

Chapter 31. The impact of Higher Education on religious attitudes of University graduated Turkish women in Vienna

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Introduction

The stereotype of the Muslim woman in public discourse is built upon the image of an oppressed and uneducated person. “*Allah’s rechtlose Töchter. Muslimische Frauen in Deutschland*” (Lawless daughter of Allah. Muslim women in Germany). This headline of an article published in Germany’s news magazine “Der Spiegel” discussed troubled living conditions of Muslim women oppressed by their families (Schießl & Schmidt, 2004). The Muslim woman is also stereotyped in political debates. A woman with black chador was at the center of a poster for anti-minaret-initiative of the Swiss People’s Party (DiePresse, 2009). The conducted research also considered the fundamental fact that many Muslim women in Austria still move within their traditional cultural values. According to the information provided by the Austrian Integration Fund from the year 2010, the increase in Muslim population between the years 2001 and 2009 was due to a much greater extent on a higher birth rate than on immigration (Marik-Lebeck, 2010). Parallel to this mainstream traditional attitude of Muslim women in everyday life one can also notice that the traditional image of women is also deeply rooted in the religious handbooks which are used as an orientation by many Turkish muslims in everyday life.

The traditional image of women is intriguingly promoted in the religious handbooks, which are widespread within the Turkish community. The analysis of these religious handbooks shows that woman is described as equal to man. The man is figured as the head of the family who has the responsibility to earn money for the family whereas the woman is responsible for the domestic sphere and for the education of the children. (Yavuz, 1961, pp. 121-124). The woman is blessed as God’s creation, but primarily mentioned in connection with her role as mother and housewife. With the statement of the Prophet Mohammed, ‘*Paradise lies at the feet of mothers*’ the positive role of women is highlighted in these books. Women should pursue higher graduation to educate her children and to be an educated mother (Uysal & Uysal, 1993, p. 21)

The reading of religious handbooks triggers in many readers a feeling of obligation to accept the contents, as most writers have a theological education and reason their arguments with the primary sources of Qur’an and Sunnah.

With the help of these observations, my research interest in my doctoral thesis was focussed on Muslim Turkish women, who have graduated from University and are different-coloured. The traditional or stereotypical images of women do not

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match with the lifestyles of the interviewed women. They pursue a higher education, graduate and work in the professions they have chosen. Some of the visible graduated Turkish women are wearing a headscarf which has been discussed as a backward traditional lifestyle in contradiction to the Western values. (Turam, 2008) And some of the visible graduated Turkish women are corresponding to secular values without headscarves. All of them have one thing in common; they have educational and professional success in Austrian society and do not correlate with well-known stereotypical or traditional image of Muslim woman.

This research is thus framed by the following three broad questions: What importance does University education have for the life and thinking of young women? What is the correlation between religion and higher education? How do educated women evaluate the traditional image of women and reconcile different religious subjects?

Methodology

The open guide (general) questions in the interviews covered a variety of topics: from biographical history including education and background, personal image of women, compatibility of work and motherhood to their opinion about women's position in Islam. Also the personal outfit, religious education in their childhood, as well as the general importance of religion in their lives irrespective of regular practice were topics of the interviews (Dursun, 2015, pp. 102-107). I considered women with two different backgrounds between the age of 25 and 35 in my study: Those who were born or grew up in Austria and those who came to Austria for their studies. Young women who were born or grew up in Vienna, mostly have a migration background and are from families, who came as "guest workers" to Austria.

The conducted research was mainly based on semi-structured interviews with seven young Turkish women who graduated from the university and live in Vienna. Through my special role, both as a researcher and as a member of the community, I had the opportunity to access a field that might not have been easily accessible to other people of non-Turkish origin. All interviews were evaluated by the method of system analysis (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003). Because of my own Turkish migration background, I analysed the interviews through the method of system analysis. The speciality of this method is that interpretation groups with different backgrounds and professions were involved to acquire an objective analysis.

Mainstream Understanding of Islam in Turkish society

This subheading aims to highlight a short overview about the trends and characteristics of Islam, which describes the mainstream religiosity of Turkish Muslims. It is assumed that the religious understanding of the interviewees on the one hand differs from the common understanding of Islam. On the other hand, this mainstream is possibly the initial starting point for their individual understanding of religion in my opinion.

About 6.8% (573,876) of the Austrian population are Muslim. The Turkish people are the largest Muslim group in Austria (Aslan & Yıldız, 2013, p. 21).

Historically, the largest number of Muslims from Turkey is related to labor migration from Turkey both in Germany and in Austria. Ednan Aslan, Professor of Islamic Religious Education in Vienna, notes that Islamic organizations in Austria act very origin-oriented and he lists about 195 Turkish mosques in Austria (Aslan, 2013, p. 62). In addition to this, according to Aslan, Muslim schools and kindergartens are established as a moral protection of children against the “bad” influences of modern secular Austrian society (Aslan, 2013, p. 63) Similar views to Aslan are represented by Rauf Ceylan, Professor of Religious Education in Germany. Ceylan refers in his arguments to the establishment of the Turkish Republic: The Kemalist reforms were only accepted by a small social elite, while the large part of the population remained untouched by these reforms. To clarify his thesis, Ceylan notes the term “folk Islam”: In his view, many Turkish migrants came from the rural areas, where folk Islam is alive and he points to popular piety of Turkish Muslims in Europe. (Ceylan, 2008, pp. 48-49) Turkish theologian Hayri Kırbaçoğlu and many other professors from different disciplines and viewpoints believe that the understanding of religion of Turkish Muslims is confined to the five pillars of Islam and religious orientation of these people is formed through religious handbooks or İlmihal-books (Kırbaçoğlu, 2002, pp. 119-120) The Arabic term *İlm-i-hâl* means “behavior teaching”. These handbooks contain mostly instructions for religious practice mainly in keeping to the “Five Pillars of Islam”. They also offer religious orientation through rules in everyday life (Kırbaçoğlu, 2002, pp. 119-120) Kırbaçoğlu speaks of “narrowed religiosity understanding”. He criticizes these books with regard to the presentation concerning the status of women, as the main sources of these descriptions and rules come from the Middle Ages and are consequently patriarchal. In his opinion, the contents of these books can cause psychopathological effects due to the very strict regulations. For example, these books issue a cleansing or a ritual prayer as invalid if a very small skin would remain unwashed. In consequence it might cause a kind of everyday paranoia (Kırbaçoğlu, 2002, pp. 119-124) Turkish columnist Taha Akyol emphasizes that many of these contents are based on outdated sayings and traditions. He refers for example to shaking hands between man and woman, which is described in many handbooks as “forbidden” (Akyol, 2008, pp. 256-258). One can shortly summarize conservative and folk Islam as disinterested in theological content, but showing a strong interest in the observance of Islam through form and dependence on rituals (Öztürk, 2012). Analyses of the interviews concerning the issues of religious subjects or evaluating traditional images of women and their reasoning show that university education leads to individual modification of religious and cultural practices as well as an adaptation of religious values and cultural attitudes in the lives of these women. The results show that young women – who were brought up in a conservative or popular Islamic way– developed a modified, individual understanding of the religion in comparison to mainstream religiosity of Turkish Muslims.

Research results: Modification of religious and cultural practices

All of the interviewed women I met developed a modified, individual reasoning of different religious subjects which do not correlate with current described reasoning in the religious handbooks. This chapter aims to present two detailed

examples of theological reasoning of interviewed women which refers to wearing/not wearing headscarf and shaking hands. The interviewed women are presented with figures (as respondents) and didn't get an anonymized name.

Respondent III

The meaning of Islamic outfit comes from the third Respondent (Respondent III). She is a computer scientist holding a Master's degree. She is 30 years old and has one child. When I asked her what is important to her when she chooses her outfits, she responded that her strict Islamic outfit was in the center of her life as a student. Up to her graduation, she remained in her Islamic outfit. Her opinion has changed since she started to work. She does not wear a headscarf anymore. She has an opinion that "outfit is not the most important thing in Austria. In her workplace, the people respect her intelligence and she prefers to wear comfortable clothes. I asked her how or when she has changed her opinion. Her answer was: during her professional life. At her job, she predominantly has worked with male colleagues and had the feeling that they do not notice what she wears. She believes that she is unremarkable without an Islamic outfit. For this reason, she feels that she fulfills the religious rule of Islamic outfit without wearing a headscarf. It is possible, that one day she will miss her Islamic outfit and will return back to her roots. If we compare her theological reasoning with the descriptions of religious handbooks, we notice that the importance of choosing an Islamic outfit in the religious handbooks is reasoned with arguments such as protection of Muslim women or minimized visibility of women in the society. For example: According to the descriptions of these religious handbooks there are suitable jobs for women in the the context of Islamic society (Uysal & Uysal, 1993, p. 403). However education should be acquired either within their own sex, which means that women should be taught by female teachers only. If the woman must attend a school for males and females, she must dress Islam-conform and behave "unremarkable" in the educational institution. Islam-conform outfit should help Muslim women to be "unremarkable" (Uysal & Uysal, 1993, p. 403). Respondent III feels that she fulfills the religious rule of Islamic outfit without wearing a headscarf. The analysis of her reasoning may possibly cause a modified theological reasoning which she experienced during her working phase.

S: Which features are important regarding your personal outfit?

RIII: There was a turn in my life ... During my student days, I thought that I.. religiously I have to wear strictly ... and I had the feeling that it was the most important matter.. which was centered in my life ... but this thinking has dissolved, since I work ... now I think people really respect me for my intelligence and not for my garment I wear ... and I think in Austria... the outfit is not the first point..[...] ... But now hmm I'm relaxed I wear jeans and a T-shirt and they are not itching me (she laughs) ... but I think in the future I will return to my origin.. Somehow I have the feeling that I will miss the typical Islamic clothing I do not know why..[...]

S. When or how did you change your opinion about your outfit..?

RIII: In my working place, where my work became center of my life ... I am in a sector, where I have to work predominantly with men ... and I have the feeling that they do not look (she laughs) on what you wear ... nobody cares in the office, what you wear.. and I have become more relaxed, I do not know, I cannot even explain the reason... why this is happening ... but it was more important to me that I pray really five times a day and that I fast.., but my outlook for example became not so important ... but my mates, of course not always share my opinion ... so they still remained so and outfit is still the most important point in their life ... I think it differs from person to person ... [..] (Dursun, 2015, pp. 196-197)

Respondent II

The next example concerning the modification of religious and cultural practice is referring to distance between males and females. The second Respondent (Respondent II) came from a small town in Turkey to Vienna, because of the prohibition of headscarves at Turkish universities. She wanted to study with her headscarf in the country, although her weeping father asked her to remove the headscarf in order to study at the best university in Turkey. She is an electrical engineer and did not to go back to Turkey after her graduation. She is 34 years old, married and has a child.

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Both during and after her student days, she modified her religious practices. In Turkey, she attended a theological school for girls. At the Technical University in Vienna she was almost exclusively among male students. In Austria, it was difficult for her to deal with the difference, Western culture and predominant male colleagues in her new environment.

The deliberation phase has led her to change her personal ideals. She started to talk to her classmates about things, which she would have considered to talk about in Turkey. She also avoided shaking hands with men. One can assume that distance to men was due to her religious views and of course to the fact that she had attended a school for girls.

Through the perception of the different contexts, she now finds it acceptable and interprets her behavior as a result of changing personal attitudes in order to be accepted and incorporated into the new environment. Using her modified religious attitudes, she feels more comfortable.

It concludes that her male-dominated environment in Vienna, both in her student days and in her workplace, didn't lead her to the feeling of withdrawing herself from society.

Due to the fact that before she refused to the shake hands with men and recently she has amended this idea, one can assume that up to her study phase she had implemented an understanding of Islam which is described in religious handbooks. Turkish columnist Taha Akyol emphasizes that many of these contents are based on outdated sayings and traditions. For example, he refers to shaking hands between man and woman, which is described in many handbooks as "forbidden" (Akyol, 2008, pp. 256-258)

RII: Yes, both during and after the study? Of course you .. walk in a country where it ..actually .. I do not say .. it is dominated by Christians .. because I believe in that or not .. that everything in this country is .. influenced by religion .. especially in Europe, it is just a Western culture when people see you in Turkey .. they know you .. they know what you want.. .. here in Austria firstly you have to introduce yourself.. .. you have to show where your limits are.. ..and because it comes naturally also ..and specially in this phase you have to move your borders.. of course I'm not as strict as before .. [...] I imagine, I attended a school for girls.. and in my student time here we were only three girls in classroom ..[...] I was sitting next to my male colleagues in laboratory .. it was a bit difficult to talk about anything ..[...] . I did not know how they would react during our conversations.. .. because I do not know them well. [...] And this phase has led me to change my attitudes .. slowly I started to talk about things.. where I probably would have never spoken in Turkey (she laughs) I do not think that these would be considered as normal for men in Turkey. But here it is normal. [...] what else.. for example outside of my family, I didn't shake hands with men.. (Dursun, 2015, p. 188)

Conclusion

All of the interviewed Turkish women emphasize the positive change of their personalities and the importance of their University graduation. These women value their professions as a special part of their identities, they cannot imagine a life without their professions and try to balance their lives with their traditional roles as mother and working life. Religious attitudes despite the level of intensity are not regarded as a barrier to their individual fulfillment with their professions and their emancipation ideals in the Austrian society. Religious attitudes do not cause an obstruction because of the internalization of modified religious and cultural practices.

Marti Gerardo, Professor of sociology at Davidson College reveals “how religious reflexivity points a deliberative and problem-solving dynamic that is an unavoidable element of contemporary religious selves as a result of continuous novelties in modern society”. Marti writes: “*While sociologists will surely continue to seek uniformities, religious reflexivity is not touted here as a form of homogeneity, rather, religious reflexivity is a sustained mode of human action necessitated by encounter with novel situations*” (Marti, 2015, p. 3)

Through these presented two detailed statements of the interviewed women one can see that these women were brought up in a conservative or popular Islamic way and through their educational period developed a modified theological reasoning. Internalized religious interpretations and contents or religious norms from earlier times seem to be religious handbook-oriented and disagree in many respects with today's lifestyles of young Turkish women in Vienna, have begun to question the religious justifications from earlier times, and develop a new theological reasoning to encounter with novel situations. (Dursun, 2015, pp. 329-330)

Following Marti's approach of religious reflexivity, the analysis of the interviews shows, on the one hand, the heterogeneity of Muslim identities and on the other hand, how these individuals rely on themselves and their own intuition to

solve religious challenges and manage a balancing act between traditional gender roles and emancipatory ideals.

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