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Religious Conviction & Social Activism

Muslim Women in Rotterdam

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Leila by now knows more about Islam than her parents. Together with Selma she studies classical Arabic, so that they can read the Quran for themselves. Selma has a Turkish background and is the only woman in her family who goes to the mosque for prayer. A few years back, Halima took a radical decision. She “gave up her job and house,” and broke off her engagement, started anew and became a conscious and practising Muslim. On Sundays, these three students – Halima studies social welfare, Selma architecture, and Leila education – attend the sermons in the mosque Dar al-Hijra given by imam Adil, a young history student, whose voice is so “beautiful and gripping.” Four other women, Faizah, Hafsa, Badiyah, and Raouda, recently started studying again as well, wanting to set an example for other Muslim women. They had married, had children, and then started doing voluntary work. Now they form the women’s commission of the “social-cultural organization Ettaouhid” and want to make Muslim women conscious of their abilities to develop themselves within Islam.

“We want emancipation and development from within Islam.”

Women’s meeting at Ettaouhid

Their life stories illustrate the choices and views of several Dutch-Moroccan women, who are active in Rotterdam as teachers and organizers in local associations and whose inner religious conviction, self-development, social responsibility, and engagement seemed to be connected. They are consciously participating as Muslim women in society as an expression of their true belief in personal responsibility and Islamic duties and virtues, and as ways of getting closer to God. For them, being a good Muslim not only comprises a true and just inner conviction, but

applying that to day-to-day activities as well. The spiritual equality of men and women, central to this true Islam, forms the basis on which the women proclaim equal worthiness of men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims within Dutch society. Through activities in which they link up religious ideas and ideals with actual, social matters, they strive for equal treatment of Muslim women by their husbands, families, and the Dutch Muslim community, and press for more knowledge and a more positive image of Islam and (Moroccan) Muslims within society as a whole. Faizah, trainer with SMACCV, a cultural centre for Dutch-Moroccan women on women’s rights and the Quran, claims that:

“Muslim women should not stop working or studying when they get married, because they are expected to take care of the children ... I want these women to participate ... Knowledge and development, and striving for an objective in life, these are obligations in Islam! Muslim women in the Netherlands should first of all realise the importance of language, study and education.”

Self-development

These women experienced certain personal developments upon becoming practising Muslims. Notably, their outlook on the hijab, which most of them only recently started wearing. Badiyah started to wear a headscarf, after she had been married for quite a while, and stresses that this had nothing to do with the views of her parents or her husband. Zaineb just started wearing Islamic clothing and the hijab from one day to the next. Like Halima, she remarks she always paid a lot of attention to how she looked and was particularly proud of her hair; one night, however, she dreamed she was standing before God, woke up sweating, and decided that veiling was her individual spiritual responsibility and necessity. Some of the women describe these developments as a gradual, step-by-step and greatly unconscious transition. Others, like Zaineb, seem to have made a very conscious and radical change.

Self-development

Fundamental to their decisions, these women explain, is the development of a new spiritual consciousness. They say they had “missed something” in their lives, had not felt “completely themselves” and were more like “roaming.” Selma and Leila explain their attitude to veiling: “you have to wear the hijab but only if you personally want to do so and feel the need in your heart; you have to have the right intention otherwise your wearing it will have no meaning”; while Raouda adds, “many Moroccan women wear this on cultural grounds nowadays, without realizing the spiritual and religious purpose of getting close to God, and this is wrong.” Contrary to many Dutch Muslims who proclaim belief in or with their heart, those women state that “to practice completely and be a good and true Muslim you have to show your belief to the world around you and act accordingly.”

These women volunteer for good deeds to obtain extra religious merit and gain spiritual closeness. A few years ago, around the time Leila started wearing the hijab, both she and Selma decided not to shake hands with men any more. Selma even considers discontinuing her studies, because she feels uncomfortable working as a Muslim



COURTESY OF SPIOR, 2008

woman in such a "men's world." Like the women from Dar al-Hijra and Ettaouhid, Zaineb started to study again and switched from finance to teaching. Married mothers like Zaineb seem to see their voluntary work and studying as marking a new phase for them, consciously expanding their role as wife and mother, by committing to others in society. As such, practising true Islam gives them a sense of inner peace and strengthened self-worth.

Striving for equality

Besides their personal development, many of these women target the development of Dutch Muslim women, and the Dutch Muslim community in general. In this context Badiyah, Hafsa, and Raouda, like Faizah, claim that many Muslim women lack an understanding of the central duties of Islam and therefore hold on to women-unfriendly conceptions and practices, which are generally supported within Dutch Moroccan and Muslim communities. Independently Hafsa and Halima point to the mental health problems many Muslim women in Rotterdam are suffering from, due to social and economical pressures that they face as Moroccan and Muslim women migrants. Hafsa, who studies to be a spiritual caretaker, states: "especially through my work and contacts at Ettaouhid, I noticed that there are so many women with mental problems. Yes, perhaps it has to do with alienation from society ... another culture, a completely different life – it's a big step and you get so much fear and doubt in society ... Also if you have a real traditional Moroccan husband at home: you can't do this, you can't do that. It plays a big part in pressuring women and causing these mental problems." Besides organizing activities within the mosque, Halima acts as a social worker for the female visitors. She relates: "I provide guidance to women who really need it. Women come here with a lot of problems. The threshold is low here ... I refer them to the physician, for instance ... and it helps, so ... my objective is being fulfilled here." Leila and Selma mention the overall passivity of Dutch-Moroccan women and criticize the fact that Islam is often used to legitimize women staying at home, although this is not right according to "true Islam."

Ettaouhid, Dar al-Arqam, and SPIOR regularly organize meetings where Islam and the position and rights of women within their "own" community are discussed. With projects like the one coordinated by Rajaa, concerning the issue of forced marriages, the women strive to address the community as their collective responsibility to denounce gender inequality. The project on forced marriages thus tries to involve not only young Muslim women themselves, but also their parents and the young Muslim men, because as Rajaa says: "... a lot of the parents think that this is the way it should be done according to Islam, but in the Quran it is written exactly the other way round! The rights of the Muslim woman are obscured by culture. We want emancipation and development from within Islam." Emina, a former teacher of empowerment trainings, believes that giving Islamic guidance is a logical undertaking, because Islam stimulates women to think critically. "Muslim women," Emina states, "... have to use the traditions to empower women."

Social engagement

The women are seriously committed to Dutch society. Although they do not participate physically in public or political debates – in fact they made clear they do not aspire to be on national television or to become political figures – they do actively discuss the position of Islam, Muslim women, and Dutch Moroccan citizens in society. They try to include non-Muslims as well. Through informational and discussion meetings, they concentrate on "distinguishing true and just Islam, from negative culture and cultural traditions," distancing themselves from the women-unfriendly, violent and undemocratic, image of Islam as it is represented in media, politics, and public discourse in the Netherlands. Basing their religious practices and belief first of all on the Quran, as the literal word of God, they describe Islam as entailing love, tolerance, personal freedom, individual responsibility, and equal worthiness. In this light Halima, Selma, Leila, and other women from their mosque formed a women's group called Seal of Prophecy. They invited Muslims and non-Muslims from the neighbourhood to spend an afternoon of dialogue across religions. While leaving, everybody received a rose as token of intercultural understanding, respect, and tolerance.

While the women want to reach out to Dutch society, they feel it does not appreciate them. They make clear they continuously feel discriminated against and excluded as Dutch-Moroccan Muslim women. Former students Saima, Farhat, and Bushra from Dar al-Arqam, all had

difficulty finding jobs because of their religion and background. Zaineb, teacher in Rotterdam, tells about her recurring problems arranging internships for her students; companies admit to her over the telephone, not to accept someone with a Moroccan name and wearing the headscarf, not realizing that Zaineb, who has an explicit Rotterdam accent, was born in Morocco and wears hijab too. According to the women, non-acceptance by Dutch non-Muslim society has slowly increased after September 11 and the murder of Theo van Gogh. Moreover, Badiyah remarks it especially affects the younger generation of migrants, "ironically those who just don't know better than to be Dutch." Emotionally she adds:

"In the last years you feel it [being discriminated against] very explicitly and then you think: should I go back? I never felt it but my children, they feel it now ... and that's bizarre!... where does this lead to? Because we try to integrate as much as possible and to my feeling we are – while keeping our own identity! ... And still you have to prove yourself every time, do your children have to prove themselves every time?"

Feeling neither fully included within Dutch national identity nor a Moroccan one, these women say they feel "first and foremost" Muslim. Indeed, being practising Muslims is the only way they can be "truly themselves." It forms an alternative to being Dutch and native (autochthonous), or Moroccan and foreign (*allochthonous*); identities all of which do not fit or suffice them. Badiyah explains: "because we don't feel we are ór Dutch ór Moroccan ... but we just don't belong with anything ... So those youths went looking for themselves – I don't belong here, I don't belong there. Where can I hold on to?! – To being a Muslim, because that's an identity, because then I can say that is truly mine ..."

For these women, being a good Muslim involves both an internal, spiritual conviction and a publicly visible commitment to social action. This action, directed at improving the lives of Muslim women in the Netherlands, is inspired by the strength and nature of their internal commitment to a "true" Islam. They expand their spiritual consciousness beyond an internal faith and into physical demonstrations of religiosity, personal development, social action among Muslim women, and consciousness raising among the broader Dutch public. In each of these cases the women return to their religious belief as the inspiration for their social action and as their justification for the claims they make to women's rights. It is no wonder that women such as these identify themselves as Muslim before Dutch or Moroccan, when the social activism that characterizes their daily life is connected so wholeheartedly to their personal religious convictions.

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