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Muslim women as ‘ambassadors’ of Islam: breaking stereotypes in everyday life

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the efforts of Dutch Muslim women who try to break the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ stereotype by monitoring their own behaviour in everyday interactions with members of the non-Muslim ethnic majority. In representing themselves as modern and emancipated, they try to change the dominant image of Muslim women in Dutch society, and thus also that of Islam. Based on interviews and archival material, I demonstrate that initially this strategy was mostly adopted by Dutch converts to Islam, and later also by ‘born’ Muslim women. Why do more and more Muslim women turn themselves into ‘ambassadors’ of Islam? And what are the costs of this form of self-essentialization? This article demonstrates the usefulness of studying self-representations of minority groups in the light of existing stereotypes, arguing that Muslim women’s self-representations should be seen as part of a politics of belonging.

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Introduction

In this article, I explore how Muslim women try to break the stereotype of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ by managing their own conduct in everyday encounters with non-Muslims. The focus is on women in the Netherlands who are active in Islamic organizations and who see their religion as an important part of their identity. As I will show, some of these women turn themselves into ‘ambassadors’ of their religion. In representing themselves as modern and emancipated women, they try to challenge popular perceptions of Muslim women in Dutch society. This way, they also try to change the dominant image of Islam. In taking a historical approach, this article reveals interesting developments. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when most Muslim women in Europe were newly arrived migrant women and when there was little public attention on Islam, this strategy was typically used by

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white, ethnic Dutch converts to Islam. Later, the strategy increasingly became adopted by other Muslim women as well. My key questions are: how exactly do Muslim women try to challenge the stereotype of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' through specific self-representations in their everyday life? Why do more and more Muslim women seem to opt for this particular strategy? And what are its unintended consequences?

I use the term 'oppressed Muslim woman' as an encompassing term for stereotypical representations of Muslim women as 'backward' and 'oppressed'. A stereotype is defined here as an essentialist representation of a certain group or category of people that is widely shared in society in the form of texts and/or images (Pickering 2001). Stereotypes of 'oppressed Muslim women' have existed for centuries as part of Orientalist discourses about the Middle East (Said 1978). During the last decades, these stereotypes have become revived in Western Europe in the context of the 'War on Terror' and the growing public debate about the integration and emancipation of Muslim minority women (Razack 2004; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009).

The Netherlands, once famous for its multicultural tolerance, has experienced a particularly virulent multiculturalism backlash after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. In the 1980s and 1990s, little public attention was paid to women with a Muslim background, and there was little debate about Islam. At the start of the new century, stereotypical images of 'oppressed Muslim women' began to play an important role in debates about immigrant integration. In Dutch media, Muslim minority women were increasingly presented as backward, pitiable and isolated women who regularly fell victim to violence and oppression by their husbands or male relatives. Right-wing (populist) politicians such as Pim Fortuyn and Ayaan Hirsi Ali accused the Dutch political establishment of 'political correctness' towards Muslim minorities, and of turning a blind eye towards the problems caused by multiculturalist policy-making. They argued that Muslim women had to be protected against Muslim men, and Dutch society had to be protected against the 'backward' and 'inherently patriarchal' religion of Islam. Former Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali in particular became known for her provocative statements about Islam, arguing that if Muslim women wanted to emancipate themselves, they had to leave their faith behind. After Hirsi Ali left the Netherlands in 2006, the radical right-wing MP Geert Wilders kept addressing gender equality as one out of many Dutch values that had to be protected against the 'Islamization' of Dutch society. He repeatedly proposed forced assimilation and a ban on the Qur'an, the headscarf and the construction of new mosques (Ghorashi 2010; van Es 2016a). Although representations of Muslim women in Dutch media have become somewhat more diverse during the last 10 years, stereotypical representations of Muslim women as 'oppressed' have remained predominant (van Es 2016a).

Stereotypes are constructed within unequal power relations, and they are both cause and effect of marginalization: a dominant group speaks of and for a marginalized group, thereby reinforcing the marginalized position of the latter. Stereotypes differ from categories in the sense that they deprive people of their individuality and reduce them to a fixed definition that deviates from the norm. In doing so, stereotypes help to construct, strengthen or maintain a symbolic boundary between those who stereotype and those being stereotyped (Pickering 2001). Several scholars (Roggeband and Verloo 2007; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009; Ghorashi 2010; Bracke 2011) explain how the stereotyping of Muslim women as 'oppressed' is part of a process of boundary drawing between a modern, enlightened and emancipated Dutch 'us', and a backward, traditional and patriarchal Muslim 'them'. In dominant Dutch discourse, being Muslim is thus construed as mutually exclusive with being 'modern', 'emancipated' and 'truly Dutch'. Hence, the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype not only deprives Muslim women from their individuality, but also positions them as outsiders from Dutch society – even when they were born in the Netherlands and/or have Dutch citizenship.

Nevertheless, the wide scholarly attention regarding the stereotyping and othering of Muslim women in contemporary public debate contrasts sharply with that regarding how Muslim women deal with this. This applies not only to the Netherlands, but also to other Western contexts. Only a few scholars have begun to explore how stereotypes and prejudices feed into Muslim women's self-representations (Buitelaar 2006; van Tilborgh 2006; Jouili 2009; 2015; Mir 2009; Bracke 2011; Contractor 2012). Stereotypes can be internalized or appropriated by the people stereotyped, but also subverted. Similarly, symbolic boundaries can be shifted or blurred. Boundary shifting happens when the boundary becomes 'relocated' so that part of the out-group becomes included in the in-group. Boundary blurring happens when collective identities or value systems that were perceived as mutually exclusive begin to overlap (Zolberg and Long 1999). In this article, I argue that Dutch Muslim women's attempts to break the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype can be seen as ways to shift the symbolic boundary between 'emancipated Dutch' and 'oppressed Muslim' women, and to blur the symbolic boundary between 'Dutch' and 'Islamic' values. I thus analyse their attempts as part of a 'politics of belonging': a process of inclusion and exclusion where the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are continuously being constructed, maintained and reinforced, as well as contested, challenged and resisted (Yuval-Davis 2011).

A self-representation is understood here as a statement or set of statements about oneself or about the group that one claims belonging to, whether in the form of texts, images or bodily behaviour. Drawing on the theory of symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959), I assume that our self-

representations result from a continuous internal dialogue between how we see ourselves and how we think that other people see us. Those other people do not need to be real individuals, but can also be a more abstract notion of a 'generalized other'. By representing ourselves in particular ways, we reject or confirm specific attributes that are ascribed to us. Usually this happens at a subconscious level, but self-representation can turn into a deliberate effort when certain aspects of our identity become politicized. However, as I will elaborate, this does not mean that the self-representations of the women in this study are 'false' or 'merely strategic': they result from a deeply felt mismatch between how these women see themselves and how they think they are being seen by the non-Muslim, ethnic Dutch majority.¹

The organizations included in this study are the Islamic women's organizations *Al Nisa* (established in 1982) and *Dar al Arqam* (1992), the mixed-gender Muslim student association *MashriQ SV* (2003) and the mixed-gender Muslim youth association *Ahlal bait Jongeren Organisatie* (2006).² In the latter two organizations, more than half of the board and of the constituency were women. *Al Nisa* and *Dar al Arqam* were originally led by converted women, the majority of them having a middle-class background. Over time, both organizations developed a highly diverse constituency, including women of Turkish, Moroccan and Pakistani origins. Most of these women were students or young professionals. *MashriQ SV* and *Ahlal bait Jongeren Organisatie* were founded by young Dutch Muslims with different ethnic backgrounds and have always maintained a highly diverse constituency. Most members of *MashriQ SV* were Sunni Muslims originating from Turkey, Morocco or Pakistan, who had been born and raised in the Netherlands. Most members of *Ahlal bait Jongeren Organisatie* followed the Twelver Shia denomination and had immigrated from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey or Pakistan at a young age. Here too, most women were students or young professionals.

The empirical material consists of qualitative interviews (oral history) with women who have played an active role in their respective organizations. Between two to four women were interviewed per organization. The interviews were supplemented with archival material, mostly in the form of offline and online magazines published by the organizations. In these magazines, some of which dating back to the 1980s, women regularly wrote about gender-related issues and about their experiences with stereotypes and prejudices.³ Neither the organizations nor the women who were interviewed can be taken as representative for Dutch women with a Muslim background in general. However, the research material does provide a wealth of information about the strategies that Muslim women have adopted to break stereotypes and prejudices in Dutch society.

In the following sections, I first discuss women's strategy to turn themselves into ambassadors of Islam. I describe how some women engage in a particular effort of ethical self-fashioning (Mahmood 2005) while they try to

make a consistent whole of at least two different normative registers (Schielke 2015), namely that of Islamic female piety and that of living an emancipated life according to Dutch standards. I use Butler's notion of the performative performance (1988) to explain that the 'strategic' representation of the self cannot be separated from the 'real' self. Then, I explore why this developed from a strategy that was typically adopted by converts to a wider phenomenon. I will also address the role of whiteness. After that, I draw on the Foucauldian notion of the panopticon (1975) to provide a deeper analysis of Muslim women's self-essentialization, showing how their efforts to change the dominant image of Islam builds upon the essentialist perceptions that the non-Muslim majority seems to have of Muslim minorities. Last but not least, I discuss the costs of this strategy for those who adopt it.

'We are not oppressed'

The women studied were highly aware of the prevailing stereotypes and prejudices in Dutch society. Both in the interviews and in the organizations' magazines, women expressed much frustration with the ongoing public debate about Islam and Muslim women, which they perceived as highly stigmatizing. None of these women denied that gender discrimination and violence against women occurred among Muslims. However, they felt that little attention was being paid to Muslim women who were not oppressed. In their perspective, public debate about women's emancipation focused only on Muslims while other women might also need to be emancipated. Most of all, they regretted that Muslim women's oppression was falsely attributed to Islam, and that the non-Muslim majority did not listen to Muslim women's voices unless they criticized Islam. All interviewed women, and many women who wrote in the organizations' magazines, strongly objected to popular views of Islam as inherently patriarchal, and argued that a careful study of the Qur'an and the hadith would lead to women's empowerment. Some women referred to Qur'anic verses about the equality of men and women before God. Others emphasized the right of women in Islam to seek education and develop their talents on the labour market. At the same time, many women argued that they felt respected in Islam not only as human beings but also *as women*, and argued for a moderate form of gender complementarity rather than full gender equality. Arguably, their ideas were in one way or another influenced by Islamic feminist thinking. Similar to Islamic feminists, these women argued for women's empowerment while referring to the Qur'an and hadith. But unlike activist scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1985), Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002), they were not explicitly engaged in a reinterpretation of those sacred texts, and not all of them called themselves feminists.⁴

Many of these women expressed a deep concern with the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype. Some of them felt stigmatized and excluded from Dutch society, purely as a result of how Muslim women were portrayed in the media. From the archival material, it appears that the organizations studied increasingly tried to change the dominant image of Muslim women and Islam, and through various means. *Al Nisa* board women increasingly wrote op-eds to nationwide newspapers, gave interviews, participated in televised debates and even organized publicity campaigns. Other organizations preferred to give lectures in libraries, church organizations and community centres. All organizations kept most of their activities open to outsiders, so that non-Muslims could get answers to their questions and experience the organization and its respective constituency. Although the magazines published by some of the organizations primarily targeted Muslim women or Muslim youth, they were also a means to send out messages to the broader Dutch society.

On top of this, women active in these organizations encouraged each other to challenge prevailing stereotypes through their own behaviour in their everyday encounters with non-Muslims; whether at work, at university or in the supermarket. By showing others – sometimes explicitly, but mostly implicitly – that they did not fit in the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype, they hoped that people would understand that Muslim women were not necessarily 'oppressed' or 'pitiable', and that Islam was not a 'backward' or 'oppressive' religion. Several of the interviewed women considered this a more effective strategy than for example writing op-eds to newspapers. As Amina, a white, ethnic Dutch convert to Islam and board member of Dar al Arqam, says: 'I think that you can talk a lot, but you can also simply convey your message through your own conduct. By setting an example, in your own environment: how do you treat others?' Her fellow board member Maryam, who is also a convert to Islam, explains:

My vision – which is also that of the foundation – is that whatever you can change by yourself, in your own little environment; you should do that. We don't go out and protest. [...] I just try, in my own direct environment – at work, with my family, with my neighbours, you know? Just show how I am and that that is positive, I hope. And that is also what the foundation wants to do. [...] I want to show that I am also 'just a nice person'. [Laughs] 'Despite that I am Muslim', or ..., you know? [Laughs more] Despite that some things are different about me, it does not mean that my whole world looks different. [...] I just want to show them that I also have a nice life. That Islam does not mean that your whole life looks different, or that you are being oppressed. That's typically one of those things that make me think: 'Wait a minute, can't they see that I ...?' And probably all Dar al Arqam women think that way: 'What do you mean, "not emancipated"? We are all ... [already emancipated].' The women coming to Dar al Arqam are almost all women who also simply have jobs.

Similar views were expressed by women in other organizations, including women who were born in a Muslim family and who traced their origins to a Muslim majority country. Consider for example the words of Zainab, a young Afghani-Dutch woman active in *Ahlal bait Jongeren Organisatie*:

To be honest, I think that we, as women, also have played a role in the existence of that prejudice [that Muslim women are isolated and oppressed]. [...] I want to show that a woman – a daughter of a clergyman, who also hopes to have some understanding of the religion herself – can be active in all areas. [...] ‘The woman active in society’, that’s my motto. [...] I keep encouraging, like, ‘women have to get a much more active participation in society. [...] Be more active, simply like, ‘I am Muslim’. Be proud of it, and make it known to the world: ‘Yes, I wear my hijab, but it doesn’t stop me from anything. I participate actively in society and I haven’t left my religion to be able to do so’.

Another example can be found in the words of Nawal, a young Pakistani-Dutch woman active in *MashriQ SV*, who recalls:

There was this girl saying ‘I am so shy, I never dare to speak in public’, and so on. Then I began to encourage her, like, ‘You know, you shouldn’t let yourself be pushed aside by certain stereotypes. In fact, you should step forward and show who you are, and that ideas like “Those women are oppressed, and they can’t do anything, and blah, blah, blah ...,” that those ideas are simply wrong.’ And during the following year, she really came out of her shell. She even said to me later: ‘I changed so much. I am no longer the girl I once used to be, and I dare a lot more now.’ And later she also did an internship at a big law firm. That’s really nice to see.

It is noteworthy that none of these women presented themselves as positive exceptions. What they wanted was to change the overall image that the non-Muslim, ethnic Dutch majority had of Muslim women. Through their lifestyle and their everyday conduct, they wanted to show that being a devout Muslim woman was not mutually exclusive with being emancipated, independent, self-conscious, modern, smart, friendly, fun-loving and open-minded. In doing so, they also wanted to change the dominant image of Islam. Some of the interviewed women even called themselves ‘ambassadors of Islam’, implying that they considered it their task to be a positive representative of their religion.

The headscarf was an important element in this strategy. It made these women immediately recognizable as Muslims, and the combination of the hijab (perceived by many as a symbol of Islam) with particular, non-stereotypical behaviour was thought to have strong potential to subvert the dominant image. Sometimes it was about the very fact of having a paid job. In other instances, it was a matter of casually telling non-Muslim colleagues about the tasty dinner that the husband had cooked the evening before, or about last weekend’s trip to a theme park. In again other instances, it was about subtle practices such as making small jokes or

meeting people with an upright and confident posture. In short, it could be any form of behaviour that did not confirm the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype. In the case of white, ethnic Dutch converts to Islam, even their wearing of the hijab in itself visually disrupted the symbolic boundary between a white, Dutch 'us' and a non-white, Muslim 'them'.⁵ Nevertheless, some of the converted women I spoke with argued that *not* wearing a headscarf could also be a powerful way of breaking stereotypes because the sight of a Muslim woman with light-coloured hair does not correspond with the dominant image. However, this only worked if the onlooker knew that the woman was Muslim.

The strategy of breaking stereotypes in everyday interactions with non-Muslims seems to be a fairly widespread phenomenon, and similar patterns have been observed outside the Netherlands. Jouili (2009) describes how young French Muslim women of Maghrebi origins try to re-signify the headscarf – a garment strongly associated with traditional, oppressed and poorly integrated women – by deliberately choosing different, more fashionable *hijab*-styles than the generation of their migrant mothers, and through specific conduct signalling openness and self-assurance. This way, these women seek recognition as pious *and* emancipated Muslim women. Moreover, the strategy of taking on an ambassadorial role is not limited to women. In his study of Muslim youth in Finland, Pauha (2015) observes how young Muslim men remind each other that they determine the popular view of Islam through their own actions. If they behave badly or get involved in criminal activities, they damage the reputation of Islam. Hence, they make sure to behave contrary to negative expectations.

What is particularly striking in the quotes presented above is that several of the women seemed to engage in a particular effort of 'ethical self-fashioning' (Mahmood 2005). In the eyes of some women, such as Maryam, breaking stereotypes was simply a matter of 'being yourself'. But in the cases of Zainab and Nawal and those of many other women, it was apparently also a matter of actively working on yourself to ensure that you fit in the stereotypical image as little as possible. These women encouraged each other to purposefully strengthen specific qualities that they considered inherently Islamic, but that also helped themselves and their religion to become accepted in Dutch or Norwegian society. Being convinced that Islam empowers women, several of the interviewed women including Zainab argued that acquiring religious knowledge and striving to live a pious life form the key to Muslim women's emancipation, and hence to the breaking of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype. This view was also expressed on the website of Dar al Arqam:

Distorted information about Islam and the mixing of Islam with cultural traditions result in a multitude of prejudices and stereotypical images of

Islam and of Muslims in Dutch society. The popular image is often biased, especially when it is about the Muslim woman. Sometimes these prejudices are also confirmed by Muslims themselves through particular acts and statements. In studying the [Islamic] sources, we want to provide opportunities for women's emancipation with preservation of their Islamic identity. (www.daralarqam.nl, accessed: 1 February 2016)

In other words, many women who take on an ambassadorial role engage in an effort of ethical self-fashioning according to two 'normative registers' that are commonly perceived to be mutually exclusive – that of Islamic female piety and that of living an emancipated life according to Dutch standards – while trying to make a consistent whole of these two. Drawing on Schielke's work (2015), I use the term 'normative register' for any set of ideas, values and aims that provide a guideline for living a 'good' life.⁶ Although women's emancipation is commonly discussed in terms of freedom and autonomy, I argue that it can simultaneously be seen as a normative register that guides and informs women's life projects – especially in a context where living a 'modern' and 'emancipated' life is construed as an ideal that Muslim women should live up to in order to be accepted as 'Dutch'. Whether Muslim women succeed in creating a consistent whole out of these two normative registers is not relevant here, let alone whether they manage to live up to it. What matters is that in order to send out a convincing message that being a pious Muslim is not mutually exclusive with being an emancipated woman, female 'ambassadors of Islam' have to simultaneously live up to both schemes as much as possible.

However, when Muslim women present themselves as modern and emancipated to counter the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype, this does not mean that their self-representations are 'false' or merely 'strategic'. Unlike Goffman, I do not see the 'self' as hiding behind a front, manipulating his or her behaviour to make a particular impression. Inspired by Butler's concept of the performative performance (1988), I argue that the self is produced through repetitive representation. The self cannot be separated here from the way it is represented, and the 'real' cannot be distinguished from the 'strategic'. The women in this study first and foremost reject an ascribed identity as backward and oppressed because it does not correspond with how they see themselves. Similarly, the dominant image of Islam as inherently oppressive does not correspond with how they see their religion. They then highlight certain aspects of their identity to prove the dominant image wrong, which in turn entails a reinforcement of those aspects of their identity and a reconstruction of social norms regarding Muslim womanhood.

From convert phenomenon to widely adopted strategy

The phenomenon of Muslim women taking on an ambassadorial role is nothing new. This is well illustrated by an article in the magazine of *Al*

Nisa in 1995, in which a convert to Islam explains why she started to wear a headscarf in the 1980s:

The first years of being Muslim I did not wear a headscarf and I didn't consider wearing one. [...] At some point it occurred to me that I was never recognisable as such [as a Muslim]. [...] That's why I started wearing a headscarf. And it worked. Not only for other Dutch Muslim women, but also for non-Muslims I was recognisable as a Muslim. Various people approached me and asked questions about Islam. I have always experienced that as highly positive. [...] I didn't think in terms like 'Oh dear, they shouldn't see my hair', but rather 'Look, I am a Muslim and I speak good Dutch, I am independent, walk on the streets, laugh and talk with men' (in a humble way). This way trying to eliminate a number of prejudices. (*Al Nisa*, July 1995: 13)

It is no coincidence that this woman was a white, ethnic Dutch convert to Islam and not a migrant woman born in a Muslim family. From the interviews and from the available archival material, it appears that in the 1980s and early 1990s it were typically converts who took on an ambassadorial role and not migrant Muslim women. This can in part be explained by the fact that *Al Nisa* and *Dar al Arqam* were largely managed by converts during those years, which may have caused a bias in the research material. However, the sources reveal that many Dutch converts considered themselves as a distinct category of Muslim women, who were particularly capable of representing Islam to the non-Muslim Dutch majority. Consider for example the words of a white, ethnic Dutch convert in *Al Nisa's* early magazine *Umma-el-Islam* in 1984:

I think the task is precisely up to us, Dutch Muslim women, to show our own non-Muslim fellow citizens something of what Islam actually is, because probably the people around you *think* they know Islam from the history books or through bad information from the media. But that is not Islam. We can't expect non-Muslims to think positively about Islam if we turn our backs towards them. [...] We Dutch Muslim women have the benefit that we can convey the Muslim vision to non-Muslims in a clear way and in our own language. Make use of that. Be clearly a Muslim woman, not only through your dress, but most of all by word and deed. (*Umma-el-Islam*, November 1984: 7–8)

It is not very surprising that these women saw a special role for themselves. Most Muslim women who lived in the Netherlands at that time had recently migrated from Turkey or Morocco. Contrary to those migrant women, these converts were native Dutch speakers, had the same cultural background as the non-Muslim majority population, interacted frequently with members of that majority and had a high education level. This made it relatively easy for them to break stereotypes about Muslim women and to explain their beliefs to others.⁷ Perhaps some Dutch converts also considered themselves to be

more 'emancipated' and 'modern' than migrant Muslim women, although they did not explicitly say so.

Furthermore, because of their close attachment (and former belonging) to the non-Muslim majority, they were highly aware of the prevailing stereotypes and had a strong interest in breaking them. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, when there was little public debate about Islam in the Netherlands and Dutch media paid little attention to Muslim women, these women were commonly perceived as pitiable and oppressed. Convert women were regularly confronted with the prejudices and stereotypes that prevailed among their non-Muslim relatives, friends and colleagues. Fauzia, one of the founders and board members of *Al Nisa* in the 1980s, remembers that after she had converted and married her Indian Muslim husband, she was warned that 'soon she would be locked up between four walls'. Fauzia, Amina and many other convert women were repeatedly met with the assumption that they had converted under pressure of their husbands, which illustrates how little agency these women were ascribed. Many of these women were married to Muslim men, but they had converted out of personal conviction. They wanted this to be recognized. At the same time, many of them felt that their loyalty to Dutch society and its values was questioned. As an *Al Nisa*-affiliated woman writes about the period short after her conversion:

I often felt pushed into a corner by the criticism of (mainly my parents and) my friends and acquaintances. It seemed as if people considered it some sort of 'betrayal' that I had become Muslim: betrayal to my culture and education, to Christianity, or to feminism, for example. (*Umma-el-Islam*, October 1984: 7–11)

The fact that white, ethnic Dutch women become perceived as less 'Dutch' when they convert to Islam has also been observed in other studies (van Nieuwkerk 2004; 2006; Vroon-Najem 2014), as well as the fact that converts at times feel urged to prove that they are still 'normal' and 'emancipated' Dutch women. This shows that not only the self-representations of Muslim women with a foreign background, but also those of white, ethnic Dutch converts can be analysed through the lens of a politics of belonging.

Besides, converts may have been (and may still be) relatively sensitive to stereotyping more generally because they could compare their experiences as a Muslim with those as a non-Muslim. Converting to Islam as a member of the ethnic majority means moving from an 'unspoiled' identity that is relatively free from the constraining effect of stereotyping, to a 'spoiled' identity where one feels compelled to engage with the perceptions of the majority (Goffman 1963). The sudden experience of being subjected to stereotyping seems to have hit many converts quite hard, resulting in a strong urge to counter stereotypes.

In any case, today, breaking stereotypes through one's everyday conduct is no longer typical for converts. As we have seen, the women who nowadays adopt such a strategy originate from many different countries. Two things have contributed to this development. First, the escalation of public debate about Muslim women and Islam after the 9/11 attacks has provoked a wide variety of Muslim women to make themselves heard and to change popular perceptions of Muslim women and of Islam. Second, the social differences between converted women and 'born' Muslim women have decreased considerably during the last decades. There is a growing group of Muslim women of Turkish, Moroccan, Pakistani or other foreign origins, who have been born in the Netherlands or at least spent a large part of their lives there. These women speak perfect Dutch, and many of them have obtained higher education and are active in the labour market. As a result, converts to Islam are less and less perceived to be particularly well equipped to break the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype. It seems that they no longer assign themselves the same special role as in the 1980s and 1990s, and that they are no longer assigned such a role by other Muslims.

If there is one thing that still distinguishes white, ethnic Dutch Muslim converts from Muslim women with a migrant background, it is their whiteness. This factor was not mentioned by the women studied, but may nevertheless play a role. Race is seldom discussed in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, being Dutch is implicitly associated with being white, with whiteness being so narrowly construed that it excludes people of Turkish or Moroccan descent (Mepschen 2016; Wekker 2016). In her work on women converts in contemporary Dutch society, Vroon-Najem (2014) argues that white, ethnic Dutch women lose their white privilege when they convert to Islam, especially when they start wearing *hijab*. Before their conversion, they are seen as part of the white Dutch 'self', but afterwards they are perceived as the Muslim Other. In other words, they become symbolically 'non-white'. However, one may ask to what extent white converts really lose all social advantages that come with having a white skin. It is possible, for example, that they are still seen as somewhat more 'rational', 'modern', 'civilized', 'independent' and 'emancipated' than non-white Muslim women, as has been observed in studies regarding Muslim converts in Spain (Rogozen-Soltar 2012) and Germany (Özyürek 2014). This may seem useful for converted women who want to represent their religion positively. Yet, the more their ambassadorship is based on white privilege, the less likely non-white Muslim women will benefit from white women's ambassadorship.

Muslim women's strategic use of the panoptic gaze

As said, the women in this study wanted to change not only the dominant image of Muslim women in Dutch society, but also that of Islam. Regardless of whether they were converts or born Muslim women with a migrant background, there seems to be an underlying assumption in their strategy,

namely that members of the non-Muslim majority base their ideas about Islam on the behaviour of Muslims, and that they explain everything that a Muslim says or does through Islam. Put differently, these women anticipated a high degree of 'culturalism' (Ghorashi, Eriksen, and Alghasi 2009): an essentialist notion of minority cultures or religions as homogeneous, static and coherent, and – most importantly – as the determining factor for all actions of minority individuals. The women studied basically put this culturalism in reverse: if the non-Muslim majority thinks that Islam is an oppressive religion just because some Muslim women are oppressed, then why not try to subvert the dominant perception of Islam by showing that there are plenty of Muslim women who are not oppressed?

The women studied seemed to strategically use the 'panoptic gaze' that keeps Muslim minorities under constant surveillance, to send out alternative messages about themselves and their religion. Several scholars, including Mir (2009) and Pauha (2015), have drawn upon the Foucauldian notion of the panopticon to conceptualize the continuous scrutiny that Muslim minorities experience as to whether they are integrated enough in, and loyal enough to Western society, and the effects of this scrutiny on Muslims themselves. The term panopticon originates from an eighteenth-century prison design where all inmates can be watched by a single watchman. As the prisoners cannot tell whether they are being watched, they must control their behaviour and act as if being watched all the time. Foucault (1975) used the panopticon as a metaphor for the disciplinary power that is exercised in modern societies. The Foucauldian 'panoptic gaze' is the inspecting gaze through which a powerful overseer such as the government controls all aspects of life. This gaze is internalized by individuals, who then exercise surveillance over themselves. Regarding Muslim minorities, the inspecting gaze can be that of the government, but also that of the white, ethnic Dutch, non-Muslim majority that is positioned to accept Muslims as full members of society.

Needless to say, this majority is not a homogeneous monolith: its members vary widely regarding their attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. Muslim women have good reasons to think that specific prejudices and stereotypes exist in society, but in their encounters with members of the non-Muslim majority, they seldom know what perception these particular people have of Islam and Muslims. Just like the inmates in a panopticon must act as if being watched at all times, Muslim women are dealing with an internalized gaze rather than the actual gaze of specific individuals. One can in fact speak of a *hyperawareness* of a majority Dutch 'generalized other'. The fact that this hyperawareness is not unique for Muslim women becomes clear when reading Du Bois (1903) about 'double consciousness': the African-American experience of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the white majority. What is important here is that the women studied relied on this panoptic gaze

in their strategy to counter stereotypes and prejudices through their own lifestyle and everyday behaviour. They adopted an ambassadorial role in the perception that when observed by members of the non-Muslim majority, their words and deeds could at any time be connected to their religion and to their minority group as a whole.

At first sight, this may seem to be an effective and accessible strategy. Scholars have long been claiming that stereotypes and prejudices tend to lessen when members of majority and minority groups have durable contacts with each other in their everyday lives, for example, as friends or colleagues (Allport 1954; Savelkoul et al. 2011). Moreover, the women's strategy can be adopted by any individual at any time and place; does not require particular resources in terms of money, media contacts or organizational skills; and is employed in a relatively controlled setting, namely in direct encounters with members of the non-Muslim majority.

However, turning oneself into an ambassador of Islam comes with costs, even when women claim that they 'simply remain themselves'. It is a form of self-essentialization where women reduce their identity to a single element – namely that of being Muslim – and where virtually every aspect of their everyday life becomes politicized. They put a heavy burden on themselves, taking 'the reputation of their whole religion on their shoulders', as Pauha (2015: 95) puts it. Taking on an ambassadorial role may therefore cause women to experience extra surveillance within Muslim communities. Though this role is not exclusively adopted by women but also by men, there certainly is a gender bias in the sense that the headscarf – if adopted, which not all the women studied did – makes women's religious identity more visible than men's. As Tarlo (2010) notes, Muslim women may hence not only experience a greater opportunity, but also a larger responsibility to represent Islam to the outer world.

Last but not least, the discussed strategy may not be as effective as it seems. Stereotypes are difficult to break, precisely because they are constructed within unequal power relations. A common feature of othering processes is that 'bad' Others are seen as typical for all people in their group or category, while 'good' Others are seen as atypical (Elias and Scotson 1965; Lamont 2000). Muslim women who come across as 'modern' and 'emancipated' may thus be taken as positive exceptions, and not as evidence that Muslim women are not as 'backward' and 'oppressed' as commonly thought – let alone as evidence that Islam is not an oppressive religion. To what extent individual Muslim women can change popular perceptions of Muslim women and of Islam through their everyday conduct remains the question.

Discussion

This article contributes to the scholarly understanding of the dynamics between stereotyping and self-representation, focusing on Muslim

women who try to break the 'oppressed Muslim woman' stereotype by representing themselves as 'modern' and 'emancipated' women in everyday interactions with members of the non-Muslim ethnic majority. The research findings reveal the enormous impact of stigmatizing public debates about Islam on the self-representations of Muslim women in contemporary Dutch society. In behaving contrary to negative expectations, these women try to change not only the dominant image of Muslim women, but also that of Islam. Hence, this article shows the importance of studying not only the ways in which ethnic and religious minorities are being marginalized, but also how they contest, challenge and resist their marginalization. Furthermore, this article shows that women's emancipation is not simply a matter of liberation, but also of fashioning the self according to a particular normative regime. In contemporary Western societies, being 'emancipated' has become an ideal that women – particularly Muslim women – should live up to.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, it was mostly ethnic Dutch converts who adopted an ambassadorial role. Compared to most Muslim migrant women at that time, they had more close relationships with non-Muslims, and they considered themselves better equipped to positively represent Islam. Over time, many of the social, economic and cultural differences between born and converted Muslim women faded away. Meanwhile, the growing public debate about Islam increasingly provoked a response from Muslim women, including those with a migrant background. These women felt increasingly urged to counter negative perceptions of their religion. As a result, a wide variety of Muslim women began to adopt an ambassadorial role. Although this may seem to be an effective and accessible strategy, it entails a form of self-essentialization where almost all aspects of everyday life become politicized. Moreover, it turns out to be very difficult for those who are affected by stereotypes to change the dominant image of their minority group, precisely because of the unequal power relations in which stereotypes emerge.

Notes

1. This does not mean that Muslim women's self-representations are only influenced by the stereotypes of the non-Muslim ethnic majority. The women studied relate to a multitude of discourses, including Muslim minority discourses about (Muslim) women.
2. The research data have been collected as part of a larger study on the dynamics between stereotypes and self-representations of women with a Muslim background between 1975 and 2010, which also included secular organizations (van Es 2016a).

3. The organizations are presented with their real names as these data are relevant for the analysis. Moreover, due to the small number of relevant organizations in the Netherlands, full anonymization is impossible. However, the names of the women who are cited have been replaced with a pseudonym for ethical reasons. The interviews were conducted in 2013, with the participants' informed consent. All participants have been given the opportunity to check their quotes. The quotes have been translated from Dutch by the author.
4. Elsewhere, I have argued that such perspectives on Islam and gender can be understood in terms of 'diffused Islamic feminism' (van Es 2016b).
5. A somewhat similar observation has been made by Franks (2000) regarding white converts to Islam in Great Britain, and by Vassenden and Andersson (2011) regarding Norway.
6. Schielke (2015) criticizes Mahmood (2005) for overemphasizing the role of piety in Muslim everyday lives. However, this discussion lies beyond the scope of this article.
7. Özyürek (2014) explains through similar arguments why ethnic German converts to Islam are over-represented in Germany as leaders of Islamic organizations and as spokespeople for Muslims in public debate.

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