Let's Talk about Gender

Women’s Narratives of Moving Out of Islam in Contemporary Europe

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Abstract

Within Europe, gender and Islam have a complex and often polarised discursive history. Whilst some find only repression of women in patriarchal and religious structures, others hail Islam as the birthplace of emancipation. This article explores the experiences of women who have moved out of Islam in both the Netherlands and the UK and finds that many navigate in between these narratives of suppression and liberation. The aim of this article is twofold: based on 22 life-history interviews, it firstly explores gendered experiences whilst growing up (from personal experienced inequality to observing theological or legislative problems), which may have led to various degrees of doubt or distress. It further unpacks gendered embodied experiences, such as veiling, modesty or mosque attendance as having relative importance when moving out of Islam. Secondly, this article elaborates on how these women position themselves, within religious and secular expectations of what it means to be a former Muslim woman. It explores their positionality in a polarised debate: how did they relate to the discourses of suppression and liberation, from either secular(ised) or religious environs?

Keywords

Introduction

On the 10th of December 2020, the documentary ‘Women Leaving Islam’ prescreened on YouTube (Reason4Freedom 2021). In anticipation, around 80 viewers gathered a few minutes before and some greeted each other in the open comment section. The film opened with the statement from founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain (CEMB), Maryam Namazie: “The Qur’an, Islam and Islamism are the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women’s emancipation”, a reference to American women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s (1815–1902) similar statement with regards to the Bible and church. During the film, six public activists who had left Islam narrated their experiences. The film first showed Halima Salat, who sits in a small, light room, stating that she had a rough childhood “in terms of FGM and violence”.

In the film ‘Women Leaving Islam’, six activist women talk about their experiences. There is no music, voice over, or interviewer. The only other visual materials used are pictures of their past, often in hijab, niqab, or burqa which sometimes briefly appear next to them. Other additions are explanatory remarks on Arabic or religious terms. They generally emphasise the lack of freedom they experienced due to the religious surroundings they grew up in. They all had worn some form of head covering at some point and its removal had generally been a difficult experience. The women from different parts of the world stress the persecution and unsafety they experienced, both from political levels as well as from their families and communities. There had been issues with (involuntary) marriages or divorces, and the gender inequality that they witnessed and problematised before leaving Islam is extensively addressed. Although the women tend to speak for themselves, there are also generalisations about ‘when you are born in a Muslim family’, or ‘if you are Muslim this is how life is for you’. During the screening, in the comment section, their ‘courage’ and ‘bravery’ was repeatedly pointed out.

According to the CEMB: “The film will premiere on 1 February World Hijab Day to challenge Islamic modesty culture”. According to worldhijabday.org:

1 ‘Women Leaving Islam’ is a film by the CEMB, produced by its founder Maryam Namazie and writer, activist and journalist Gita Sahgal. Six former Muslim women from various Muslim majority and minority countries (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Bangladesh and the UK) narrate their stories. It is important to note that this film was produced in a European/British context, a setting in which Islam is a (contested) minority religion. Although it is hard to assess the reach of any publicly accessible digital content, the intended audience would have been predominantly the secular Western public.
February 1st, 2013, marked the first annual World Hijab Day (WHD) in recognition of millions of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab and live a life of modesty. The brainchild of the movement is a New York resident, Nazma Khan, who came up with the idea as a means to foster religious tolerance and understanding by inviting women to experience the hijab for one day.

World Hijab Day Organization 2021

Over the past few years, each year, Muslim and non-Muslim women around the world have been taking selfies donning a headscarf and posting them on social media platforms claiming to stand in solidarity with their Muslim sisters. Also, public figures worldwide have been seen to support the cause. The WHD organisation claims the support from Nicola Sturgeon, for example, as well as various MP’s in the House of Commons of the UK. The event has been criticised for fetishising head coverings, not in the least in relation to Iran where activists are fighting for their right not to cover. However, the organisation claims to wish to draw attention to ‘hijabophobia’ and discrimination against Muslim women donning a headscarf, to fight for the freedom of women to wear what they want, and to stand for women’s rights worldwide. The women promoting WHD claim to experience Islam as liberating and empowering for women, as evidenced by the many testimonials on their website.

In both these contexts, a documentary on women leaving Islam, or advocates for ‘world hijab day’, womanhood is central to the narratives. Both sides are responding to a gendered discourse on Islam and women which has roots in an orientalist depiction of the suppressed veiled woman who is, or at least was, in need of saving (Abu-Lughod 2013). From both perspectives of World Hijab Day and ‘Women Leaving Islam’, women publicly claim to know ‘real’ Islam and to represent other women within it. During my fieldwork among people who had moved out of Islam in the Netherlands and Britain between 2016 and 2019, I met many women who indeed had had “gendered experiences” of Islam. However, most of the women I spoke to somehow did not fit either narrative of suppression or liberation, but often thought both sides held some veracity.

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2 Also see Larsson (2016), Bosch (2008) and Vliek (2021) for examples of how gender and specifically women’s positions have been subject to and instigators of polarised debates on Islam in Europe. Public women who have left Islam, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands, Mona Walter in Sweden, and the activists and producers from the film mentioned here, have claimed positions of both victimhood and expertise or insider knowledge (Bosch 2008) as well as positioned themselves explicitly against the extreme right (Vliek 2018) in order to authoritatively speak on ‘true’ Islam within the Western European contexts.
Indeed, whilst many of my interlocutors would not contest that some people could experience structural issues with gender equality in their communities or former religion, or that others find liberation in Islam, not all would recognise themselves in these dichotomised and public testimonies which claim to be representative for women’s experiences with Islam as described earlier.

Furthermore, in the anthropology of Islam, gender has generally received ample attention, as evidenced by for example research on the piety movement, finding agency in religious conservatism in the Islamic Revival movement in the Middle East (and beyond) (Hafez 2011; Hocke 2014; Mahmood 2005). In addition, in studies into conversion to Islam in the West, gender has played a central role (King 2017; McGinty 2006; Van Nieuwkerk 2006). However, where leaving religion is concerned, and especially Islam, gender has so far been relatively absent (also see: Van Nieuwkerk 2019). Based on 22 life-story interviews, this article wishes to fill this lacuna by presenting the experiences of women who have moved out of Islam in both the Netherlands and the UK.

My purpose in this article is thereby twofold. First, I will elaborate on the gendered experiences to fill some of the lacuna in our study of moving out of religion and moving out of Islam specifically. How did my interlocutors experience gendered issues when moving out? Second, I will elaborate on the balance my interlocutors negotiated between the discourses of ‘Women Leaving Islam’ and ‘World Hijab Day’, or between allowing critique on conservatism whilst not falling back on arguments over the backwardness of religion, thereby showing their inbetweenness rather than being claimed by one or the other. In what is to follow, after some methodological considerations, I will first explore some of the academic debates on gender and religion and argue for the inclusion of gender in the analysis of ‘moving out’. Second, I will then outline how my interlocutors narrated their experiences, by looking at gendered rules in their upbringing and the gendered embodied religious practices which may change when moving out and which make this move visible. Last, I will relate this to my interlocutors’ views on the politicisation of their experiences of religious transformation. Whilst some were rather open about their anti-religious views, others were aware of the polarisation of the debate and anti-Muslim bigotry that they experienced and felt less inclined to speak out. I will outline

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3 The term ‘interlocutors’ is used to do justice to the inherently dialogic nature of research interviews. It is to recognise that narratives are never uttered in isolation, but are co-created not only in dialogue with the many people and events in people’s own lives, but also with the researcher. If another would conduct such interviews, different narratives would be produced. Therefore, the term interlocutor is thought to be more appropriate than ‘participants’ or ‘subjects’ (Russell and Kelly 2002; Vitanova 2012; Vliek 2019a).
some of their own views on their contested status as former Muslim women in order to navigate these murky waters and provide some insights into what is at stake on both the personal and societal level when women move out of Islam.

By taking up this task I do not mean to single out gender or gender inequality as a driving force for women leaving religion behind, nor do I aim to delegitimise any of the public testimonials referenced above. Rather, I hope to add to the tapestry of narratives circulating in both the public sphere and academia about what it means to move out of Islam, as a woman.

2 Methodology

Between the autumn of 2016 and the summer of 2019 I conducted fieldwork in both the Netherlands and the UK among people who moved out of Islam. I conducted life-history interviews with 44 former Muslims, which lasted between two to five hours. Some interlocutors were spoken with various times. Of the 44 interlocutors, 22 were interviewed in the UK and 22 in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, I spoke with 12 women and 10 men. In the UK, the ratio was inverse. The interlocutors’ ethnicity roughly represented the composition of the Muslim population in each respective country, although no converts were included. In each country, three people were included who were not born or raised in the UK or the Netherlands, but migrated at a later stage in life. Ages ranged between 18 and 65, and all but eight received higher education. In addition to the interviews, I kept in touch through social media messaging and via email with some of them. Interlocutors were found partially via social media (such as Facebook-groups), partially via organisations such as the Council for Ex-Muslims in Britain or the Humanist Society in the Netherlands, and

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4 This research did not discriminate on gender, ethnicity or age. Because of the small sample per ethnicity (or age), no conclusions can be drawn on its relevance for trajectories of moving out of Islam. Whilst fully realising that discursively, matters are rather different for a Dutch-Turkish man in his forties from the countryside in the Netherlands than for a British-Pakistani woman in her early twenties from Blackburn in Britain, considering the research into people moving out of Islam is relatively ‘young’ an inclusive approach was considered necessary before being able to delve into these specifics. It should be noted, however, that these biographical and intersectional qualities have always been taken into account and carefully considered wherever possible and relevant. Causal relations on the basis of such characteristics, however, have not been suggested since this project did not have the scope to do so.
partially via my own primary and secondary networks and snowballing. Furthermore, I attended various events where former Muslims would formally or informally come together, such as evenings in the pub or events organised by the abovementioned organisations (ranging from support groups to international conferences). Furthermore, I collected newspaper articles (from 1989 up until the time of writing) human interest stories, documentaries, Reddit-pages, Facebook-discussions, older forum discussions, television debates, (digital) testimonies, blogposts, vlogposts, political debates, books written by or for former Muslims and any other relevant spoken, written, or video-form related to moving out of Islam in a Dutch or British context (or international context, if referenced by my interlocutors).

The film ‘Women Leaving Islam’ came out after my fieldwork but I had met three of the women being interviewed and both the producers on various occasions in the years prior to its release (although they were not ‘formally’ interviewed by me). Although all the interviews were conducted prior to its release, by being produced by Maryam Namazie and Gita Sahgal, as well as presenting activist women’s narratives, the film represents a discourse on ‘ex-Muslims’, which I have previously described as ‘secularist ex-Muslim voices’ (Vliek 2018). Among my interlocutors, this discourse was often referenced, being represented by for example Ayaan Hirsi Ali or the members of the CEMB: former Muslims who were now critical of religion and Islam, predominantly in a Western European context. This discourse was not embraced by all, as will become clear, especially considering the already contested status of Islam in (or Muslims of) Europe. World Hijab Day and the discourse this represents was also referenced when my interlocutors would discuss their experiences with religious friends and family, or donning or removing the scarf. WHD for them often represented a discourse which seeks to present Islam as empowering and feminist, especially within the West. Taking into account these dichotomised discourses that surfaced in the discursive analysis of the larger research project,

5 See Vliek (2019b; 2021) on the implications of the method of finding interlocutors for the type of narratives that were told.

6 Also see Vliek (2021) for an extensive overview of the importance of national discourses when leaving a minority religion.

7 Ayaan Hirsi Ali was a Somali-born Dutch politician (she is currently residing in the United States), who left Islam after having moved to the Netherlands. Elected as a member of the House of Representatives in 2003, she advocated for Muslim women’s self-determination, actively criticising Islam, not in the least through the controversial film Submission. In this film, which she produced with Theo van Gogh (who was assassinated by a young Muslim in 2004), orientalist tropes of Muslim women and verses from the Qur’an are invoked to illustrate the alleged suppressive nature of Islam.
this article wishes to examine the complexities that surround ‘gender and moving out’ by looking at the narratives of women in the Netherlands and Britain who generally positioned themselves in relation to, but at a distance from both these contexts.

3 Gender and Moving Out of Islam

Especially after 9/11, Muslims of Europe and other Western countries have been looked upon with suspicion. Islam has become increasingly associated with violence, conservatism, the subjugation of women, and the man as aggressor. In order to shed more light on the realities of women around the world who live this contested religion, Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam*, for example, already argued that women’s choice to veil was not so much about subordination but rather an assertion of gender and class (Ahmed 1992). Furthermore, the pioneering work of Saba Mahmood (2005) into the agency of pious women in Egypt and agentic powers of women claiming a space and political voice from Islam, set forth the flourishing of studies into the piety of Muslim women around the world (i.a.: Jacobsen 2011; Rinaldo 2013; Terman 2011). These provide a nuanced understanding of the feminist subject within supposedly patriarchal religion. It should be noted that such work has not been limited to Islam alone, but has also covered Judaism (Prell 2007), Muslim and Christian women (Ali, Mahmood, et al. 2008; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016), Mormonism (Feller 2016; Hoyt 2007) and so forth.

In line with the above-mentioned scholarship, extensive research has been done into conversion to Islam within the West. Especially the study of why women would ‘embrace’ Islam has captured the attention of the public but also scholars. Karin van Nieuwkerk brought together an array of scholars, in her edited volume *Women Embracing Islam* in 2006. In later years, the topic of women’s conversion continued to be of interest (i.a.: Galonner and de los Rios 2016; King 2017; McGinty 2006; Roald 2012; Shanneik 2018; Spoliar and Van den Brandt 2020; Van Nieuwkerk 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr 2006). Vanessa Vroon most elaborately studied women’s conversion to Islam in the Netherlands, incorporating the negotiations over ethnic, national and religious belonging (Vroon-Najem 2014). From a focus on gender, the study into conversion to Islam within Europe has taken a recent turn towards the racial aspects that come into play when white people convert to a religion (i.e. Islam) that is racially classed by non-Muslims as non-white. Esra Özyürek explores these racial tensions when studying German converts (Özyürek 2015), and ethnic issues are discussed by Gabriel Pirický in his study into Slovak and Czech Muslim converts (Pirický
As evidenced by the above, the study into women’s conversion to Islam can be considered to be well-established. Although men have received less attention, they have most definitely been present, but more so in studies covering both men and women’s conversion. Notable exceptions are studies into black imprisoned men in the United States (Copeland 2017) and an analysis of the performance of Revival Islam by white Muslim converts in the United States and Canada (Tourage 2013). The above body of literature on conversion to Islam shows that there is a serious gender aspect to religion that should or cannot be ignored.

Orit Avishai has argued on various occasions for the incorporation of gender in the sociological study of religion (Avishai 2016; Avishai, Jafar, et al. 2015). More specifically, she conceives of religion as a gendered social institution “where ideas about gender, femininity, masculinity, men, women, sexuality, and the body emerge and are negotiated, developed, and practiced” (Avishai 2016, 388). Although she argues for the recognition of religion and calls for accounting how religion organises gender, she emphasises that it would be a misconception that these institutions would be singularly responsible for gendered social inequality. She quotes Zwissler who argued:

> It is naïve to think that if everyone woke up tomorrow an atheist, no one would continue to be sexist, racist or homophobic. These negative values suffuse society and transcend particular cultural systems. Blaming religion for these problems means not having to acknowledge how deeply ingrained hierarchy and oppression are within contemporary societies.

ZWISSLER IN AVISHAI 2016, 388

Given these caveats, Avishai emphasises the importance of recognising the structured patterns and processes “that produce and justify gender inequality” (2016, 390). How, then, are such patterns and processes experienced and what ideologies, practices, interactions, texts or authority structures underlie them?

The importance of gender within the study of religion may be clear. But there seems to be an issue when studying leaving Islam, or ‘moving out’ (Van Nieuwkerk 2018). First of all, it has received far less attention than its ‘con-
version counterpart’. In a pioneering sociological study, Simon Cottee studied the process of moving out of Islam through a chronological lens: what happens when Muslims leave Islam? From doubts to realising one is ‘an apostate’, to telling one’s surroundings or concealing unbelief, to eventually ‘managing’ apostasy, Cottee’s work and his interlocutors sketched the first impressions of such experiences. My own work has also focussed on former Muslims in Europe, but taking a less chronological and more thematic approach (Vliek 2021). From the different types of moving out, to embodied experiences and considerations over ‘speaking out’, as well as the public manifestations of ‘secularist ex-Muslim voices’, our understanding of ‘moving out of Islam’ is broadening. In addition, Göran Larsson has researched the more discursive problems surrounding ‘apostasy’ (Larsson 2018a) or apostasy debates in Sweden (Larsson 2018b). These studies all represent an emerging field, and gender is as of yet rather absent. A notable exception, however, is the attention that is paid to unveiling (Fadil 2011; Gould 2014; Izharuddin 2018; Küttük-Kuriš 2021) although it should be noted that these examples do not necessarily consider unveiling as a practice of moving out of Islam (Van Nieuwkerk 2021).

4 Gender and Leaving Religion

I wish to briefly look at the study of ‘leaving religion’ more generally, because it seems to suffer from a similar lacuna. In the field of psychology, the work of Heinz Streib is leading with regards to ‘deconversion’ (Streib 2020; Streib, Hood, et al. 2009). However, gender as either ideological objection or personal experiences of inequality are not addressed. In the field of sociology, gender is rarely mentioned apart from as a demographic factor (Sidło 2016; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017) or simply mentioned but not analysed (Cottee 2015; Van Nieuwkerk 2018).

Lynn Davidman (2015) as a notable exception, does pay ample attention to gendered issues, especially for women, when exploring the stories of ex-Hasidic Jews. From women’s dress, to gender segregation, issues of homosexuality, ignoring gender norms, gender inequality, all are explored in detail. Davidman’s interlocutors describe, for example, how their first transgressions often evolved around breaking gender norms, such as talking to boys, or even touching boys as well as the normative differences that were inscribed on boys and girls. This started with the early realisation that girls from the age of seven or eight would not be allowed to go to synagogue on Shabbes but had to stay at home to help their mothers, as opposed to their brothers who would still attend. Davidman notes that it is this gender inequality that the girls perceived from a very young
age, which prescribed their role in the community for the rest of their lives, that often "produced doubt about their ability to remain in the Hasidic world" (2015, 31). Davidman further highlights, among other things, the double standard that women saw regarding male and female sexuality, one that indeed feminists have criticised for decades.

When E. Marshall Brooks (2018) describes the bodily experiences of his interlocutors who have left Mormonism, with regards to gender he mentions clothing and modesty. However, a structural analysis of gender is absent. Bodily and sexual expectations are thus not described in a gendered manner, but rather as pervasive for both men and women, considering procreation is an expectation for both. A more structural approach is that of Caroline Faulkner, who addresses the gendered motivations for 'religious exit' among former Amish (Faulkner 2018). Responding to the call by among others Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo (2015) to pay more structural attention to gender in sociological studies of religion, she approaches her interlocutors' narratives with a gendered lens: gender shaped the motivations of men and women differently. Rather than either paying no attention at all or conceiving of it narrowly, she argues for a gendered approach to moving out of religion to provide a deeper understanding of how gender is produced in religious communities. However, her analysis is limited due to her focus on 'motivations' for exiting, rather than incorporating an analysis of the placement of gender in larger leaving narratives.

The recently published *Handbook of Leaving Religion* (Enstedt, Larsson, et al. 2020) is a timely and necessary addition to our understanding of processes of religious transformation. Its broad span covers historical debates, case studies from world religions as well as methodological and theoretical approaches and suggestions for further research. The same goes for the edited volume *Moving in and out of Islam* (Van Nieuwkerk 2018). However, both these volumes pay scant attention to gendered issues of moving out of religion and Islam specifically. Thereby, as evidenced by the above, there seems to be a relative lack of attention to gender when it concerns moving out of Islam since we are in the early stages. This article wishes to contribute to our discussions of leaving religion, and specifically moving out of Islam, by examining the specific gendered experiences of my interlocutors, and their placement in larger societal discourses.

5 Different Rules for Girls

During my fieldwork, I never asked my interlocutors 'why'. 'Why' has an underlying nudge for someone to defend 'choices' that were made. In fact, rational choice theory has long been refuted within conversion studies (Wohlrab-Sahr
and therefore I considered the presumption that ‘choices’ were made when moving out of religion not productive, and did not ask ‘why’. Rather, I asked how: How did this happen? How did you experience this?, thereby aiming to illicit narrative rather than reason. Approaching my interlocutors as well as my data in this manner, also meant that I never, in five years, came up with an answer to the question ‘so why then, do people leave Islam?’. This is contrary to for example Caroline Faulkner (2018) who asked ‘why women leave the Amish’ and found predominantly gendered motivations. Rather, I consider people's lives to be an accumulation of various religious, ethnic, social, political, economic, and gendered intersections, instead of an action-reaction pattern which identifies ‘reasons’. In light of this approach, I wish to explore two issues in this section: first, the experiences of my interlocutors of different rules for boys and girls when growing up, which may have led to doubt and play a role in women's narratives of moving out. Second, I wish to elaborate on how some of my interlocutors found the legal status of women within Islam to be problematic, which contributed to their doubt and uncertainty. I will open this section by elaborating on Sara's story, which displays both key points on personal experience and intellectual disagreement.

For Sara, a twenty-something student who grew up in a Shi'a family between Kuwait and the UK, the different rules for boys and girls that were imposed on her were what led her to doubt and eventually moving out of Islam. Raised in a strict “all or nothing” environment, she explained how her Kuwaiti family viewed boys and girls: “when I was young they used to pair us up for the future (…) my father's family, they basically viewed women as like ‘you are going to grow up to marry this person and you are going to be this person's wife’ (…) That's it’. As a child, she remembers playing outside with boys and girls, and did not have any particular awareness of the difference, until she was made to wear a headscarf from the age of nine:

I remember it vividly. I remembered how I changed from before to after hijab. I felt I was just a child. I was quite a happy child. I played with the boys and once I wore it, that all went away and I just kind of went into myself. I literally just retreated into myself, because everybody treated me differently: ‘She is now wearing a hijab. She is a woman, she needs to be treated differently’.

8 All names of interlocutors have been anonymised.
9 All quotes from Sara are from an interview with the author on the 21st November 2017 in London, UK.
When her family would visit the UK, she would be criticised for wearing the scarf. Even though she hated ‘every second of it’, she used to pretend to other children that it was her choice: “I would scream and I would be like: ‘it’s my choice!’! They have not even said anything offensive, but I was so defensive about it: ‘it is my choice!’! Whereas in reality it really wasn’t”. At this very young age, Sara already seems to be positioning herself here towards her friends wanting to subvert the narrative of suppression that World Hijab Day also wants to thwart. She assumes her friends would consider the scarf as suppressive, as not a choice, and she feels that she has to defend the narrative of choice within Islam. Her mother had sold the scarf to her by asking her if she didn’t want to be a good Muslim? And so of course she did, but she explains: “Once you wear it, you can’t take it off (...) it’s like a public rejection (...) It is worse to wear it and then take it off, instead of never wanting to wear it. So it really defined who I was”.

As a child, she was to conform to all the rules and regulations in order to avoid hell fire. This ‘all or nothing mentality’ accumulated in panic attacks, when she would wake up convinced she would go to hell. This made her conform to all rules, such as fasting, praying, not talking to boys, and wearing the scarf. But she constantly felt that: “I wasn’t a good enough Muslim, I wasn’t a good enough daughter either”. Her doubts were always there, but her fear was bigger, until her father passed away. This is when Sara witnessed a form of gender inequality that was hard to come to terms with: her mother was not to receive any of the inheritance, instead her children were to take care of her. She thought: “this can’t be right” and started to look into Shi’a legislation. The entire affair had an impact: “Is this how you view women? Is this how you view your wife? That she is not worth of inheritance? And this got the ball rolling from there”. A second issue that made her doubt her religion and religious practice, was that of a *nikah mutah*, a temporary marriage: “So it was always very lenient towards like, letting the guy do what he basically wanted to do”. Such inconsistencies made her doubt:

> How can this be, from a religion that is so strict, that is so you have to follow the rules. It pretends to be this pure religion, and you just kind of, slip in a role here that: ‘oh, you can actually get temporarily married’. It just

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10 A *nikah mutah* is a private and verbal temporary marriage, practiced in Shi’a Islam. The duration of the marriage is agreed upon beforehand. Often, the man pays a small dowry to the woman. Since the marriage by definition is temporary, it has also been criticised for practically allowing for sex without ‘really’ getting married, or even making legal arrangements for prostitution.
did not make sense it was really, it was really a sore spot for me because (...) it is insulting to women. (...) I started resenting the religion itself.

Sara described this process as not just a rational thought process, but as a very emotional time which had her torn between her fear for the afterlife, the unequal treatment of her mother as well as her own experiences and the exceptions that were available to men.

Reflecting on her experiences she said:

Basically, I think that is how a religion viewed me, like that is how religious people view me, that is how men in Kuwait would view women: just like pieces of garbage that you just use for a bit and then throw away. That is how I felt. (...) It baffles me how other women did not see it that way.

She explained how misogyny was almost a ‘women’s practice’. It was considered ‘natural’ for men to cheat on their wives after they had had children: “The women took it on as well. (...) They would view themselves that low: ‘You should just accept, yeah of course the men are going to go out and find someone else. You are only the mother of his kids now, so not young anymore’. Absolutely ridiculous (...).” At the time of our conversation she was studying in London. When visiting her family who are now also in the UK, she still wears the headscarf because she reckons: “My mum and my sister would not be able to look at me without hijab. They would not be able to see me outside without hijab and feel ok about that. I think it would be too upsetting for them, maybe a bit jarring as well”. Even if she were to be honest with them about her beliefs or lack thereof, she still wouldn’t think she would ever not wear the scarf in front of them: “I would still wear it at just out of not wanting things being awkward”.

For Sara, having to behave like a good Muslim girl was what defined her childhood, her puberty, and her narrative of moving out. Strict religious and gendered rules defined how she was supposed to live her life, which was accompanied by eventually unbearable guilt. Guilt and fear were still, to some extent, with her when I met her. For others, the gendered rules for boys and girls were also an issue when growing up. Maya, a student in her mid-twenties, whose grandparents had migrated from Yemen to the UK, told me, similarly to Sara, how differences between her and her brother in her upbringing frustrated her entire childhood and adolescence. Since her father had left the house, her brother was supposed to protect her ‘honour’:

This honour thing, that is about asserting masculinity. Because you’re protecting your sister’s honour, so it’s very brave and noble of you, to make
your sister’s life hell (laughs). You know, when you’re on the receiving end of that, it feels horrendous.\textsuperscript{11}

According to Maya, the stories of women being ‘tainted’ if they would have sex before marriage, for example, were mainly reproduced by the women in her family. If she were to ask for help with her brother who treated her unfairly, she would find her mother and grandmother on his side: “That was the hardest thing. When you look to another woman because you think they are going to understand. Women can be the biggest advocates for it [unequal treatment of men and women]”.

There were others for whom gendered issues or impositions had not necessarily affected their personal lives, but for whom gender inequality within Islam had been an instigator of doubt. Yagana, for example, an Afghan-Dutch student also in her mid-twenties, started to explore her religion more during puberty, mainly in response to societal criticisms on Islam claiming it was supposedly an inhumane religion which glorified violence (Vliek 2019a). Initially, she became more religious, “even considered wearing a headscarf”,\textsuperscript{12} but the more she read, the more inconsistencies she found, especially in relation to women. For Yagana, it was not so much the inequalities she experienced herself, but rather the legal position of women in Islam, as Sara elaborated on as well.

Amina, a forty-something Moroccan-Dutch teacher, told me: “My mum raised us without any differences between boys and girls” however, she did observe how gender inequality was affecting Muslim communities today.\textsuperscript{13} Her own narrative, however, did not place gender at the forefront but rather: “The life that I chose, removed itself from Islam”. She placed her ‘light’ upbringing in the cultural way of life of Morocco, where she and her family lived until she was 13. She observed an increased visible religiosity among young female Muslims:

\textbf{My generation, if you had to wear hijab or get married, girls would run away. They wanted to go to university (...) Now you see that young girls choose consciously to wear hijab or get married (...) So many women fought for those freedoms, and now so many girls seem to limit themselves.}

\textsuperscript{11} All quotes from Maya are derived from a personal interview with the author on the 23rd of January 2018, London, UK.

\textsuperscript{12} All quotes from Yagana are derived from a personal interview with the author on the 24th of April 2017 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

\textsuperscript{13} All quotes from Amina are derived from a personal interview with the author on 17th July 2017, Utrecht, the Netherlands.
Like Yagana, she interpreted this increased visible religiosity as a consequence of the scrutiny on Muslims and their wish to assert their identities more after 9/11.

There were different arguments about gender inequality and where it supposedly came from. Some firmly placed it within culture, like Fareeda, a young British-Bangladeshi who was currently working in a clothing shop:

I just remember the culture. The fact that we are Bengali, being imposed on us. Like what they do, they do that because they are English, they are white, black, people have their black lifestyle, white people have their white lifestyle. We don't drink, and we don't have boyfriends. We get married, women cook and clean and you know.  

Fareeda had known gendered differences as a child, and was mostly concerned with the impositions this made on her future life. She always wanted to leave the small town in the North of England that she had grown up in, and move to London. Breaking away had everything to do with the watchful eye of the Bengali community, and not so much with that of Allah. It was a common reasoning that Islam and cultural understandings would underpin social inequality, that it would be kept “firmly in place”. Maya explained: “As a woman, there is this massive double standard, that I experience, which is frustrating. And you know, I don’t know where it comes from. Is that religion? Is that culture? I couldn’t tell you because for me it is just patriarchy, culture and religion are used as tools”. Khalida, a Dutch-Moroccan entrepreneur in her late forties took culture and religion out of the equation entirely when she added: “I blame women. They know how much power they have, and they just give it to the blokes. And blokes use that by claiming it is supposedly Islamic, but it is purely because they know that women would otherwise be way too powerful. They would rule them. I blame women for letting that happen”.  

The women I spoke with raised various issues when it concerned gender. For some, it was the inequality in treatment that they experienced in their childhood and throughout puberty that initiated doubt and kept playing a crucial role in their development and religious transformations. The forceful wearing of the hijab for one, or the impossibilities of dressing the way they would want, or the structural patriarchal treatment of women were at times such grieving

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14 All quotes from Fareeda are derived from a personal interview with the author on the 8th February 2018 in London, UK.
15 All quotes from Khalida are derived from a personal interview with the author on the 18th August 2017, Breda, the Netherlands.
experiences that it dominated the stories of moving out. It should be noted, that although gendered issues were raised by all women, they were predominantly a factor alongside others. Although women reckoned that gendered social impediments were generally inspired by religious conservatisms, there were also some who thought that ‘culture’ had a say in this too, meaning these impediments would also surface in non-religious but specifically ethnical or cultural contexts. This may have been expressed because of not wanting to generalise Muslims, but some women also saw a change within their families: whereas before rules and restrictions came from ‘culture’ passed down over generations, it was not until later that a stricter form of religion seemed to take hold, where cultural elements such as non-segregated weddings were no longer possible. The perceived stricter form of religion can be linked to the increased scrutiny that Muslims of Europe have been placed under in post 9/11 times. As Yagana explained, before moving out, having her religion dis-sected and criticised publicly made her more interested in Islam and wanting to ‘own’ this identity so that “I could say: look, I am Muslim, and I am ok” (Vliek 2018). This trend was observed by many of my interlocutors (both men and women) throughout the past 30 years. This turn towards religion because of the increased public scrutiny (as well as generational issues; second generation migrants often search for identity and may find a ‘deculturalised’ version (Slootman and Duyvendak 2018) or a ‘globalised Islam’ due to Muslims’ minority status (Roy 2004) more attractive), has led, according to some of my interlocutors, to a decrease of cultural elements in their religious surroundings.16

6 Visibility of Gender

Elsewhere I have discussed the role of the body when moving out of Islam (Vliek 2021). I argue that it is in visibility of knowledges, practices, and behaviours that membership to a certain group is established, be it the religious or the secular (Hirschkind 2011). My interlocutors negotiated various dispositions from both sides of the religious and secular divide to construct their own unique selfhood. These visible dispositions often had a gendered nature, which this section will explore in order to shed light on the role of the gendered body

16 These trends could be extensively analysed, as has been done by for example Saba Mahmood (2005) or Anabel Inge (2016). For now, it is sufficient to note that these developments were also observed and experienced by some of my interlocutors and that I will have to leave the analysis of the position of women in Salafi movements or globalised Islam for other experts to untangle.
when moving out of Islam. As religious and secular discourse as well as public testimonies such as the film ‘Women Leaving Islam’ and ‘World Hijab Day’ often lay claims through either the embodied empowerment or subjugation of, for example, the scarf or veil, it is worth exploring my interlocutors’ experiences with them here.

As elaborated on above, many of my female interlocutors experienced differences in the rules that were imposed on them and their male counterparts, or they found that the ‘official’ treatment of women, in for example divorce law or bearing witness, was unequal. About a quarter of my female interlocutors (five) had at some point worn a headscarf. Their experiences varied from traumatic to pragmatic, and I wish to first examine Sara’s story further, who considered the fact that she had to wear a headscarf a pivotal fact that changed her childhood forever. Sara hated wearing the headscarf as a child. It changed her self-image drastically, as elaborated above. When she and her family would visit the UK, people started to treat her differently. She reckoned she never faced outward hostility, but she was stared at. Her mother reckoned that it was just in her head, but: “Once I took it off, there was a huge change in how people treated me (…) I just felt like one of everyone, accepted more. Accepted at least”. Before, “I felt very isolated when wearing the scarf in the UK. When I was wearing the scarf here, I just did not want it anymore”. But taking it off was not on the table: “How I dressed, was absolutely the most important thing for them, how I looked: ‘Do you look like a good Muslim?’ Whether you actually did anything else was irrelevant to them”. This emphasis on the appearance of ‘being a good Muslim’ persisted throughout her childhood. It is in the discrepancies with the different rules for men who did not have to behave or dress in a certain way and who did not face the impositions she faced, as well as the persistent judgment that was passed, that her belief in such practices faded. Once she had moved out of her parental home to study in London, she considered taking off her scarf:

There was one time when I was thinking: ‘I am not going to wear it’ and I felt it was such a thing. I felt someone was watching me like, I was looking over my shoulder: ‘who is going to see me?’, you know, and I was very, very self-conscious but it was so weird. It was like my heart was racing the whole time I was out walking around without my headscarf and it was just such a huge, very memorable experience to be honest.

At the time of our conversation, Sara still wore a headscarf when visiting her family, who are now also residing in the UK “to keep the peace with my family. At the moment, I don’t really want to have them knowing, so I wear it but I feel
still like it is why I avoid going there so much, which upsets me (... I just revert back to that self-conscious teenager I was”. When I asked her what would have been different if she had been a boy, she answered:

I think I would have been like one of those on-the-surface Muslims but not really a Muslim. It would have been a lot easier for me. A lot easier. Because generally, Muslim guys are not outwardly Muslim. (...) I would even go as far as saying, if I was a non-hijabi girl it probably would have been a bit different as well.

Sara summarises the power of the visibility of behaviour and the gendered nature it had for her. In her surroundings, men are not visibly Muslim. Women, and especially ‘hijabi women’, are considered to openly renounce their religion when they start dressing differently. Ayat, a young Moroccan-Dutch girl from The Hague (at the time of the interview she was in her late teens) also still wore her hijab when visiting her mother in her old neighbourhood: “My father knows, but he lives in a different neighbourhood, so no one would see me. But from there on, I have to wear it again, otherwise people would see me”.17 At the time of our conversation, she was eager to leave her parental home to go to university, also to be able to stop conforming to the expectations of fasting and wearing the scarf, but the main issue for her was that she had ‘freed her mind’ of what had been: “I know what’s in my head, I can wait with leaving the house”.

Hiranur, a twenty-something Turkish-Dutch girl from the north of the Netherlands working as a researcher had never worn a headscarf in her day to day life. Her story, however, was coloured by her wish to fit in with her extended family. From a young age, she had been less versed in religious practice and knowledges than her peers. Although on a principal level she disagreed with the fact that women ‘had’ to wear a headscarf in Islam, personally she did not care much about the fact that she, her sister and her cousins (none of whom usually wear a headscarf) would wear a scarf during celebrations such as weddings. Although it was not her ‘favourite’ thing (“it’s more uncomfortable than difficult”), she struggled more with the fact that it was another occasion on which people could see she did not know the prayers and rituals: “but these days I no longer pretend to know what to do. I just sit down and listen”.18 When I asked her about other visible gendered differences, she thought long and hard.

17 All quotes from Ayat are derived from a personal interview with the author on 7th February 2017, Den Haag, the Netherlands.
18 All quotes from Hiranur are derived from a personal interview with the author on 5th April 2017, Groningen, the Netherlands.
Eventually she reckoned that her aunt would tell her quietly to ‘cover up a little, love’, if her top was considered a bit too low cut.

When discussing other differences for men and women, some of my interlocutors would point to the fact that men have to go to mosque, and girls or women do not. Naima, a young Moroccan-Dutch girl still in school, reckoned it was actually more difficult for men to move out of Islam because of the visibility of their behaviour. Men would have to go to mosque, pray, and marry a Muslima, things that were not relevant for women. She continued, “if you [as a woman] are eating during Ramadan, you have the excuse that you’re on your period”, whilst men would not have that luxury. Naima made these comments also in light of the fact that she had never worn the headscarf for longer periods of time. As a young girl, she had worn it for a few weeks, but decided to take it off due to her uncle’s comments: “just make sure you get a job before putting on the hijab”. She continued: “I’m glad I listened because it would have been very difficult to take it off on my own accord. Also, if I had waited, I’d be a grown woman, it’s difficult then”. Naima was still living with her parents. She said she wanted to wait with moving out of her parental home until she would be married. Then, she would be able to wear short clothes, not fast, and be visible. For now, she did not experience it as problematic to stay at home. Although sometimes she felt it would be “really nice to be on my own”, it seemed more complicated to leave than to wait.

In our study of moving out of Islam, gender has received scant attention so far. Shedding light on certain gendered experiences of my interlocutors has shown a few things. First, the role of gender in their leaving narratives has been explored. The personal experiences of different rules for boys and girls during their upbringings would sometimes contribute to doubt and uncertainty about the validity of their religion. In addition, intellectual disagreement with the legal status of women in Islam could exacerbate such feelings and problematise their views on Islam. Sometimes, these grievances were all-encompassing and made gender a dominant theme throughout their stories of moving out. For others, gender was not to be excluded, but it was much less prominent in their experiences with their family, community and religion. Second, gendered discourses were often experienced on the body. Various visible practices, knowledges and behaviours that establish or terminate membership to either the religious or secular had a gendered nature, such as the wearing of the scarf, modest dress in general or mosque attendance. Again, whilst for some this was

19 All quotes form Naima are derived from a personal interview with the author on 25th July 2017, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.
experienced as suffocating and impossible to live with whilst not believing, for others these gendered visibilities were not as problematic since they were not expected to conform to such extents in the first place.

7 Positionality in a Polarised Debate

This article opened with a description of two discourses on women and Islam. On the one hand, the documentary ‘Women Leaving Islam’ claimed to represent the dissenters, in which six activist women narrated the suppression of Islam on their lives. On the other hand, the organisers of ‘World Hijab Day’ claimed liberty and feminism to be hallmarks of Islam. Both within the UK and the Netherlands, this discussion on the societal and political level is often equally polarised and lacking nuance.

Saba Mahmood argued that “[f]eminist contributions to the vilification of Islam do no service either to Muslim women or to the cause of gender justice. Instead they reinscribe the cultural and civilizational divide that has become the bedrock not only of neoconservative politics but also of liberal politics in this tragic moment of our history” (Mahmood 2009, 204). As I agree that orientalist descriptions and generalisations of Islam as oppressor are not helpful, I do not believe that we should not take into account atrocity narratives or experiences with gendered inequality. The question then remains why and under what circumstances such contributions arise. Iveta Jusová, in her analysis of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s and Theo van Gogh’s film Submission, places this conundrum on the following scales:

Thus as intellectuals champion the right of immigrant and all women to speak about their dissent, it is equally important to categorically oppose as dangerous and counterproductive any attempt on behalf of those participating in the broader public debate at appropriating feminist critiques into arguments about presumed backwardness or inferiority of the group in question. (Jusová 2008, 149–150).

She quotes anthropologist Uma Narayan who argued that Western academics all too often pressure ‘Third World feminists’ into an ‘emissary position’: a position that forces them to be positive ambassadors for their culture. However, according to Narayan this impedes their feminist analyses and critiques and fails to “recognize the fact that women have good reasons to be disloyal to a multiplicity of civilizations” (Narayan 1997, 135). This balance between allowing space for critique on inequality whilst not falling into arguments (or being
used as such) over backwardness and inferiority is a delicate one which requires scrutiny. As my interlocutors themselves were also aware of their positionality within such debates, I wish to briefly reflect on their considerations.

Fighting for change within families was common after having moved out of Islam, not only for women. However, it was the women who emphasised that many of their arguments revolved around women’s rights and gendered upbringings. For Maya, her position as a woman moving out of Islam, had very much defined her experiences: “something that really drives me crazy is something that Islam is often promoted as a very feminist religion. When I know for certain that that has not been my experience. (…) Because you know, if you are such a peaceful and feminist religion, why am I as an ex-Muslim woman, having to navigate all these different barriers?” According to Maya, Muslim women stay quiet about inequality because they feel they have to protect their religion since it has been under attack. She reckoned: “So when you start to criticise or challenge or question, you’re immediately just thrown out of the group”. This made any form of speaking out against gendered inequality within religious communities nearly impossible for Maya.

Others were also quite aware of the gendered stereotypes that surrounded Islam, which made them cautious about speaking out about their experiences. Sara, for example, explained that women’s stories of leaving Islam could be used for ‘both’. She referred to the stigmatisation that some veiled women experienced in the UK, which allegedly made them take off their scarf. According to Sara, the ‘Left’, by using women’s stories of unveiling, would attempt to illustrate Islamophobia. On the other hand, there would be those on the ‘Right’ who would use these women’s stories for their own political agenda: ‘Look, Islam is misogynistic, even these women who come from Muslim families recognise this’. Sara explained: “the extreme right, [they] would use it to shed a bad light on all the Muslims, like: ‘look these brave women! They have thrown off this evil Muslim thing’. Which again, is partially true. Or it could be used by the Left to say that ‘you evil Islamophobic Westerners, you’ve made these Muslim women feel so bad that they felt that they had to leave their religion’. Neither of the stories is the complete picture, I think”.

Additionally, like many others, she distinguished between critiquing Muslims and critiquing Islam. She was keen, like Elea, a thirty-something Turkish-Dutch working at the university, to discuss gendered issues with friends and family as well as on the internet, but she emphasised that ‘you have to tread carefully’: “I don’t want to seem that I am attacking them [Muslims] in any way but at the same time it could come across as if I’m doing that, saying: ‘this verse in the Qur’an is sanctioning domestic violence, it’s just ridiculous’. People would hear me say that (…) they would understand it as ‘Muslim men
would think it is ok to hit their wives’, which is not what I mean.”

Elea noted a difference between what Islam or the Qur’an states which she could point out, but that this could be interpreted as what ‘Muslim men’ do. She would mean the former, whilst attempting to avoid the latter. Despite her experiences with gendered impositions on her life when she was growing up and the consequences these had had for her mental health, she did not want to play into these narratives, from both the left or the right, as she put it. She was aware of her positionality as a woman who had moved out of Islam, which could indeed be utilised for both the narrative of ‘World Hijab Day’, as a woman who felt stigmatised when she wore the scarf, but also for the victimised narratives from the documentary ‘Women Leaving Islam’ because she felt pressure from her family. Although her own experiences could be considered to have an overlap with both (she did feel stigmatised when she was still Muslim woman by the non-Muslim majority, and she was made to wear the scarf by her family) she was not inclined to support either argument. Rather, she wanted to navigate these waters with her own positionality and keep nuance in her narrative.

It should be noted that the examples presented here are specifically geared towards gendered stereotypes that my interlocutors felt were imposed on Muslims in both the Netherlands and the UK. This, however, was not the only issue that this positionality of ‘being in between’ would come up. Generally, as I argue elsewhere, my interlocutors experienced an ‘inbetweenness’ after having moved out of Islam, not only when it would concern gender (Vliek 2021). Maya explained: “I’m not going to say ‘Yeah, I’m going to be killed for being an ex-Muslim, my family is going to honour kill me’, but I feel that there is people that would love me to say that, because that fits into an easy simple narrative, the perfect kind of story to this movement. And I think it is important to show that the stories are so different”.

8 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this article was twofold: to explore my interlocutors’ experiences with gender when moving out of Islam and to elaborate on their positionality within religious and secular expectations of what it means to be a former Muslim and the gendered nature this supposedly has. First, for some of

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20 All quotes from Elea are derived from a personal interview with the author on the 22nd September 2017, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
the women I spoke with the unequal treatment of men and women which they had experienced throughout childhood and puberty initiated doubt. Furthermore, different rules and regulations or the structural patriarchal treatment of women were sometimes such grieving experiences that they dominated narratives of moving out. However, generally, gender was a factor that was elaborated on as one among others in leaving narratives. Second, in the visible practices that may change when one moves out of Islam, gendered practices came to the fore as being particularly discerning. Various visible practices, knowledges and behaviours that establish or terminate membership to either the religious or secular had a gendered nature, such as the wearing of the scarf, modest dress in general or mosque attendance. Again, whilst for some this was experienced as suffocating and impossible to live with whilst not believing, for others these gendered visibilities were not as problematic since they were not expected to conform to such extents in the first place.

Last, analysing gender when leaving religion, especially considering a polarised framework on ‘Islam’ and ‘women’, shows at a minimum that there is more to ‘gender and Islam’ than the liberation versus suppression binary many societal and political debates would have us believe. This also showed in my interlocutors’ ponderings on the expectations of the effect that one’s narrative may illicit when speaking out about gendered issues. They feared either being appropriated by the ‘Women Leaving Islam’-narrative or the ‘World Hijab Day’-discourse. Rather, they often found themselves in an inbetweenness which they preferred to inhabit. Furthermore, on a more analytical level, the analysis of gender when moving out of Islam shows that gender rears its head differently in personal experiences, intellectual grievances, and bodily inscriptions which contributed to women’s narratives of moving out.

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