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Linda Hyökki

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Tel.: +90-212-692-9689
Fax.: +90-212-693-8229
E-mail: ciga@izu.edu.tr
Web: ciga.izu.edu.tr

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The Politics of the Headscarf and Recognition in Finland's Integration Debates

Linda Hyökki

Muslim women and the Islamic headscarf are recurrent themes in Finnish socio-political discussions focusing on the limits and possibilities of immigrant integration. In this short study, I analyze the way Finnish political discourse is instrumentalized in order to negatively frame Muslim immigrant women (specifically those who wear the Islamic headscarf) as unable to integrate into Finnish society. The premise of my argument is the acknowledgement of integration as a two-way process and of individual identities as dependent on recognition by one's significant others. I thus argue that, for successful integration, society must facilitate recognition of the immigrants' religious identities and practices and avoid legislative governance measures such as headscarf bans which misrecognize Muslim women's identities.

The history of Muslim presence in Finland goes back to the beginning of the 19th century when the country was annexed as an autonomous Grand Duchy to the Russian Empire. From 1809 onwards, Muslim members of the Russian army settled in Finland, and permanent immigration of Tatar petty traders from the Volga River area to Finland started in the 1870s. In 1917, Finland gained total independence from Russia, which allowed the Tatars living in the country, now former subjects of the Russian empire, to gain citizenship in independent Finland (Martikainen, "Muslimit Suomalaisessa Yhteiskunnassa"; Pauha and Martikainen). Today, the Tatar minority of Finland is a well-established cultural and religious group with congregations in Helsinki, Järvenpää, and Tampere.

In the second half of the 20th century, the number of immigrant Muslims from Muslim-majority countries settling in Finland began to increase. Until the 1980s, a small number of Muslims from mostly North-African countries immigrated to the country and established the first non-Tatar

religious community in Helsinki in 1986. Finland also received refugees from Iraq, Iran, and Turkey in the same period. By the 1990s, Somali, Kosovo, Albanian, and Bosniak asylum seekers further diversified the different backgrounds of Muslim residents in Finland. However, post-WWII immigration from Muslim-majority countries has also been motivated by work, study, and family (reunification) (Martikainen, *Religion, Migration, Settlement: Reflections on Post-1990 Immigration to Finland* 122–23).

The exact number of Muslims in Finland is unknown. The most official registry of people residing in Finland is the Population Information System. However, according to the Population Information Act (661/2009),[1] religious affiliation is not included as required information on any individual. Moreover, registered membership in a religious community is not obligatory. Hence, the official statistics on population structure provided by Statistics Finland only provide information on the number of Muslims registered in an Islamic religious community. By calculations based on country of birth, researchers estimated that, as of 2019, the actual number of Muslims living in Finland is between 110,000 – 120,000 individuals, i.e., ca. 2 % of the total population (Pauha and Konttori 238). Such calculations, however, do not account for Muslim children born in Finland to parents with immigratory backgrounds nor Muslim converts. Due to the ethnic diversity of the community, Finland's Muslims also follow diverse legal schools. Researchers have estimated the size of the Shi'i community is 10% of the overall Muslim population, but there are no official study to confirm this (Pauha 2015).

With the increasing immigration to Finland since the 1990s, Finnish society diversified in cultural, linguistic, and religious terms. In the beginning, Muslim immigrants faced hostility in the form of an explicit anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse that targeted their racial identities and, in its extreme, was present in the skinhead movement

[1] https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2009/20090661 [last accessed 31.7.2019]

(Puuronen). However, the rhetoric changed into an explicit anti-Muslim racist discourse due to the post-9/11 global political developments (Creutz et al.). During the following decades, like other European countries, Finland experienced a rise in presentable right-wing politics, as the Finns Party gained voters and has, since the 2011 elections, held a significant number of seats in the national parliament. Even though, statistically, the majority of immigrants to Finland are from Christian-majority countries and are thus non-Muslims (Martikainen, *Religion, Migration, Settlement: Reflections on Post-1990 Immigration to Finland* 10; Finnish Immigration Service), the increasing Muslim population and the visibility of Islam in the public sphere have put Muslims in the spotlight with questions regarding the "challenges to the governance of minority rights and multiculturality" (Sakaranaho 230). The current anti-Muslim racist discourse influenced by the Finns Party and other actors in the nationalist right-wing corner of the public debates focuses on advocating an idea that the integration of Muslim immigrants into Finnish society would be impossible, based on the argument that Islam as a religion and the "Finnish culture" are incompatible.

All in all, the discourse is framed by dichotomies of Western civilization versus Islam. Special attention in these debates is given to the headscarf as a religious sartorial practice exercised by some Muslim women and girls. I maintain that discourses of othering and headscarf bans are problematic for immigrant Muslim women's integration. As O'Brien has argued (112), it is within liberal perfectionism wherein Muslim women's voices stay unheard as judgements are made about their emancipation. The anti-Muslim racist discourse underlying the headscarf debates is marked by stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women under the influence of Islamic patriarchy (Ahmed). Thus, as I draw from the understanding of an individual's identity being a social construct formed concerning one's significant others, I argue that headscarf debates and bans impose oppression on Muslim women by misrecognizing their religious identities and their agency.

The headscarf as a sartorial practice of Muslim women has become one of the most disputed features of Muslim life in Finland and European societies. In the public discourse, the headscarf is often negatively associated with conceptions about Islam's inherent inclination towards terrorism, violence, backwardness, and fundamentalism. Furthermore, it is identified as a symbol of women's oppression – as a piece of cloth allegedly forced upon them by their male relatives (Bullock; Amir-Moazimi). The Islamic headscarf becomes especially problematized when the public discourse in European societies emphasizes a socio-cultural identity based on a Judeo-Christian tradition. Hence, the headscarf – as a symbol for Islam – is framed discursively as the symbol of a spatial and temporal Other not belonging to the "post-modern Western" society that is supposed to present a moral high ground against which Islamic practices are juxtaposed (O'Brien 4). In the Finnish discourse, examples of such moral superiority can be seen in political statements that create dichotomies between the Islamic sartorial practices and the "Nordic identity," which is framed as inherently offering freedom and equality to women.

Hence, the headscarf debates could be regarded as being about the role of Islam in Finnish society and in Europe at large, and in its very essence, about the appropriate measures of minority governance (Valenta 457). The narratives concentrate on picturing the headscarf as a hindrance to Muslim women's integration as well as a general disturbance to public peace (Keskinen 62), which leads to the regulation of the headscarf by political measures such as bans. Thus, Islam and Islamic practices are frequently put in the spotlight when speaking of national unity (Martikainen and Tiilikainen 10; O'Brien 4). When the headscarf as a religious practice visible in the public space is otherized, it reflects, in a more general sense, those values that Finnish society wants to claim to be presenting – values upon which members of the society might construct their social identities. Ultimately, the veil reflects the following question: Who can be part of Finnish society, and what does "Finnish society" mean in its visible and invisible cultural aspects?

Integration, as it is defined by the current Finnish Act on The Promotion of Immigrant Integration, means an interactive development of both the immigrant and the receiving society, during which the immigrant gains the necessary knowledge and skills that they need to function in society. At the same time, opportunities for preserving the immigrants' own cultures and languages are being supported by the state and other actors involved in integration work. On a broad scale, the role of authorities and other actors in undertaking measures and providing services that promote such inclusion of the immigrant into Finnish society is also emphasized in the act.[2] Heckmann defines intercultural contact as possible ways for the host society to adapt to change (Heckmann 175). However, a recent PEW Research Forum study, "Being Christian in Western Europe" (Pew Research Center), shows that Finnish people lack knowledge of Islam and that only 1/3 of the population knows a Muslim personally. Consequently, it seems to explain why Finnish people scored the highest when asked whether Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Finnish values. Yet, the attitudes about Islam and violence were more nuanced because only 17% believe that all Muslims in Finland support extremism.

Following the classification of social integration consisting of four dimensions —the structural, the cultural, the interactive, and the identificative (Heckmann) —it can be argued that intercultural contacts and identificative integration go hand in hand. Firstly, all four are interconnected; the success of one reflects the success of others and vice versa. For instance, when an immigrant is successfully integrated into the structures of society such as the labor market, it will empower them financially and emotionally to also enwiden their social network and hence to find friendships and establish relationships, which will lead to an increase of cultural skills and knowledge. Additionally, they can feel settled down and develop a feeling of belonging. Secondly, the more intercultural contacts and established relationships an immigrant has, the

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[2] Act on Promoting Immigrant Integration ("Laki kotouttamisen edistämisestä") 30.12.2010/1386, https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2010/20101386#L1P3 [last accessed 31.7.2019]

easier they will be able to (re)define their identity concerning their "significant others" and establish a sense of belonging to the group. Hence, it can safely be argued that for immigrant Muslim women, their relationships with the rest of society will define how they embrace themselves in society as its residents. The headscarf debates constantly remind Muslim women that significant parts of their identity are not accepted and welcomed.

European identity is generally associated with secularity and neutrality, for which the headscarf in its inevitable visible manifestation of religious identity becomes the antipode *per se*. The headscarf is in this regard politicized when it is taken as a symbol of a hardline demand to unite religion and state based on Islamic practices (Amir-Moazimi 115). Thus, Muslim women who wear the headscarf are perceived as unwilling to accept the majority's cultural norms (Amir-Moazimi 27). Moreover, the headscarf is constructed within the immigration debate as a sign of Muslim women's reluctancy to integrate (Casanova 65–66), which gives birth to a societal struggle for recognition as Muslim women seek to gain recognition for their value in their *difference* to the others (Fraser 2000). When the political and societal discourse paints a negative picture of the compatibility of Muslim women and their agentive moral choices with socially constructed normativity of national belonging, the women are forced to justify and defend their position in society and public space as equal citizens. I thus maintain that instead of discussing how the headscarf as a religious practice presents the "clash" of Islam with Finnish culture and values, or a "rebellion" against the host society, it should be investigated from the perspective of choice for self-definition and hence as an integral part of identificative integration.

Bans on headscarves and face veils in public spaces on the national and local level as well as in specified institutionalized contexts have become a reality across Europe since 2004, when France first forbade the hijab along with other clearly visible religious symbols in public schools. Even though the size of the Muslim population is proportionally smaller in

Finland than it is in France, the question of following France's example has been raised in Finnish politics. In Finland, different positions on Muslim pupils wearing the headscarf have been presented in parliamentary discussions since 2004. Directly after France's decision to ban the hijab in public schools, MP Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democratic Party) submitted a written question about the government's position on such bans. Inspired by debates in Austria in 2018, MP Laura Huhtasaari (Finns Party), with her party's support, filed a petitionary motion in 2018 for the government to undertake measures for banning headscarves for girls in kindergartens and pre-schools. The arguments for the headscarf ban have highlighted the idea that the headscarf would hinder girls from accessing the same opportunities as their peers. MP Huhtasaari, in her motion, noted that the headscarves contribute to the emergence of "parallel societies." In her view, Muslim girls forced to wear headscarves by their parents will more likely face marginalization. Moreover, she argued that the headscarf would contribute to gendered discrimination as Muslim parents do not force their sons to wear any specific clothes.

Agency is not an uncommon discursive theme in Finnish political debates on Muslim girls and women when it comes to Islamic sartorial practices. In 2013 and 2016, the Finnish MP Vesa-Matti Saarakkala (Finns Party) argued in his legislative proposal on face veil bans that such measures are necessary "because there are reasonable grounds to believe that Muslim women in Finland or elsewhere in Europe in principle do not wear the face veil out of their own will." However, it has been established through empirical studies in Europe that women's experiences are far from the social reality depicted by politicians such as Saarakkala. Narratives by Dutch Muslim women who wear the face veil (Moors) show that not only do they consciously decide to wear the face veil– even sometimes against the opinion of their families – but they analyze such decisions as agency relating to bodily integrity. Contrary to the outsider assumptions about the presence of women who wear the face veil negatively affecting societal life, Moors argues further that the face veil is not a problem for interactions in the public space. The women are very self-initiated in

making contact with their fellow citizens and even consciously adjust their behaviour to ensure a positive image of themselves. These women are also not to be seen as a single social category; they have different spiritual backgrounds, including Sufism (Moors). This is an excellent example of the multitude of religious interpretations Muslim women practice and the diversity of their identities. These findings speak against the argument that the face veil, or the headscarf, would hinder (immigrant) Muslim women's integration. In contrast, the women actively participate in social life outside of their homes and are accommodating to each situation so that interaction is not hindered.

However, the political debates seem to concentrate less on the social aspect of integration and construct narratives about Muslim women, which can be used to frame them as inherently unable to subscribe to the same values as the host society claims to represent. In certain political discourses, the headscarf has been reduced to a practice that can allegedly only be "inflicted" upon girls, i.e., as a form of oppression. It results in "imposed" gender identity. In 2018, then presidential candidate of the Finns Party, Laura Huhtasaari, claimed that "Women of the Nordic countries are free, " which was the premise for arguing for a face veil ban. According to her, the face veil was not a free choice for a woman. Instead, true freedom would be when she "as a woman from a Nordic country, can decide in the morning whether to wear a pair of jeans or a skirt." The rhetorical emphasis of her cultural and geographically bound identity can be analyzed to imply a misrecognition of any Muslim woman living in Finland or other Nordic countries as belonging to the same cultural space. Instead, Muslim women (who wear the face veil) are racialized in Huhtasaari's words as Others who do not belong to the same identity category of "a *free* woman from a Nordic country" as her.

When discussing the headscarf, apart from Muslim women's agency, Muslim women's perceptions and opinions about the headscarf should be considered instead of merely using the headscarf for essentialization and spreading anti-Muslim racist stereotypes. An individual's identity

formation is not only constructed through recognition as such but also by how the "other" acts upon it (Taylor, "Die Religion Und Die Identitätskämpfe Der Moderne" 369). Women's perceptions are much more diverse than reduced ideas about the headscarf as a symbol of oppression. They also depend on how each woman interprets the holy Islamic texts. The sociologist Nilüfer Göle's interviewees explained the headscarf to mean a fortification of their relationship with God. Because the headscarf in European societies is not a general practice, it gives women a more developed feeling of individualizing their identities, Göle argues (Göle 154–55).

Identities of individuals and collectives are social constructs. Individual identities are partly based on collective ones (Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 22). This is the reason why identities are not formed in a monologue but in a dialogue—if not in a struggle-like process against what our "significant others" want to define us to be (Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 22). Within this struggle, when given a chance, the majority will define everyone who does not comply with their normative ideals of national belonging as "the other" (Tabboni 327). Moreover, for the individual, their identity is dependent on the recognition given by others (Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 25). Recognition secures an individual's identity, self-esteem, and self-respect (Honneth). In contrast, self-respect emerges from equal positioning regarding legal rights granted through recognition (Honneth 118–21).

Hence, we may observe how the negative discourses on the Islamic headscarf spread through political discourse can stabilize within the minds of the wider public certain images of "us" and "them." These dichotomies leave little space within these processes for the Muslim subject to construct identities that the non-Muslims would recognize. It is important to note that while the headscarf as a religious practice can be spiritually significant for those adhering to it, religion and its practices, in general, can function for immigrants during their integration process as a means of comfort and provide familiarity of structures (Heckmann 171–

72). This role of religion should be acknowledged as a supportive tool rather than an obstacle in the integration process, as it provides the immigrant safety and familiarity when acculturation to the host society has not yet been fully accomplished.

Drawing from the understanding of integration as a two-way process and focusing on its identificative dimension, I have explored Muslim women's identities concerning their social others. How Muslim women immigrants are perceived in the host society is crucial to promoting a balanced integration process for both sides. So far, political and societal discussions have focused on problematizing the headscarf worn by Muslim women and girls. Still, the problem is the misrecognition of Muslim women's religious identities altogether. The sociologist Naser Meer (63) provides a helpful conceptualization of the identity marker "Muslim" by seeing it as sociological instead of theological: "Compared to the purely theological variety, this sociological category might be preferred as a less exclusive and more valid way of operationalizing Muslim identity because it includes opportunities for self-definition. Equally, it can facilitate the description of oneself as 'Muslim' and take the multiple (overlapping or synthesized) and subjective elements into account independently or intertwined with objective behavioural congruence to the religious practices (…)."

The state and its institutions are responsible for facilitating integration in a direction where the immigrant will become a fully participating citizen. A lack of socio-cultural knowledge amongst legislators and officials working on immigration policies relating to Muslim women's heterogenous identities can result in a failed identificative integration and, consequently, in Muslim women's societal marginalization. For state representatives and other actors to successfully fulfil their part of the integration process, I regard them needing to acquire enough knowledge about the diversity of Muslim women's identities. However, when advocating for governing measures of Islam, the actors often disregard Muslim women's voices. It should be noted that this is problematic,

especially in instances when political decisions are made without including the voices of those whom the decisions affect, as has been the case so far in discussions about banning the headscarf or the face veil in public.

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Biography of Contributor

Linda Hyökki is a doctoral candidate at the Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul, Alliance of Civilizations Institute. Her thesis, which she will defend in the spring of 2023, focuses on Muslim converts' experiences of anti-Muslim racism in Finland. Linda worked from 2017-2019 at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA) as a research associate focusing on Islamophobia and Muslim minorities. She is currently a non-resident research associate with CIGA and contributes to the centre's work, including publications and conferences. She authored the country chapter on Finland for the European Islamophobia Report 2015, 2016, and 2017 and has published Op-Eds and academic articles in her field of expertise. She has also appeared on TV as a commentator on current European affairs relating to anti-Muslim hate crimes and discrimination. She is currently the coordinator of the anti-Muslim working group at the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism and consults as an expert researcher in diverse policy projects.

The Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA)
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