Insiders' tend to describe their own conversion in very positive terms, with reference to the transcendent, as a process of spiritual awakening ... 'Outsiders', on the other hand, tend to be more interested in the psychological, social, cultural and other forces ...

In reference to the fact that a researcher's own background and subjective biases cannot be divorced from the research process, Zebiri suggests that the phenomenon noted above may be the case because researchers themselves may seek secular explanations for phenomena. In my case, I could not claim secular leanings personally; in my eagerness to attain 'objectivity', however, I had not foregrounded religion in my analysis.

However, while this adherence to theological convictions was unobtrusive and worn with ease for these women, it soon became apparent that faith was an identity component that could not be set aside if this study was to communicate their subjectivities adequately. I had to revisit the framing of my study, and include religion as a significant driver in the sociabilities and daily practices of these women.

Thus, while there is a need for researchers and commentators to look beyond religious factors when studying Muslims, we cannot neglect the evidence pointing to the fact that it remains a core identity component for the vast majority of them (Parekh, 2006; Modood, 2010; Hussain and Sherif, 2014). There remains, however, a third way.

Rather than pitting the 'everyday' against an approach that recognises the centrality of a pious ideal for some subjects, one must resist such analytical dualisms. Turning the gaze on one's own proclivities, it may be suggested that in order to achieve a 'better understanding of the nature of certain forms of religiosity', we need also to examine 'the secular-liberal presuppositions that underpin much of our lives' (Fadil and Fernando, 2015a: 81).

Aside from studying the core component of religion, a number of additional methodological considerations have informed this study.

My commitment to generating deeper, individual and self-defined data has also been served by an interdisciplinary approach. As a result, this study has approached both the respondents and the methodology from a wider and more heterogenous epistemological viewpoint. In widening the disciplinary base for this research project, the study has been able to obtain greater depth of data and analysis, thus coming closer to not only the sacred but also the temporal concerns of the women themselves. This article aims to deepen the understanding of Muslim communities that are still profoundly connected to their religion, while interacting in a secular society better explained by sociological frames. The discussion has thus developed from a Religious Studies approach inextricable from postcolonial, feminist and intersectional critique.

In particular, this interdisciplinary approach has led to a unique blend in this study, which is worth particular mention: the application of feminist theory and methodology to study religious subjects. Until very recently, the

concerns of religious women have not been adequately addressed by mainstream Western feminism. However, with more Western-educated Muslim researchers themselves contributing to academic discussions, this is also now changing. In fresh new approaches, scholars are seeking a reconciliation between Islam and Western feminisms. The discussion here appropriates the widest sense of feminism: 'scholarship and activism within which it is possible to work towards rights and respect for any marginalised group, including but not limited to women' (Contractor, 2012: 5).

The seminal work of Saba Mahmood (2012) marked a turning point in this regard, with its unsettling of liberal assumptions around freedom, individuality and agency; it has been central to my analysis. Her interventions have paved the way for researchers such as myself to employ feminist theoretical concepts to the study of religious women. In using feminist frames of reference related to the concepts of 'agency' and 'freedom', for example, Mahmood's 'alternative' constructs have widened the possibilities for understanding the lives of religious women.

For this study, I have developed the concept of agency as an alternative to the liberal secular framing. Rather than defining it narrowly as the ability to seek freedom from oppression, I instead frame the agency of the women in my sample as a capacity for change and a capacity for action, both preceded by a desire to do things 'differently'. I do, however, qualify the concept of a pious ideal with discussion of the mundane and temporal realities of daily life; my discussion illustrates how the women exhibit a creative and hybrid 'matching' of worldviews and subjectivities in making agential choices.

In this way, a theoretical concept that has previously been used to study secular subjects may now be appropriated in the study of religious women, and may be used to highlight a wider range of voices and worldviews. For the current study, this alternative application of feminism has given rise to an emphasis on individual voice, self-definition and the centrality of freely made choices for the women studied here.

In addition, the current methodology owes much to the elucidation of an 'Islamic' feminist approach by Sariya Contractor. In her quest to 'De-mystify the Muslimah' (2012) in Britain, she charts her journey from suspicion of feminism to an awareness of its possibilities for religious women. In particular, the current study employs a 'feminist-pragmatist' methodological approach to research; 'feminist' because it gives voice to a marginalised group, 'pragmatist' because it contributes to the wider debate on community relations in Britain. It involves the use of the tools of a feminist methodology that allows alternative and contextualised views, involves participants fully in the research process

and gives centrality to their experiences and motivations. In addition, self-definition and self-expression have been privileged; thus, what are presented here are the selected findings of a case study that gives voice to an unheard group, rather than a work of representation of the wider Muslim community.

For the current study, a feminist methodology meant that the 'working alongside' approach to interviewees was developed, whereby the concerns of the respondents were as valued as the initial research agenda. On the ground, this meant a redesigning of interview tools and themes to reflect a more open-ended approach, led by the concerns of respondents, rather than preconceived by the researcher. The aim was for these women to be 'collaborative partners rather than passive subjects in a research process' (Contractor, 2012: 6), in a method that employed the 'tools' of feminism in its simplest form as a struggle for the rights of women, but with the inclusive and contextual concerns of third-wave feminism.

In conducting the fieldwork for this study, which concluded in the summer of 2017, a qualitative and inductive approach was employed. Using an interview guide to suggest themes for discussion rather than ask closed questions, twenty-five in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups in the area of Greater London were conducted.

In the initial stages of sample selection, a conundrum familiar to many who study religious communities arose: namely, that using visible and ritualistic measures for 'religiosity' can be problematic. For, although a select group of Muslim men and women are visible as religious (through, for example, mosque attendance or hijab wearing), we know that there exists a significantly larger group of people who identify with the Muslim community culturally and sociologically, but do not exhibit the usual 'markers' of religiosity. Combined with this was a desire to move away from studying 'visible and institutionalised' forms of Islam to a more subtle focus on less 'hypervisible' forms of practice in the Muslim community (Jeldtoft, 2013). Consequently, respondents for this study were chosen neither for their 'visible' Muslimness, nor for their affiliation to mosques and other Islamic institutions.

Through personal contacts and selected gatekeepers in roughly six different geographical locations in and around London, respondents were chosen on the basis of active involvement in community and public life and self-identification as Muslims. They hailed from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the demographics of British Muslims: Pakistani, Indian, Bengali, White, Mixed race, Black British, Arab, Somali and Mauritian. The discussion below turns to significant themes emerging from the narratives of these women.

5 The Voices of Muslim Women: Emergent Themes

The women interviewed for this study spoke about their experiences as women of faith living in a secular society. Here I report three significant themes emerging from the data: the influence of faith on their lives, their experiences of public engagement with non-Muslims, and their vision for Muslims as an intrinsic part of the fabric of British society. All names and other identifying details have been changed to protect identities. The findings reported below represent areas of both concern and commitment, as voiced by the women themselves.

6 Faith Matters

Very early on in the fieldwork, the inadequacy of secular worldviews in explaining the lives that these women have consciously created for themselves became apparent. Data returned included much reference to faith as a central aspect of identity for these women. In the words of late anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2012: xviii): '[W]e can no longer arrogantly assume that secular forms of life and secularism's progressive formulations necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world.'

The centrality given to religious conviction became a uniform thread throughout the fieldwork; this was the case regardless of the extent to which the women were practising their faith on a daily basis, and whether or not they identified with the wider Muslim community and institutions in their local area. It took the form of public assertions of faith in conversations with non-Muslim friends and colleagues, requests for prayer space at workplaces, inculcating in their children a strong sense of their spiritual heritage and even being the powerful motivator behind social and charitable contributions.

The experience of Aini is illustrative; she is a mother-of-4, pharmacist, community madrasa manager and Scouts leader. Speaking about what sparked her passion for community work, she reflected:

Once I started practising and perhaps it's the personalities I'm with ... it's like my life, my death, everything I do is for you Allah, it's that understanding that Islam (and) worshipping Allah isn't just praying, it wouldn't be good enough basically, that is very selfish. I would see that as really selfish, and I don't see Islam as something selfish, you need to serve and that's the example you have in the prophets and the Companions and

all the inspiring (people). I read the life of Imam Hassan al-Banna and I found that so inspiring. What I found inspiring was that he developed hospitals, schools, educated and had welfare programmes and it was taking his faith and translating it, looking at the action that came with it, that's what Islam is, and Iman is action.

Similarly, Baha, a mother and schoolteacher turned academic, spoke of a significant moment in her life, which then guided her subsequent community and public interactions:

When I saw the persecution of Bosnians, their religion took on a new meaning for me, and since then, it's been part and parcel of everything that I do. So, it's in my work, it's in my house, it's in my family. When I engage with people, the first thing I always think of is that I'm a Muslim, whatever I do, I'm going to leave an impression on them, because of who I am and what I look like.

A younger participant, Saba, charted the development of her spiritual journey. She holds a senior management position in a large charity, and grew up in a Muslim household where, in her words, she and her siblings were 'never compelled, but gently encouraged' and given a wide choice on matters of religious practice. She described her relationship to faith as:

... a really positive relationship in the sense that I've always seen it (as) something that guides me, that inspires me and ultimately strengthens me. So, it strengthens me in terms of like ... it teaches me patience and the value of patience. It guides me like when you think, 'Oh, this is a dilemma' and you go, 'How would he answer that question? How would he have this conversation that is difficult to have?' (referring to the Prophet Muhammad).

We see here faith in its various manifestations as a motivator, as an intrinsic identity and as an enabler in daily social interactions. In all cases, it forms a core component of respondent identity, and inspires and motivates these women in their social contribution.

The empirical evidence arising from this study gives weight to the findings of a recent report produced by the Ipsos Mori Institute, in conjunction with the Aziz Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Trust, amongst others. In a review of existing research on British Muslims, they conclude that statistical evidence

shows that: 'Religion is a far more important part of their life for most Muslims than it is for other people in Britain, and is central to their sense of identity' (Kaur-Ballagan, Gottfried, Mortimore, 2018: 7).

Few have contributed more to an understanding of how Muslim minorities have negotiated secular public life in the past thirty years than the eminent social scientist Tariq Modood. He has commented widely on the trajectory of 'multiculturalism' in Britain as part of the framework for locating Muslim involvement in public life. Like Bhikhu Parekh (2006), Modood favours a nuanced and multi-layered definition of multiculturalism. Here, it is Modood's third level of multiculturalism that the present respondents are building: 'a positive vision of society as a whole – but remade so as to include the previously excluded or marginalised on the basis of equality and belonging' (Modood, 2010: 16).

Most significant for our purposes, however, is the recognition that the 'Muslim' question in Britain has turned from a focus in the 1960s–1980s on 'ethnicity', to a focus on 'religion'. Muslims, increasingly since the Rushdie Affair of the 1980s and the highly visible terrorist attacks of the twenty-first century, are being viewed in terms of their faith, and are also increasingly self-identifying by it (Modood, 2010). In contrast to other forms of popular religion that have been relegated to private spheres, the more visible forms of Islamic belief and praxis often defy the public-private binary. This means that, for Muslims, newly assertive in their religious identity, 'equality' is no longer just a question of having their religious and cultural difference tolerated in the public sphere. Indeed, as far back as 1997, Modood argued for a discourse of equality that emphasises 'the right to have one's difference recognised and supported in both the public and the private sphere'. In his vision of a 'new' multicultural Britain, minority heritage must be encouraged and supported 'rather than contemptuously expected to wither away' (Modood et al., 1997: 358).

Serena Hussain (2008), in a thematic examination of the 2001 National Census results, uses Census data to support the view that Islam is being asserted more confidently and visibly in British public spheres, and there is growing evidence to suggest that greater participation of Muslim women in the public sphere does not lead to greater secularisation.

This study has used a qualitative approach to explore, amongst other factors, the religious commitment of a group of publicly engaged Muslim women who have been chosen neither for their 'visible' Muslimness, nor for their affiliation to mosques and other Islamic institutions. Data returned has indicated that the relationship between the public engagement of Muslim women and their faith commitment remains an enduring and significant research theme.

7 Weak Ties and Strong Aspirations

A more novel, and unanticipated, theme emerging from the narratives has been the strong desire of the women to initiate relationships outside Muslim communities. As they matured, many respondents reported the need to 'balance' their bonding relationships and commitments to their own community with a more concerted effort to form bridging relationships not only of friendship but also of general conviviality across communities.

In particular, a number of my respondents in their 40s and above had begun to consciously seek out voluntary work in the wider community, in the interest of interacting with, and also benefitting, a more mixed circle of people. This community work very often took an interesting trajectory; women aged roughly 20–40 tended to be involved in Muslim community causes, while from the mid-40s onwards, many of them began to look outwards and actively seek engagement with non-Muslims, often through common causes. I found that as they matured, their passion for community work became combined with a desire to forge ties across communities. I refer to this as the 'generational trajectory' observed in the lives of these women. Coupled with a greater confidence as their experience grew, many of my more senior respondents are now working across communities for the benefit of all.

As she raised her children, Aini increasingly realised that mixing with non-Muslim mums and colleagues enriched her own life:

I had this long gap (between jobs), when I started having children and I didn't work and then I wasn't mixing at all and I'm very much with the Muslim mums' home-based network and the Madrasa. I think that could make you insular, ... because you are not talking to people who are not Muslims, you are perceiving all your ideas say from negative media, you are thinking – they must be thinking this or that. ... Once you get to a non-Muslim school and you start talking to the non-Muslim mums it's after this that it is quite reassuring that on the inside, people are just mums and they all have similar worries actually. If I wasn't mixing I would perhaps become a bit narrow ... The more you mix, the more you value people.'

Isra is a self-made mental health practitioner who had come through a traumatic history of domestic violence and divorce with resilience. Her experiences had given her much cause for reflection and change, she explained. While she did not have very many non-Muslim friends when growing up, she

now actively encourages her three children to develop friendships across faith and culture:

Even with my children, I have embedded in them that no one is different. All of them have brought friends home. Masha Allah, Uzma (daughter) has got friends ... I'm so proud of her ... her friends are from outside ... her friend keeps fasts with us. As long as you communicate with people, they understand. It's just that barrier, we think ... oh no! stay away from them! When Uzma went there, the dad had found the qibla direction for her, they found a white sheet for her, and they were reminding Uzma when to pray!

Shabnam is an IT consultant and mother of four who has led on a number of grassroots initiatives in partnership with her local Council. She similarly described how her approach to friendships had developed over the years:

Unfortunately, most of my friends are still Muslim. And I don't like that ... I would prefer to say that all my friends are mixed ... I wish that it was like that for me, and I hope that it will be like that for my children. When they come home and say their friend is a nice Chinese or black girl, I prefer it...

Building on the work of economic sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973), the term 'weak ties' is employed here to describe these relationships; and while Granovetter's model is used most frequently in the business world to understand how individuals may build economic capital, the women showcased here desire to build social and community ties without regard for economic gain. A 'weak tie' for the research at hand is a link between two individuals from different religious or ethnic communities characterised by casual acquaintance, less frequent interaction and low levels of emotional investment. However, it forms a crucial bridge between different communities, communities between which individuals would not normally have strong relationships.

More specifically, the women in the current sample had strong aspirations to establish 'weak ties' across communities defined largely by religion but also by ethnicity and social class, with the aim of improving community relations through deeper understanding. This desire increased as they grew older, whence the 'generational' aspect; it was also frequently expressed as an urgent need for the future of religious minorities in Britain.

These findings, and the everyday sociabilities that my respondents undertake, are significant for studies of social cohesion in multicultural societies.

The recent intervention of interculturalism has shed light on the importance of micro-level social interactions in urban spaces, and the potential they hold for social cohesion. Interculturalists prioritise the micro-level processes relating to integration: the everyday, the grassroots and convivial interaction that allows the smooth flow of daily life in diverse societies (Wessendorf, 2013; Cantle, 2015; Sealy, 2018). Here, I use the arguments developed by recent qualitative studies to show how the convivial daily encounters of the women in my sample contribute in a bottom-up fashion to create cohesive societies.

My research has particularly focused on showcasing what Myriam Cherti and Clare McNeil term 'everyday integration'. In an inversion of the popular national approach to social cohesion, they argue that it emerges 'in the everyday experience of those (minority) groups, rather than at the grand level of citizenship and national identity itself' (Cherti and McNeil, 2012: 5). They call for a redirection of integration debates in favour of a 'focus on everyday sites where identities are constructed and reconstructed' (ibid.: 2012:18). Similarly, interculturalists Susanne Wessendorf and Jenny Phillimore focus on integration as a sense of belonging felt by new migrants, manifest in their various social relations and the extent to which these social relations facilitate access to the resources required for settlement. It is their stress on affective local relationships as 'the most valued resource' that resonates with my study; not only are enduring and meaningful friendships (often initiated in childhood) important to foster a sense of belonging and home, but also later-life 'serendipitous fleeting encounters can provide much needed information or even just a sense of humanity' (Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019: 134). In addition, Les Back and Shamser Sinha argue for a greater focus on multicultural convivialities to counteract 'residual ideologies of colonial racism and melancholic nationalism (that) remain socially alive' (Back and Sinha, 2016: 521).

Thus, Aini, Isra and Shabnam (quoted above) may be voicing their own personal wish to establish weak ties, but their sociabilities are unwittingly contributing to a wider narrative of social cohesion. The discussion below illustrates how their proactive daily sociabilities and interactions, aimed at establishing weak ties, offer hope for the future.

8 Looking Ahead ... Visions for the Future

At the end of each interview, respondents shared their vision for the future of British Muslims and community relations. Data returned on this theme gives us hope for a positive future for British community relations, one where

change may well come from within the Muslim community, rather than imposed from above.

For the women forming the sample of this study, this theme brought together the previous two in a vision that incorporates religious practice and identities in the wider secular landscape.

Irum, an experienced lawyer and one of the more high-profile and nationally involved community activists, held lofty aspirations for the future:

I'm hoping that in 5–10 years' time, there will be a much more integrated and cohesive society, where we have managed to improve the situation of the Muslims, socially, economically, academically, all that ... I'm hoping that the UK can turn its situation around, we become world leaders and to get this right, and I would love to be an activist in that time, teaching others how to do it. But we're going in reverse, following European policies, which are secular based, and we need to stop that. That's why the inter faith movement is really important, because all people can see that the secular agenda doesn't work for all of us.

We see here that Irum expresses aims and aspirations not just for the Muslim community, but also for Britain more widely, and sees herself as firmly embedded in the fabric of this country. Concurrently, she criticises the ability of secularism, as she sees it, to accommodate women of faith.

Cheryl, a convert to Islam, mother and academic, frames her vision in terms that emphasise the replacement of ethnic and cultural attachments with a spiritual universalism:

I think British Muslims have to create an identity as British Muslims and not as Pakistani Muslims who happen to be living in Britain, or Somali Muslims who happen to be living in Britain. You can keep your roots; you can accept your culture. It has to be a home which acknowledges all of those things and moves forward to an ever-increasing spiritual place. So, I am talking from a spiritual point of view as opposed to from a cultural or ethnic point of view.

Finally, one of the most powerful manifestations of this pluralistic vision came from Shabnam. Referring to the 2015 North Carolina shooting of three young community activists, Deah Barakat, Yusor and Razan Abu-Salha, Shabnam recounted with passion and awe how this incident changed the course of her life:

(It was) ... A lightbulb moment for me ... they had made an impact at a very young age on the community as a whole ... (explains at length how the funeral was attended by many people of no faith and other faiths). They left a legacy for young people ... so that they can contribute to society, but that they're not so self-conscious of their religion that it holds them back. That incident had a real impact on me ... I thought, if I die tomorrow, there won't be a massive congregation of mixed people.

We see here the synergy between two central aspects of these women's narratives: their core identity as Muslims, and their fleeting daily encounters across cultures and faith. In an iterative process of negotiation and renegotiation, both phenomena strengthen each other as these women craft hybrid identities in the third spaces they create for themselves.

9 Discussion: the Possibilities and Potential of Hybrid Identities

The data shows Muslim women articulating lived Islam in creative ways, and in a newly-assertive mode of being. They are challenging the precepts of secularism, and demanding a 'third space' for their sacred, yet very British, worldview.

In order to explain the negotiated strategies employed by women living in liberal societies yet seeking alternatives to the liberal worldview, the concept of hybridised spaces can be appropriated here. In particular, critical theorist Homi Bhabha employs the term 'hybridity' to move away from the notion of fixed and 'authentic' cultural identities, and to frame the spaces inhabited by individuals mediating multiple identities. 'All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity,' he argues, 'but for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge' (Bhabha, 1990: 211).

For this study, the idea of a constant flux and negotiation of identity resonates; in particular, the concept of crafting a 'third space' seems apt to describe the strategies employed by the Muslim women described above in trying to marry their presence in a Western, liberal context with their cultural and religious identification. Bhabha (1995) envisions the creation of this 'third space' as an opening up of new sites for negotiation:

Something opens up as an effect of this dialectic, something that will not be contained within it, that cannot be returned to the two oppositional principles. Once it opens up, we are in a different space, we are making

different presumptions and mobilizing emergent, unanticipated forms of historical agency.

One could venture that, in fact, the on-going construction of robust and positive identities through social mixing and daily sociabilities is indeed empowerment itself, an empowerment that enables previously subdued voices to rise over and above 'two oppositional principles', allowing alternative worldviews to emerge.

In creating new sites for negotiation and mutual exchange, Muslim women are subtly instigating the small changes that will allow for greater accommodation of faith identities in secular Britain, and doing so on their own terms. They are no longer on the sidelines, spoken about and spoken for. The case of Maryam is illustrative here; she takes on the job of organising her office Christmas party so that she can negotiate 'alcohol-free' social spaces, and reflected on such practices:

I feel there is often misunderstanding in our society about different groups of people and it is important to break down barriers and try to understand each other rather than constructing divides and creating labels for each other. At the bottom of it, we have to remember that we are all human beings... I think you just need to take some time to get involved, which in fact a lot of Muslims are doing without being credited for it.

Similarly, Isra does not hesitate to explain her need for a prayer space at the start of each new job. On being asked about her experiences practising faith in the workplace, and in public dealings, she elaborated that, in her view, the Muslim community needed to develop confidence in communicating with non-Muslims:

... they respect me openly for praying ... I think it's very easy, it's just how we perceive it, because we don't have the confidence ourselves. They made a prayer room for me, (and) my manager talked about it. What I've experienced, when I didn't have confidence, people saw me differently. Because I have that confidence in me, people see me differently. I am proud of who I am!

In the words of Kristen Aune, Sonya Sharma and Giselle Vincett (2008: 9), the alternatives thus created by women such as Maryam and Isra 'may be described as both/neither spaces; ... such spaces are particularly prevalent for

women and the women who use them often conceptualise them in this way even when others might not'. Most importantly for this article, these women are taking charge of these spaces. They are using the opportunities afforded to them in a secular multicultural society to develop robust hybrid identities through purposeful, daily convivial interactions.

10 Concluding Reflections

This article indicates that religious conviction is in fact alive and well in the West, and that minority communities especially can value religious identities. Using the lens of Religious Studies to explore modern-day multicultural societies can uncover valuable insights.

With respect to the study of Muslim societies, and Muslim women in particular, day-to-day concerns are being explored in a positive, non-political and nuanced manner.

The study of Muslim communities, however, throws up a number of particular conundrums. This article explores the tendency to categorise Muslim subjects as either 'pious' or 'everyday', in an unhelpful dualism. It argues that, while religion does indeed form a core component of identity for Muslims in the West, there remains a continued need to listen to the voices of individuals themselves, away from institutions and in the more 'fuzzy structures' of daily life (Jeldtoft and Nielsen, 2011: 1116). The discussion here has attempted to move beyond such analytical dualisms.

This study has also benefited from a focus on positive themes beyond an exclusionary focus on Islamophobia and securitisation issues, beyond the 'visible and ritual'. In addition, the emergence of rich and nuanced data was made possible by an interdisciplinary approach that, unusually, applied inclusive feminist research methods to study religious participants.

This paper reports that the socially active women in this sample, through their commitment to 'mixing' across cultures and daily purposeful sociabilities, are constructing robust and hybrid identities. Data returned also reports that a significant number of them are empowered by their faith. Most significantly, it highlights successful and underreported forms of Muslim *engagement* with wider society by identifying the strategies used by these women to create a 'third space' for themselves in the secular landscape of Britain today. In this way, they indicate possibilities for diversity and engagement through contribution *to*, and not assimilation *with*, wider British society.

In addition, the practical impact of studies such as these has the potential to re-appropriate the skewed narrative created for Muslim women by popular

media discourses. There remains, however, a significant need for further contributions to a more sensitive and self-defined narrative of unheard minority women who form the backbone of their societies.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the social interaction narratives of these women, and the reported 'generational trajectory' observed in these interactions, can contribute to the development of Western Muslims in their 'new' environment. Looking ahead, the women themselves may pave the way for a pluralist society in which minority frames and contributions are valued, and also provide an example of positive, proactive and engaged citizenship in contrast to disaffected citizens and disengaged ideologies.

But above all, this study hopes to have given voice to women who are 'working tirelessly out of the spotlight for the good of their communities' (Bullock, 2005: xviii), women for whom an integral part of being British Muslims is to engage with other people and collude in good causes.

And it is this collusion and contribution that matters, for... '... they are pushing ahead towards greater integration of their communities into wider society ... In doing so, they are positively contributing to Muslim public life and to civic society in Britain, spearheading change and transformation in both' (Jawad, 2009: 21).

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