



## Was the Multiculturalism Backlash Good for Women with a Muslim Background? Perspectives from Five Minority Women's Organisations in the Netherlands

*Margaretha A. van Es*

'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' the political philosopher Susan Moller Okin famously asked twenty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Rather than providing a simplistic answer, Okin wanted to initiate a critical debate about possible tensions between feminism and multiculturalism. At that time, Okin noted a strong multiculturalist commitment in Western countries to group rights for minorities, and she warned against letting this commitment overshadow the individual rights of women within minority groups. A lot has happened since Okin asked that question.

Multiculturalism, which was already increasingly condemned in the 1990s, came under fierce attack after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Scholars describe a 'backlash' or 'crisis' of multiculturalism including a growing chorus of voices condemning multiculturalist policies, an increased

---

M. A. van Es (✉)  
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

emphasis on national identity and civic integration, a growing critique of Muslim minorities and their religion, and a surge of right-wing populist parties with an anti-immigration agenda.<sup>2</sup> Stereotypical images of Muslim women as oppressed have played an important role in the multiculturalism backlash. Western societies supposedly have to be protected against the ‘backward’ and ‘oppressive’ religion of Islam, and Muslim women have to be protected against Muslim men.<sup>3</sup>

The Netherlands, famous for its multicultural tolerance in the 1980s and 1990s, has since experienced a particularly virulent multiculturalism backlash. In her much-cited work on the Dutch integration debate, Baukje Prins describes how politicians such as Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Rita Verdonk, and later Geert Wilders, accused the Dutch political establishment of political correctness towards Muslim minorities, and of refusing to acknowledge the problems caused by multiculturalist policy-making. The charge sheet included failed integration, youth criminality, homophobia, and—last but not least—the systematic oppression of women. Ayaan Hirsi Ali in particular became known for her radical statements about Islam, which she saw as an inherently patriarchal religion. If Muslim women wanted to emancipate themselves, they had to leave their faith behind. Prins refers to this form of right-wing populism as hyper-realism: a political ideology and rhetorical style where politicians claim to speak on behalf of ordinary people, daring to face the ‘facts’.<sup>4</sup>

After Pim Fortuyn was assassinated by an animal-rights activist on 6 May 2002, his party List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) won 26 out of 150 seats in the parliamentary elections few weeks later. The LPF joined a new coalition with the liberal conservatives and Christian democrats. From then onwards, Dutch policy for gender equality became inextricably linked with immigrant integration and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, the new Minister of Social Affairs Aart Jan de Geus announced that the emancipation of Dutch women had been accomplished and that future emancipation policy should focus entirely on (Muslim) minority women.<sup>6</sup> The government installed a special committee to stimulate ethnic minority women’s social, economic and cultural participation in Dutch society. But the new policy for women’s emancipation consisted first and foremost of imposing civic integration courses, restricting marriage migration, and initiating special projects against forced marriages, female genital mutilation, honour killings, and domestic violence within minority families.<sup>7</sup> Despite several changes of government, the policy decisions regarding civic integration and migration control have never been revoked since then.

This reveals the lasting effect of hyper-realism on Dutch policy-making. Besides, after Hirsu Ali left the Netherlands in 2006, the emerging right-wing populist MP Geert Wilders kept addressing gender equality as one out of many 'Dutch' values that have to be protected against the 'Islamisation' of Dutch society. He repeatedly proposed forced assimilation and a ban on the Qur'an, the headscarf and the construction of new mosques.

The developments described here stirred much debate. In contemporary Dutch public discourse, there are two competing ways of representing the multiculturalism backlash and its effect on minority women. Those who are sympathetic to the hyper-realist view tend to argue that a radical break with multiculturalism was necessary to address the disadvantaged position of women in Muslim minority families without being hindered by political correctness. The underlying assumption is that ethnic minority women, especially Muslim women, have many problems that ethnic majority women do not have, and that these problems have previously been ignored or even concealed by minority communities and left-wing politicians alike. On the other hand, critics tend to argue that the hyper-realist approach has not served the interests of minority women, but that a discourse of 'saving Muslim women' has been used to legitimise a restrictive immigration and assimilation policy, and to strengthen national identity as 'emancipated', 'sexually liberated' and 'enlightened' in contrast to a 'backward' and 'misogynistic' Muslim culture. Moreover, the setting apart of Muslim minority women as 'pitiable' and 'oppressed', and the repeated accusation that Islam inherently oppresses women, would cause Muslim women to feel stigmatised, draw back in their own ranks and reject feminism altogether.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, almost no research has been conducted on how women with a Muslim background have experienced the multiculturalism backlash, let alone on how it has affected their efforts for women's empowerment.<sup>9</sup> More than fifteen years after the 9/11 attacks and Pim Fortuyn's murder, it is time to weigh things up: was the multiculturalism backlash good for women? There is obviously no simple answer to this question, but one can at least explore the perspectives of women with a Muslim background. In this chapter, I look at how women active in a variety of minority women's organisations in the Netherlands have perceived the recent developments in public debate and in public policy towards Muslim women, and how these developments have affected their organisational work in terms of strengthening women's position in the family and in

Dutch society. I have included five large minority representative organisations set up by and for women with a Muslim background, out of which two are secular and three are Islamic organisations. All of them were established before the turn of the century, and all of them still existed when I carried out my research. They are the Turkish Women's Association in the Netherlands (established in 1975), the Moroccan Women's Association in the Netherlands (1982), the Al Nisa (1982) and Dar al Arqam (1992) foundations, and the Milli Görüş Women's Federation (1999). My analysis is based on archival material from the organisations and on interviews with their (former) leaders, and covers the period 1975–2010.<sup>10</sup> I will first discuss my results regarding the secular organisations and then the Islamic organisations, before I come to my conclusion.

### THE PERSPECTIVES OF TWO SECULAR MINORITY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The Turkish Women's Association in the Netherlands (HTKB) and the Moroccan Women's Association in the Netherlands (MNVN) were established in Amsterdam with the aim to improve the position of Turkish and Moroccan women in the family and in Dutch society. Although the two associations represented women from different countries, they were similar in many ways. In both cases, the original target group consisted of women who came from rural areas and had recently migrated to the Netherlands, had little or no education and did not speak Dutch. The leaders had the same national origins as the target groups, but were relatively resourceful in terms of their educational level and Dutch language skills.<sup>11</sup>

Both the HTKB and MNVN had a progressive, socialist approach. In the beginning, their political struggle mostly targeted the exploitation of women migrant workers on the Dutch labour market, the vulnerable position of migrant women as a result of Dutch rules regarding family migration, and racism in Dutch society. The MNVN also addressed the consequences of the Moroccan family code for Moroccan women living in the Netherlands. Both the HTKB and the MNVN regularly organised and/or participated in public protests. However, the organisations also wanted to change traditional gender roles in the family, encourage women to become engaged in activities outside the home, and enable them to make informed choices regarding sexuality and reproduction. Both organisations offered Dutch language courses, literacy courses in the

women's mother tongue, sewing lessons, cultural activities, consultation hours, and information sessions about topics such as health care, workers' rights, migration laws and the Dutch social service system. These initiatives had the additional purpose of bringing women together to let them reflect upon their position in the family and in Dutch society.<sup>12</sup> Hundreds of women took part in their activities. In the 1980s and early 1990s, they were considered the largest organisations run by and for Turkish and Moroccan women in the Netherlands. They received large subsidies from the Amsterdam municipality and also received support from the Dutch government.<sup>13</sup> At that time, the Dutch authorities aimed to encourage the social and economic participation of ethnic minorities through group-level emancipation 'with preservation of identity'. Supporting minority women's organisations was considered to be an important means to strengthen these women's position in Dutch society.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1990s, the HTKB and MVVN went through several changes. In 1995 the HTKB split into two organisations: a local Association of Women of Turkish Origin Living in Amsterdam (ATKB) and a nationwide federation with the acronym HTKF that served as an umbrella for a number of local Turkish women's associations in the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup> From then onwards, the ATKB carried out most of the former HTKB's activities. However, as the constituency grew older, the ATKB's focus shifted gradually from women workers to ageing women and their teenage daughters.<sup>16</sup> The latter also applied to the MVVN.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the MVVN developed into an important centre of expertise regarding the sharia-based Moroccan family code or *Mudawwanah*. For example, the MVVN assisted Moroccan-Dutch women who had divorced their husbands according to Dutch law, but whose divorce was not recognised by the Moroccan authorities because their ex-husband refused to sign the Islamic divorce papers.<sup>18</sup>

After the turn of the century, the multiculturalism backlash had strong consequences for the ATKB and MVVN, the most important one being a growing difficulty to set their own agenda. Perhaps one would expect that the heightened public concern with the emancipation and integration of Muslim minority women caused the authorities to increase financial support for minority women's organisations. Yet, what happened was exactly the opposite. The multiculturalism backlash led to a more selective funding of minority organisations, which at the same time helped budget-cutting.<sup>19</sup> In 2004, the year in which public debate about

Muslim minority women peaked,<sup>20</sup> the Amsterdam municipality decided to stop giving structural funding to several minority women's organisations, including the ATKB and MVVN. This meant that the ATKB and MVVN could no longer afford to hire paid staff or provide extensive training to their volunteers. Both organisations became dependent on a small group of volunteers.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the MVVN, for example, had difficulties maintaining its legal expertise regarding the *Mudawwanah*.<sup>22</sup>

From now on, the organisations could only apply for project funding, and these projects were increasingly designed by the municipality instead of by the organisations themselves.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the ATKB, this meant that the organisation became significantly more often engaged in projects targeting problems within the Turkish-Dutch community that were high on the right-wing populist agenda. For example, in 2004 the ATKB had among others a project against domestic violence,<sup>24</sup> and in 2008, it started a project where Turkish-Dutch volunteers visited isolated women at home to convince them to participate in the association and in Dutch society.<sup>25</sup> The MVVN, on the other hand, feared turning into a 'project agency' for the Dutch authorities and decided to forego many funding opportunities. The MVVN prioritised setting its own agenda, which meant that the organisation had to work with very little means. During the last few years, the MVVN has mostly organised low-budget activities such as lectures, debates and social gatherings.<sup>26</sup> Both the ATKB and MVVN still provide consultation hours, and they try to influence public policy towards minority women through lobbying. But it seems that there is little room left to address hindrances to Turkish-Dutch women's emancipation that are not 'culture-related' but located in Dutch society, such as unemployment or the criminalisation of undocumented residence.<sup>27</sup>

Neither the Amsterdam municipality nor the Dutch government provided the support that the organisations had hoped for. Women on the ATKB and MVVN boards felt that politicians liked to 'break taboos' about minority women's oppression, but no substantial help was given to women in difficult situations.<sup>28</sup> During the first years of the new millennium, the MVVN, for example, tried to raise public awareness of the problems of Moroccan-Dutch women who were 'left behind' by their husbands or fathers during a holiday in Morocco. These women could not return to the Netherlands because their husbands had confiscated their identity documents. Married migrants without an independent residence permit were in a particularly weak position. After having done

extensive research, the MVVN proposed to the Dutch government to develop an emergency system allowing victims to get appropriate help from the Dutch embassy. The MVVN also urged the authorities to give married migrants independent residence rights upon arrival in the Netherlands, instead of keeping them legally dependent on their spouse. Integration Minister Rita Verdonk did not take this policy advice on board and only allocated the MVVN a minimum budget to print information booklets for Moroccan-Dutch women.<sup>29</sup>

Another important consequence of the multiculturalism backlash and the growing negative focus on Islam was that the ATKb and MVVN felt forced to position themselves in a polarising debate about Muslim women and their religion—something that they were very keen to avoid. The HTKB/ATKB and MVVN had been secular organisations from the very beginning. The women who led the organisations did not identify as believers or practicing Muslims, and they did not consider religion relevant to their organisational work. Moreover, they wanted to unite women with different religious views in a joint struggle for women's rights.<sup>30</sup> Before the turn of the century, both organisations regularly criticised 'conservative' or 'traditional' attitudes towards women,<sup>31</sup> and the MVVN repeatedly addressed the disadvantaged position of women in the Moroccan family code that was 'based on an interpretation of Islamic law by the *Maliki* school of thought'.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, shortly before the 9/11 attacks in 2001, MVVN spokeswoman Nora Azarkan wrote an opinion piece in the newspaper *Trouw* where she warned against the misogynistic attitudes of many conservative imams in Dutch mosques.<sup>33</sup> However, neither the HTKB/ATKB nor the MVVN worked with an essentialist concept of Islam that was either 'good' or 'bad' for women.

After the 9/11 attacks, when Dutch public debate became characterised by a growing critique of Muslims and Islam, both organisations virtually stopped mentioning Islam. Not only did the women on the groups' boards want to avoid confrontations between religious and non-religious women within their organisation, they also refused to participate in debates that diverted attention from issues that really mattered to them. As long-time ATKb board member Sevgi Gönçürmüş says:

Each time they talk about the headscarf, about religion, but they don't discuss improving the position of women: how and which way? We find this discussion important, and it needs to be discussed in depth. That's why, if there is a debate about religion, we keep ourselves out completely. [...]

Often it is purely about the headscarf. ‘Is it a free choice or not?’ Well, free choice? What does a ‘free choice’ actually mean? And why don’t we discuss the free choice with regards to the labour market, education, the important role of the wife for men, and legal rights, and unequal payments. And we talk, we are not allowed to talk about that, but we can talk about the headscarf or about clothing.<sup>34</sup>

However, there was yet another reason not to discuss religion. MVVN leader Ikram Chiddi explains that during the last fifteen years, the MVVN board has felt less and less room to make critical statements about issues that are somehow related to Islam, because it fears that such statements will be misused by right-wing populist parties:

Since the emergence of Wilders, or at least the populists, it has become really complicated for the MVVN to take a position in public debates about social issues. Because so much has changed. Before, if you sent out a press release because ten women complained after the summer holidays that their husbands got married [to a second wife] without their permission, and you said like: ‘Morocco must abolish polygamy’, you issued a press release, then it was simply like, you got a debate and it was done. Or something like that. Well, now it is of course used for a different political agenda. [...] So that is the tricky part. Because those statements, we are now extra careful with our statements of course. You see the dilemma? [...] We see that people do everything they can to stigmatise that group, or at least the Muslim women [...] But to take part in that, well, that is a choice. And we actually chose to simply not take part in that. [...] Which makes it quite hard at times. Because almost every week or month you get a call from some radio or TV programme. It is always very sensation-oriented. [...] While, originally, when it comes to our foundation we are secular. And we have clear ideas about that. For the rest, whether we are all Muslims or religious doesn’t matter at all. [...] But if you for example look at the Moroccan family code, then we do see how Islam is being used. We do see that as part of the problem. We are very clear about that, we are explicit about that. But now, in this period it is very difficult to take a position there. It is just tricky. [...] So, that nice story of a progressive, secular Moroccan women’s organisation, that has been adjusted a bit, to put it that way.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, secular organisations that were critical of patriarchal laws and practices in Muslim societies felt forced to under-communicate the possibly negative role of religion because they did not want to contribute to the stigmatisation of Muslim women and Islam. The polarisation of



public debate about Islam resulted in there being little room for constructive criticism. The MUVN has always remained highly vocal about Moroccan women's problems, but it did adapt its choice of words. Secular organisations that did not want to contribute to a right-wing populist agenda thus saw their actual freedom of expression becoming more and more limited.

### THE PERSPECTIVES OF THREE ISLAMIC WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The foundations Al Nisa and Dar al Arqam and the Milli Görüş Women's Federation are Islamic women's organisations, meaning that the women involved have organised themselves on the basis of their religious identity. Al Nisa and Dar al Arqam were both established by Dutch converts to Islam, but over the years, they acquired a more ethnically diverse constituency, including many Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch women.<sup>36</sup> The goal of Al Nisa was originally to give information about Islam in Dutch (mostly through monthly lectures and a monthly magazine) and to provide a platform where Muslim women from all over the Netherlands could share their experiences. Although Al Nisa was not an explicitly feminist organisation, it wanted to enable women to develop their faith in their own way, independently from male-dominated mosque associations.<sup>37</sup> Starting in 1982 in Amsterdam, it rapidly acquired new chapters across the country. Within five years, the foundation's magazine *Al Nisa* had more than 750 subscribers.<sup>38</sup> Dar al Arqam was established in 1992 in Rotterdam with goals and activities similar to those of Al Nisa, but it chose to remain a local organisation. In addition to its monthly meetings with lectures about Islam in Dutch, Dar al Arqam also organised coffee mornings and sewing lessons for Moroccan-Dutch women in the participants' mother-tongue that were funded by the Rotterdam municipality. A few years later, the activities were expanded with Qur'an study groups, Islamic consultation hours, Arabic lessons for converts, youth activities for teenage girls, and Islamic education for children.<sup>39</sup>

The Milli Görüş Women's Federation (MGVF) was established in 1999 as an umbrella organisation for about thirty small women's associations in the northern half of the Netherlands, most of which had already existed for years. Milli Görüş is a transnational religious revival movement founded by the Turkish politician Necmettin Erbakan.

The Milli Görüş Women's Federation is part of the general Milli Görüş North Netherlands Federation, and the local women's associations are each connected to a local Milli Görüş mosque association. Almost all MGVF-affiliated women have Turkish origins, and most activities are in Turkish. The local women's organisations run activities varying from Qur'an reading sessions to museum visits and charity markets, while the MGVF umbrella maintains contact with the press and the Dutch authorities, and coordinates larger projects across the local chapters.<sup>40</sup> The original goal of the Milli Görüş movement was to strengthen the Islamic identity of Turkish migrants in Europe, provide information about Islam and encourage them to live a religious life.<sup>41</sup> However, in 2000, the then leader of the Milli Görüş North Netherlands Federation, Hacı Karacaer, introduced 'Integration, Emancipation, Participation and Performance' as the new slogan of his organisation. These four words have always remained the main objectives of the MGVF during the period studied.<sup>42</sup>

The multiculturalism backlash and the growing debate about Islam after the 9/11 attacks have neither caused these organisations to reject feminism, nor to 'break taboos' about the oppression of women in Islam. In fact, all three of them intensified their efforts for women's empowerment. Instead of telling women to leave their faith behind, they explicitly used Islam as a source of inspiration for their efforts. All three organisations had already started working for women's empowerment before the multiculturalism backlash, albeit each in their own way. In Al Nisa, women had since the 1980s encouraged each other to read the Qur'an themselves, instead of blindly following the patriarchal interpretations of male scholars.<sup>43</sup> Dar al Arqam had organised coffee mornings and sewing lessons for Moroccan-Dutch women who otherwise lived fairly isolated lives.<sup>44</sup> The MGVF had adopted the slogan 'Integration, Emancipation, Participation and Performance' already before the 9/11 attacks and before the escalation of the Dutch integration debate. In 2002 it initiated a large project against domestic violence, a year before the Dutch government started its policy programme for the integration and emancipation of minority women.<sup>45</sup> However, as a result of the multiculturalism backlash and the criticisms made of Islam, the organisations became more outward-oriented. They started to address women's emancipation more explicitly, and they began to focus more on particular problems that were a subject of public debate.

Al Nisa became by far the most outward-oriented. Around the turn of the century, a new board had decided to take the foundation in a new direction. Rather than organising social gatherings and providing information about Islam to Muslim women, Al Nisa wanted to represent the interests of Muslim women in the Dutch public sphere. The escalation of the debate about women in Islam after the 9/11 attacks then created an urgent need for an organisation that could give voice to Muslim women. From then onwards Al Nisa's new leader Ceylan Weber—a Dutch convert who had been active in the women's movement for a long time—often wrote opinion pieces, gave interviews and took part in panel debates about Muslim women's emancipation.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, in its magazine, Al Nisa paid more attention than ever before to the position of women in Islam and the compatibility of Islam with feminism. Articles appeared about issues such as domestic violence, female genital mutilation, women's achievements on the labour market, forced marriages, women's rights to active participation in the mosque, 'honour killings', and women's rights to initiate divorce.<sup>47</sup> Some of these articles were written in response to a public debate about that particular issue, other topics were chosen simply because the constituency considered them important. A common thread was that although gendered violence and gender discrimination occurred in Muslim families, these could not be legitimised through Islam. In the Qur'an, men and women were equal before God. If women's rights were violated, this was the result of cultural practices and/or patriarchal readings of sacred texts.

There were clear similarities between the ideas expressed in these articles and Islamic feminism, and many Al Nisa-affiliated women felt inspired by activist scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.<sup>48</sup> While various forms of feminism have existed in the Muslim world for more than a century, Islamic feminism emerged as a transnational phenomenon from the 1980s onwards. It can be defined as a specific form of feminism that is explicitly embedded within Islamic discourse. Islamic feminists object to the fact that women have historically been largely excluded from interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith. Simultaneously, they object to accusations from non-Muslims that Islam is inherently patriarchal. They point to sacred texts that emphasise gender equality and argue that gender discrimination and gendered violence are incompatible with the Islamic notion of social justice. Central to Islamic feminism is the idea that Islam was originally much more empowering to women than it is as practiced by Muslims today.<sup>49</sup>

The Dar al Arqam board decided not to participate in public debate through the media,<sup>50</sup> but it did begin to focus a lot more on women's emancipation in the organisation's activities. It organised lectures and workshops with titles such as 'Women's Emancipation and Islam' and 'Boys and Girls: Respect for Each Other'.<sup>51</sup> In 2003, Dar al Arqam gave a course entitled 'Qur'an and Women's Rights',<sup>52</sup> and it also began to organise assertiveness training for Muslim women.<sup>53</sup> However, in 2007, the board concluded that these emancipatory activities diverted attention away from the foundation's original goal. It decided to bring back its focus to providing basic information about Islam to Muslim women. Emancipation-related issues kept being addressed, but with lower frequency.<sup>54</sup> The MGVF continued its project against domestic violence. In addition, it started new projects, including assertiveness training for Muslim women, workshops about sexuality and reproduction for teenage girls, and a course to increase women's leadership skills in organisations.<sup>55</sup> The MGVF was particularly good at getting Milli Görüş-affiliated imams and male Milli Görüş members positively involved in their projects.<sup>56</sup> In both organisations, the core message was that domestic violence and other violations of women's rights could not be legitimised through Islam. If Muslim women and girls gained more knowledge about their rights in Islam, this would help to strengthen their position.

The decision of Dar al Arqam and the MGVF to intensify their efforts for women's empowerment can in part be explained through changes in the authorities' funding policies. The story of Dar al Arqam is somewhat similar to that of the ATKB and MVVN. Until 2002, Dar al Arqam received core funding from the Rotterdam municipality, but after that, it could only apply for project funding. This meant that its new activities had to be clearly connected with Muslim women's emancipation and/or integration in order to be eligible for subsidies.<sup>57</sup> Also, the MGVF projects were funded by the local (and sometimes the national) authorities,<sup>58</sup> and the MGVF clearly benefited from the large subsidies that were allocated for projects against 'culture-related' barriers to minority women's emancipation. However, funding policies do not explain everything: Al Nisa never received any funding, but was also more occupied with gender equality than ever before.

From the interviews and the archival material, it appears that there were other, more important reasons why these organisations intensified their efforts for women's empowerment during these years. First, there was a sincere wish among the women who were active in these groups to improve their position and that of other Muslim women. They perceived a discrepancy between Islam as a religion that promotes social justice, and

the disadvantaged position that many Muslim women had in their families and in broader society. Many of the women involved felt a growing urge to help other women.<sup>59</sup> Second, specific conditions in public discourse made it almost impossible *not* to address the problems that Muslim women encountered, especially when these problems were perceived as culture-related. Hyper-realism had brought along a new form of political correctness where forced marriages, ‘honour killings’, female genital mutilation, and other ‘Muslim’ problems had to be recognised and explicitly condemned; otherwise, one would become accused of denying the existence of these issues.<sup>60</sup> Third, many Muslim women felt stigmatised and excluded by right-wing populist statements about Islam being a ‘backward’ and ‘oppressive’ religion that was incompatible with Western values. Through their organisational work, they wanted to challenge the negative image of Islam that they thought had been created by politicians and the mainstream news media. They wanted to show that many pious Muslim women were strongly committed to women’s empowerment, and that there was ample room for such a struggle in Islam.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the multiculturalism backlash has not stopped women with a Muslim background from fighting for women’s rights. On the contrary, several of the organisations studied have intensified their efforts for women’s emancipation during the first years of the new millennium. However, the post-9/11 developments in public debate and in public policy have put strong pressure on minority women’s organisations to position themselves regarding women’s rights in Islam. On the one hand, the multiculturalism backlash seems to have boosted Islamic feminism. The negative focus on Islam in Dutch public debate has encouraged women in Islamic organisations to show that their religion was not the cause of women’s problems, but the key to the solution. In that sense, one may argue that right-wing populist critics of Islam such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali have unintentionally contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism among Muslim women in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the multiculturalism backlash has made it more difficult for women in secular organisations to formulate constructive criticism against conservative religious attitudes. The growing fear of contributing to a right-wing populist agenda seems to have decreased the actual freedom of speech of those who had already been working for minority women’s rights from a secular perspective for several decades.

Several of the organisations studied have also found it more difficult to set their own agenda, as a result of increasingly selective funding policies from the authorities. The intense public debate about Muslim women's oppression has by no means always translated into substantial support for women in difficult situations. In some of the organisations studied, the multiculturalism backlash has led to an attention shift towards 'culture-related' problems instead of social, economic and legal barriers to women's emancipation. During the last few years, austerity measures have caused funding opportunities for minority women's organisations to diminish even further.

What the multiculturalism backlash has not contributed to is an open debate where women of different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs can discuss strategies for women's empowerment on an equal footing. White, ethnic Dutch, secular feminist ideals are still perceived as the norm (regardless of whether these ideals are put into practice). Ethnic and religious minority women can 'at best' adapt to this norm. Their own insights and strategies are seldom seen as valuable for their own emancipation process, let alone for that of Dutch majority women. Dutch society is far from gender equal, and as long as that is the case, a broader public discussion of these questions would be of great benefit to all women living in the Netherlands.

## NOTES

1. Although Okin originally published her essay 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' in the *Boston Review* in October 1997, the most-cited version of her essay is the one published as a chapter in an eponymous book: Susan Moller Okin, 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?,' in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7–25.
2. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2010); Alana Lentin, Gary Younge, and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books, 2011).
3. Sherene Razack, 'Imperilled Muslim women, dangerous Muslim men and civilised Europeans: Legal and social responses to forced marriages,' *Feminist Legal Studies* 12, no. 2 (2004): 129–74; Moira Dustin, *Gender Equality, Cultural Diversity: European Comparisons and Lessons* (London: Nuffield Foundation, 2006); Tjitske Akkerman and Anniken Hagelund, 'Women and children first!' Anti-immigration parties and gender in Norway and the Netherlands,' *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 2 (2007): 197–214.

4. Baukje Prins, *Voorbij de Onschuld: Het Debat over Integratie in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2004); Baukje Prins and Sawitri Saharso, 'From toleration to repression: The Dutch backlash against multiculturalism,' in *The Multiculturalism Backlash*, eds. Vertovec and Wessendorf 72–91.
5. Conny Roggeband and Mieke Verloo, 'Dutch women are liberated, migrant women are a problem: The evolution of policy frames on gender and migration in the Netherlands, 1995–2005,' *Social Policy and Administration* 41, no. 3 (2007): 271–88; Marguerite van den Berg and Willem Schinkel, 'Women from the catacombs of the city: Gender notions in Dutch culturist discourse,' *Innovation* 22, no. 4 (2009): 393–410.
6. 'De Geus Wil Portefeuille Emancipatie Opheffen,' *De Volkskrant*, 15 November 2003; 'De Geus: Post Emancipatie is Overbodig,' *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 November 2003.
7. Roggeband and Verloo, 'Dutch women are liberated,' 271–88; van den Berg and Schinkel, 'Women from the catacombs of the city,' 393–410.
8. Halleh Ghorashi, 'Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Daring or dogmatic? Debates on multiculturalism and emancipation in the Netherlands,' *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, 42 (2003): 163–72; Roggeband and Verloo, 'Dutch women are liberated,' 271–88; Anna Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul, 'Islam, gender, and immigrant integration: Boundary drawing in discourses on honour killing in the Netherlands and Germany,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009): 218–38; Van den Berg and Schinkel, 'Women from the catacombs,' 393–410; Halleh Ghorashi, 'From absolute invisibility to extreme visibility: Emancipation trajectory of migrant women in the Netherlands,' *Feminist Review* 94, no. 1 (2010): 75–92; Sarah Bracke, 'From "saving women" to "saving gays": Rescue narratives and their discontinuities,' *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 237–52.
9. Valuable exceptions are a study by Yolanda van Tilborgh on Muslim women's perceptions of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and a study by Conny Roggeband on how migrant women's organisations in the Netherlands deal with contradictory government policy frames that simultaneously position migrant women as agents of integration and as passive victims of failed integration. Yolanda van Tilborgh, *Wij Zijn Nederland: Moslima's over Ayaan Hirsi Ali* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2006); Conny Roggeband, 'The victim-agent dilemma: How migrant women's organizations in the Netherlands deal with a contradictory policy frame,' *Signs* 35, no. 4 (2010): 943–67.
10. The research material has been collected as part of a larger, comparative-historical analysis of the dynamics between stereotyping and self-representation of women with a Muslim background in the Netherlands

- and Norway between 1975 and 2010: Margaretha A. van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations of Women with a Muslim Background: The Stigma of Being Oppressed* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). The interviews took place in Spring 2013. All respondents signed an information-consent form before participating in the research project, and all were given the opportunity to check their quotes.
11. International Institute of Social History (IISH), Archive HTKB, File 7, 'HTKB: Turkse Vrouwen Vereniging in Nederland' (1984), 3–4; Atria Institute for Gender Equality and Women's History (Atria), File: NED7 1992, 'Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland: 10 Jaar 1982–1991' (1992), 2–3; Khadija Arib, *Conscious Op Zondag* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2009), 138–39.
  12. 'Wij Zijn Niet Alleen Een Hulpverleningsorganisatie,' *Turkse Vrouwenkrant*, May/June 1982, 10–11; IISH, Archive HTKB, File 165, 'Werkplan 1983 SMV/MVVN' (1982); IISH, Archive HTKB, File 7, 'HTKB: Turkse Vrouwen Vereniging in Nederland' (1984), 3–4; IISH, Archive HTKB, File 167, 'Evaluatie 1986–1987' (1987); IISH, Archive HTKB, File 2: 'Evaluatie 1989/1990' (1990); Atria, File: NED7 1992, 'Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland: 10 Jaar 1982–1991' (1992), 2–3; Atria, File: J 144, 'Jaarverslag Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland 1991' (1992); Atria, File: J 144, 'Jaarverslag Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland 1993–1994' (1994); Atria, File: J 144, 'Jaarverslag Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland 1994–1995' (1995).
  13. IISH, Archive HTKB, File 164, 'Subsidieaanvraag bij de Gemeente Amsterdam 1980' (1979); IISH, Archive HTKB, File 2, 'Concept Beleidsplan HTKB 1991' (1991); Atria, File: J 144, 'Jaarverslag Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland 1991' (1992), 12.
  14. Dutch Parliament, Kamerstuk 16012–21, *Nota Minderhedenbeleid* (1982–1983): 107, 123–32.
  15. IISH, Archive HTKB, File 147, 'Naamswijziging van HTKB naar ATKB' (1995).
  16. Sevgi Güngörmüş and Emel Can—ATKB (interviewed together on 19 April 2013).
  17. Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
  18. Atria, File: NED 31 1999—C, 'Conferentie "De Mudawwanah"' (1999).
  19. Justus Uitermark and Frank van Steenberg, 'Postmulticulturalisme en Stedelijk Burgerschap: Over de Neoliberale Transformatie van het Amsterdamse Integratiebeleid,' *Sociologie* 2, no. 3 (2006): 265–87.
  20. Van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations*, 52–53.



21. Sevgi Güngörmüş and Emel Can—ATKB (interviewed together on 19 April 2013); Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
22. Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
23. Sevgi Güngörmüş and Emel Can—ATKB (interviewed together on 19 April 2013); Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
24. ATKB, Annual Report ATKB 2004, 3–16.
25. ATKB, Annual Report ATKB 2008, 6–17.
26. Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
27. Sevgi Güngörmüş and Emel Can—ATKB (interviewed together on 19 April 2013); Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
28. Ibid.
29. Landelijke Werkgroep Mudawwanah, ‘Achtergebleven of Achtergelaten?’ (Booklet, 2005); Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
30. Sevgi Güngörmüş and Emel Can—ATKB (interviewed together on 19 April 2013); Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
31. See, for example, IISH, Archive HTKB, File 242, ‘Buitenlandse Vrouwen Kongres op 27 september in Amsterdam,’ (1981), 3–4; ‘Wij Zijn Niet Alleen Een Hulpverleningsorganisatie,’ *Turkse Vrouwenkrant*, May/June 1982, 10–11; Atria, File: J 144, ‘Jaarverslag Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland 1991’ (1992).
32. Atria, File: NED 31 1999–C, ‘Conferentie “De Mudawwanah”’ (1999). See also, Stichting Landelijke Werkgroep Mudawwanah, ‘Mudawwanah: Informatie over het Marokkaanse Familierecht voor Hulpverleners in Nederland’ (Booklet, 2004), 9.
33. ‘Wat imam vrouwen aandoet wordt te vaak vergeten,’ *Trouw*, 22 May 2001, 5.
34. Sevgi Güngörmüş—ATKB (interviewed with Emel Can on 19 April 2013).
35. Ikram Chiddi—MVVN (interviewed on 4 June 2013).
36. Khadija Withagen—Dar al Arqam (interviewed on 17 April 2013); Leyla Çakir—Al Nisa (interviewed on 22 April 2013).
37. ‘Al Nisa—Een Terugblik,’ *Al Nisa*, September/October 1987, 1–3; ‘10 Jaar Al Nisa—Verleden, Heden en Toekomst,’ *Al Nisa*, June 1992, 20; Farhat Khan-Poos—Al Nisa (interviewed on 2 May 2013).
38. ‘Abonnementeninformatie,’ *Al Nisa*, August/September 1987, 1.
39. Khadija Withagen—Dar al Arqam (interviewed on 17 April 2013); Salima Roelse—Dar al Arqam (interviewed on 9 May 2013).
40. Nesrin Altuntaş, Kevser Aktaş, and Saliha Meray—MGVF (interviewed together on 5 June 2013).
41. Thijl Sunier, *Islam in Beweging: Turkse Jongeren en Islamitische Organisaties* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1996), 53–55.

42. MGVF, Annual Report MGVF 2008–2009, 3.
43. Farhat Khan-Poos—*Al Nisa* (interviewed on 2 May 2013).
44. Salima Roelse—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 9 May 2013).
45. Roggeband, 'The victim-agent dilemma,' 952.
46. Ceylan Weber—*Al Nisa* (interviewed on 20 June 2013).
47. 'Geweld Tegen Vrouwen in Relaties,' *Al Nisa*, March 2002, 6–18; 'Krachtige Moslimvrouwen? Jazeker!,' *Al Nisa*, September 2002, 7–16; 'In het Web van Tradities: Vrouwen over Meisjesbesnijdenis,' *Al Nisa*, September 2005, 22–26; 'Uithuwelijking en Islam,' *Al Nisa*, January 2006, 6–13; 'Ik Eis Mijn Plek,' *Al Nisa*, June 2006, 20–21; 'Echtscheiding Op Initiatief van de Vrouw: Een Door God Gegeven Recht,' *Al Nisa*, January 2007, 21–23; 'Eergerelateerd Geweld in Nederland,' *Al Nisa*, April 2007, 6–13.
48. Ceylan Weber—*Al Nisa* (interviewed on 20 June 2013).
49. Miriam Cooke, 'Multiple critique: Islamic feminist rhetorical strategies,' *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 1 (2000): 91–110.
50. Khadija Withagen—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 17 April 2013); Salima Roelse—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 9 May 2013).
51. *Dar al Arqam*, Annual Report *Dar al Arqam* 2003; *Dar al Arqam*, 'Jongens en Meisjes: Respect voor Elkaar' (Flyer, 2003).
52. *Dar al Arqam*, Minutes of the Board Meeting on 11 July 2002.
53. *Dar al Arqam*, Work Plan 2003–2004; *Dar al Arqam*, Work Plan 2004–2005.
54. Khadija Withagen—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 17 April 2013); Salima Roelse—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 9 May 2013).
55. MGVF, Annual Report MGVF 2008–2009.
56. Nesrin Altuntaş, Kevser Aktaş, and Saliha Meray—MGVF (interviewed together on 5 June 2013).
57. Khadija Withagen—*Dar al Arqam* (interviewed on 17 April 2013).
58. MGVF, Annual Report MGVF 2008–2009; Nesrin Altuntaş, Kevser Aktaş, and Saliha Meray—MGVF (interviewed together on 5 June 2013).
59. See, for example, 'Geweld tegen Vrouwen in Relaties,' *Al Nisa*, 6–18 March 2002.
60. Prins, *Voorbij de Onschuld*; Prins and Saharso, 'From Toleration to Repression,' 72–91.
61. Nesrin Altuntaş, Kevser Aktaş, and Saliha Meray—MGVF (interviewed together on 5 June 2013); Ceylan Weber—*Al Nisa* (interviewed on 20 June 2013).