Feminism, Islam and higher education: towards new roles and family relationships for young Spanish-Moroccan Muslim women in Spain

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Feminism, Islam and higher education: towards new roles and family relationships for young Spanish-Moroccan Muslim women in Spain

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the lives and family relationships of young women of Moroccan descent in Catalonia, Spain. Based on ethnographic research and life stories, we have found that access to Higher Education has led these young women to a feminist interpretation of the *Qur'an*. This interpretation allows them to identify as Muslim women while refuting traditional gender roles. The young women surveyed argue that the bases of gender equity can be found in the *Qur'an*, but are hidden behind misinterpretations that put the role of women in a disadvantaged position with regard to men. Our study evidences that through this reformulation of Islam, in conjunction with a successful academic pathway, they have started to gain a position of authority and recognition within their families, leading to changes in their family roles and relationships.

Introduction

International research has shown how migration processes create resignifications in the ideological, political and social structures of Muslim communities. These resignifications can be observed in the roles of women transforming within the family context (Khan 2010; Hamzeh 2011; Oso and Ribas 2012; Utomo 2016; Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016).

In Spain, Moroccan Muslim women's participation in the labour market, their establishing of new personal networks outside kinship, and the relaxation of social control towards women are some factors that have increased their capacity to negotiate in the social and domestic sphere (Zontini 2010). Furthermore, a new generation of pioneering young women of Moroccan descent is currently emerging in Catalonia, they being the first in their families to enter higher education (henceforth HE)[1].

The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between HE and the strategies that have allowed these young women to transform traditional gender roles[2] and relationships within their families. This paper thus offers different insights on the experiences of young

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Moroccan Muslim women in HE, and how the perspective of Islamic Feminism influences their family and community contexts.

The context: young students of Moroccan descent in Catalonia

Spain and Morocco have a shared history dating from the Al Andalus period at the beginning of the eighth century to the creation of the Spanish protectorate in Morocco in 1913. Centuries of coexistence resulted in the exchange of a vast array of cultural elements, and the emergence of diverse political and economic conditions that favoured migratory processes from Morocco to Spain, Catalonia being one of the regions with the highest migratory flow in this respect (Martín-Corrales 2002).

According to data from the Statistical Institute of Catalonia, as of January 2019 there were 223,626 people of Moroccan nationality resident in the region. That is, 2.91% of the total population and 19.29% of foreign residents, making it the largest of the foreign groups of residents registered in Catalonia.[3] As for its characteristics, the Moroccan population is predominantly young, with a statistical average age of 30–39. Regarding schooling, figures published by the Catalan Department of Education (2019) show that there are higher numbers of Moroccan men at pre-university levels of education (Vocational Training), while there is a greater presence of Moroccan women in *bachillerato* (baccalaureate, the equivalent of a post-secondary education that grants access to university) and HE (Table 1).

These data reveal that more Moroccan women continue in the education system than men, while also highlighting the scarce presence of young Moroccan men in HE.

Intersectional-gender and *'within/outside'* negotiations: family and higher education

Current research has focused on an intersectional perspective to explain the diversity of women's experiences and locationality 'within the multiple interlocking systems of subordination in which they live' (La Barbera 2012, 22). Although such studies usually explore the conditions of gender, class and ethnicity to analyse intersections of oppression, new alternative categories – such as that of religion – are emerging in the debate on Muslim women in the European context (Ipgrave 2016; Welply 2018). Intersectionality is a useful approach for criticizing the idea of 'Muslim women' as a universal concept and places the emphasis on locatedness,[4] highlighting the different ways in which gender, ethnicity, class and religion interrelate (Al-deen 2019). Thus, we understand intersectionality as a theoretical, methodological and political

Table 1. Moroccan students in post-compulsory education and higher education. Catalonia. 2018–2019.

	Total	Male	Male %	Female	Female %
Vocational training	3748	1974	52.6	1774	47.3
Bachillerato	1260	471	37.3	789	62.6
Higher education	293	106	36.2	187	63.8

Note: Elaborated from data of the Department of Education of Catalonia and the Inter- university Council of Catalonia (June 2019).

approach to analyse and contest hegemonic logics and systems of oppression, and how these two intertwine and mutually reinforce each other with women's agencies and subjectivities. Intersectionality does not seek the analysis of separate elements – such as gender and race – but adopts a nodal approach where these elements converge – considering how gender is racialized, for example (May 2015). Although intersectionality focuses on the conditions of oppression, we believe it may also be useful in highlighting other elements related to the construction of gender, such as family and education.

Various studies have shown the importance of analysing the link between intersectionality and the academic pathways of women in a diaspora context (Rosenblum, Zhou, and Gentemann 2009; Khambhaita and Bhopal 2015; Al-deen 2019), their findings suggesting that families play a significant role in constructing these pathways. These studies have shown that educational achievement is usually based on negotiations between parents and daughters, and that immigrant parents perceive schooling as an indicator of social prestige that has a positive impact on their daughters' academic pathways (Malik and Courtney 2011; Khosrojerdi 2015; Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016). There is also evidence that working-class Muslim parents tend to invest in their daughters' education, which results in their greater presence at the compulsory and post-compulsory levels – baccalaureate and Advanced Vocational Training – that grant access to HE (Al-deen 2019).

However, research also highlights the 'contradictory messages' that these young women receive from their parents in relation to expectations of academic success and the community's expectations of what it is to be a 'woman of the group' (Suárez-Orozco and Qin 2006; Khan 2010; Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016). Immigrant parents value the preservation of ethno-cultural boundaries as a way of resisting cultural assimilation (Ijaz and Abbas 2010; Hamzeh 2011). In this context, women have the role of maintaining family honour by reproducing cultural values and gender roles (Suárez-Orozco and Qin 2006; Khan 2010). In order to ensure 'cultural continuity' (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2014), parents may exercise strict control and vigilance over their daughters (Karen, Fleischmann, and Snežana 2012). This situation gives young women the feeling that they are 'straddling' (Carter 2006) two different cultural and ethnic groups.

Previous findings have highlighted the efforts young women make and negotiations they enter into to ensure their academic pathways by searching for a balance between the expectations of their families and ethnic group and those of mainstream society (Khosrojerdi 2015; Al-deen 2019). Thus, when analysing the academic pathways of Muslim women it is necessary to explore their location with regard to the 'within/outside' concept (La Barbera 2012), which means identifying the particular social-cultural conditions where women experience multiple systems of oppression. The aforementioned concept applies to women who 'move across different nation-states and communities and belong to several groups at the same time' (La Barbera 2012, 24). Women's subjectivity and conditions are understood through their multiple locations and the negotiations they have to enter into 'within' and 'outside' their ethnic groups. However, it is important not to promote stereotypes of 'cultures of oppression', but rather analyse the intersecting elements on these women's academic pathways.

Female Muslim university students have been found to constantly negotiate their social mobility within their family context while confronting certain expectations related

to 'traditional' gender roles (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016; Al-deen 2019), a course of action that may lead to a change in their family roles and relationships. These findings suggest that through their role as students they obtain more flexible and dynamic identities within the framework of their own ethnic group. An example of this phenomenon is the generational shift by second-generation Muslims with regard to the 'Islam of their fathers and mothers' (Karen, Fleischmann, and Snežana 2012). Prior research has shown the intrinsic link between religion and ethnic identity in second-generation Muslims that results from a 're-*islamisation*' process (Roy 2015) representing the interests and efforts of young European Muslims to assert their identities in a non-Muslim context. Second-generation Muslims attempt to establish a connection with their religion and ethnic background through alternative practices of Islamic religiosity (Mendoza 2018). From this statement we like to acknowledge the existence of diverse Muslim communities influenced by religious polarization (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014), that cause Islamic actors to promote the emergence of 'new and diversify communities of faith at the intersection of gender, religious, cultural, and ethnic factors' (Roy 2015, 248).

The 'within/outside' condition of these young women may lead them to develop critical thinking about mainstream society and their own ethnic groups (La Barbera 2010). In this sense, the concept of *borderland* (Anzaldúa 1999) is useful in giving new meanings to the intersections of women oppression in a diaspora context. The *borderland* refers to a locationality that highlights the social conditions and subjectivities of women (La Barbera 2012). According to Anzaldúa, the *borderland* is presented 'whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrink with intimacy' (1999, 19). Rather than being a space for containment and exclusion, the *borderland* express a potential for emancipation and social change. This statement leads us to rethink female identity from an intersectional perspective, since different elements empower or oppress women differently. Previous research has highlighted how highly-educated Muslim women actively challenge stereotypes and develop a more inclusive identity in order to feel legitimized in the face of discriminatory and oppressive social structures (Ahmad 2007; Khosrojerdi 2015) that hinder their academic and professional expectations.[5] Thus, in this research we examine how young Muslim women are changing traditional gender roles within their families through the construction of alternative identities as highly-educated European Muslim women of Moroccan descent.

Methodology

The results presented here comprise some of the findings in a doctoral research project on the successful academic pathways[6] of young Muslim women of Moroccan descent enrolled at various universities in Catalonia, Spain. Our methodology is based on a double-reflexive ethnography (Dietz 2012), which consists in the observation and detailed description of the phenomenon, taking into account the subjects' interpretations and comparing their discourses with what is observed in the practice.

The fieldwork was carried out on three student groups over a period of fifteen months: the Collective of Arab Students, the Association of Moroccan Students of Barcelona, and the Network of Active Youth. All of these groups comprised students (men and women)
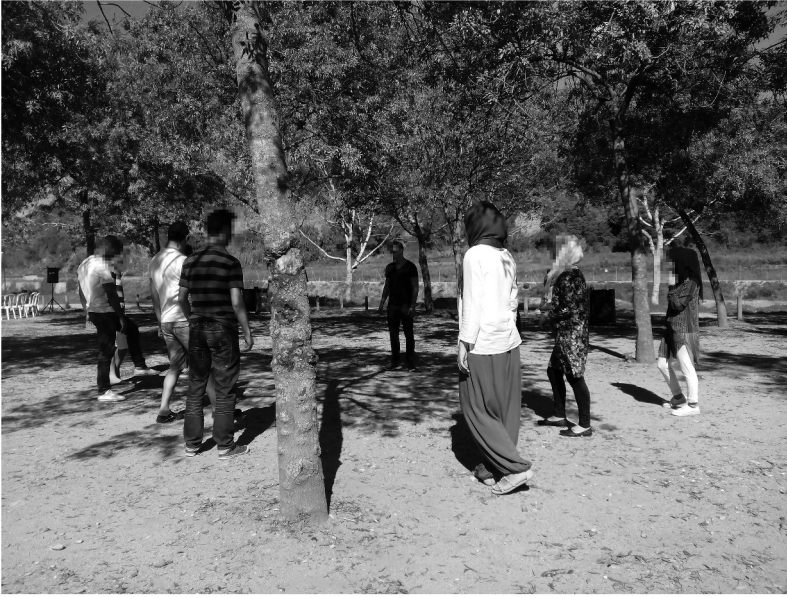
Figure 1. Students playing football at a barbecue in the city of Sabadell on May Day.

enrolled at various universities in Barcelona, most of them being Muslims of Moroccan descent. Although they meet once a week for formal activities organized by the associations (held on the university premises), many of them also get together every day to have lunch, pray or just spend time together. Members of the associations communicate mainly in Spanish and Catalan, although they sometimes include phrases in Dariya[7] in their conversations.

Participant observation was carried out by the head researcher one to three times a week inside and outside the university and during different kinds of academic and social activities (Figure 1).

The associations and the young women were approached in a direct and honest way, explaining the aims of the research and asking for their permission and opinions on the topic. Being a young foreign Latin woman allowed the head researcher to develop a rapport with the members of the association. Participate in all the associations' events as well as sharing personal information with the participants was important to build trust. Thus, participant observation was essential in establishing close ties with the young women, which was in turn very helpful when interviewing them.

The biographical interpretative method (Breckner 2007) was also employed to understand the factors that had contributed to the young women's academic success and comprehend their individual experiences through their own narratives. Both ethnography and the biographical interpretative method were considered helpful in identifying and analysing the multiple elements that had intersected and shaped their experiences. This intersectional perspective revealed the complexity of their identities, the different roles they perform, and the different forms of subordination and oppression they experience in their particular locatedness.

Table 2. Profiles of the students of the research.

Name	Age	Age of arrival to Spain	Nationality	Degree
Amira	20 years	3 years	Spanish	Psychology
Marna	20 years	Born in Spain	Spanish	Translation and Interpreting
Balqís	21 years	Born in Spain	Spanish	Anthropology
Lina	23 years	9 years	Moroccan	Industrial Relations
Esperanza	26 years	3 years	Spanish	Accounting and Finances
Mersealut	20 years	3 years	Moroccan	Political Science
Sabrine	21 years	Born in Spain	Spanish	Political Science
Fer	20 years	8 years	Moroccan	Arabic and Hebrew Studies
Manar	23 years	10 years	Spanish	Master in Speech Therapy
Fátima	23 years	4 years	Moroccan	Mathematics
Sara	21 years	1 years	Spanish	Nursing
Ikram	23 years	2 years	Spanish	Nursing
Ihssane	23 years	3 years	Spanish	Business Management
Maha	23 years	3 years	Moroccan	Audio-visual Media
Nieama	24 years	3 years	Spanish	Food Science and Technology
Shaima	24 years	Born in Spain	Spanish	Business Management
Amal	24 years	8 years	Spanish	Pedagogy

Note: elaborated by the authors.

A total of seventeen young women were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in two phases. The first focused on exploring the personal, family and social dimensions of their lives, and the second their academic pathways and how these related to the aforementioned dimensions. The interviews were carried out in different places proposed by the participants themselves and conducted in Spanish. All of the participants were university students of Moroccan descent that the head researcher met through the associations. They comprise part of the so-called second generation (born in Spain), and generation 1.5 (having arrived in Spain before the age of twelve).[8] The profiles of the research participants are presented in the Table 2 below.

The parents of the participants belong to the first generation of Moroccan immigrants, who arrived in Spain between 1980 and 2000. In all cases, the fathers were the first ones to migrate before initiating the process of family reunification. With the exception of Fer and Balquís, all of the parents are from rural areas of Morocco and have a low level of education (most of the mothers have no schooling, and none of the fathers studied beyond secondary school). Some of the fathers have paid jobs, while others receive unemployment benefit. In just four of the cases, the mothers are the main breadwinners in the family.

The young women in this research are the first in their families to attend university, and have high academic and work expectations. In terms of religious practices, of the seventeen students interviewed, ten wear the *hijab*[9] and the rest were considering using it soon at the time of the interview. Regarding national and ethnic identification, these students define themselves as Moroccan Spanish women. It is important to note that we received the permission of the young women to use the information they provided us with for this research, and that their names have been modified in order to protect their anonymity.

Intra-family negotiations and the construction of higher education as a source of social mobility

The family model described by our participants exposes some contradictions with regard to expectations of academic and social success associated with the ideal of a 'good

Moroccan Muslim woman' (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016). The young women reported that although their parents do encourage them to continue studying and achieve academic success, they also expect them to conform to certain traditional gender roles related to preserving cultural elements and family honour, and particularly the values of decency and morality, as also suggested by Suárez-Orozco and Quin (2006) and Khan (2010). Maha had the following to say in this regard:

> I spent all day at the university and my father didn't understand why I had to stay so long away from home. At some point we had a big argument and I said to him, 'I don't want to continue studying if I have to argue with you like this'.

The last sentence reveals the reasons why Maha's father constantly argues with her: HE entails certain practices that may contradict traditional roles and values related to gender and honour, such as spending a lot of time away from the home. However, these expectations do not apply to Maha's brothers, as she explained:

> [When they go out] my brothers are not asked the same questions as me: 'Who are you going with? Where are you going?' So I ask my father: 'Why do you let them go out and not me?' and he replies 'Because you are a girl'.

According to Archer (2002), social mobility restrictions are often based on discourses of protection and 'caring for women'. The reasons given for these restrictions are 'dangers' within the mainstream society, and the concern that young women might adopt values or attitudes considered *haram*[10] within the Moroccan Muslim community, as Ikram explained:

> In Morocco, people think that the girl who lives abroad is an 'easy girl'. A girl that goes out with anyone, that smokes, that drinks and goes to parties . . . all the things considered bad. A girl who does what a foreigner does.

However, our participants' narratives suggest that this 'concern for women' is also related to honour and control over sexuality, which explains why they require more 'protection' than their brothers, as Maha and Ikram explained:

> My father protects me a lot. I'm a girl so he doesn't want anything to happen to me. Like a boy getting close to me and hurting me. That's what he's afraid of.

> It's their fear [the parents']. They think, 'What if she goes to a party and drinks? What if she gets a boyfriend and gets pregnant?'

Archer (2002) evidenced how the 'protection of femininity' is a central feature of Muslim masculinity, the argument being used to justify control and vigilance over women, and reinforcing men's position of privilege over women. In this scenario, young women perceive that the control their parents and older siblings exercise over them may limit their possibilities for social mobility and academic success. In the case of Balqís, her older brother did not like her to go out due to the sexual harassment she might receive from men on the street:

> He was very controlling with me [talking about her older brother]. He said: 'Don´t dress like that', 'Don't go out', 'Who are you going out with?' (. . .) But I'm not the problem; they are the problem [talking about men who might harass her]. I don't consider that protection, I consider it control.

All of the study participants shared experiences related to 'protection' in their families, particularly by fathers and older brothers. However, some of them did not consider these attitudes to be for their protection, but rather to exercise control, and criticized the fact that such attitudes limit their opportunities for social mobility, which is reflected in how they affect their educational opportunities. This is the case of Ikram, whose family had financial problems and could not pay for all of her studies, so she decided to get a part-time job as a waitress in Barcelona[11]:

> My parents never even considered the possibility of me working in Barcelona because it meant that I needed to live there on weekends. I tried to convince them that I could rent a room in the city, but they were very much closed to that idea. They said that if that was the only option [working in another city to pay for university], then I should 'take it slow' [which meant getting her university degree in twice the time].

In Maha's case, the factor that made her father more flexible with her was knowing other Moroccan Muslim parents with daughters at university. Ijaz and Abbas (2010) noted how Muslim parents are more likely to be 'flexible' with their daughters' activities as long as these are related to study or work. For Maha, spending a lot of time away from home was only justified for academic reasons; when it was for personal reasons – such as going out with friends – her father exercised more control over her, as she said:

He said 'Stop, you're going out too much. You should be at home helping your mother'.

The expectations that our participants reported feeling from their families – such as to fulfil certain gender roles related to preserving cultural elements and family honour, and the academic expectations of having a professional degree – seem to generate contradictions and conflicts that limit their own personal expectations of social mobility, putting them in situations where they feel they are being subjected to unfair treatment. These examples demonstrate how the subjectivities and agencies of these young women intersect with and mutually reinforce particular forms of oppression (May 2015). This is reflected in situations of vigilance and control on the part of their families as a reaction to the 'dangers' posed by the mainstream society in which they live and men outside their kinship circle.

In order to avoid this vigilance and control over them, these young women develop strategies that allow them more independence on the one hand, and prevent confrontations with their parents on the other, as Mersealut explained:

> As for me, I'm quite an 'activist'. But my parents have no idea because they wouldn't understand. There are a lot of things I don't mention at home because it would create conflict, so it's better not to talk about them.

Fear of hurting or annoying their parents prevents these young women from being open with them. In this sense, they consider concealing certain information to be a way of avoiding conflict that might lead to losing opportunities for independence and mobility in public spaces, as highlighted by Khan (2010). Some participants also reported disagreements with their parents regarding the main purpose of their HE, as in Fer's case:

> My father says 'When you finish studying, you get married'. He thinks 'My daughter is worth more because she has studied'. And I say to him 'Dad, if I'm studying like crazy it's not so that a husband comes and tells me 'Make me dinner'.

In this scenario, for some parents HE seems to be an asset to ensure 'better' marriage proposals for their daughters, that is, to marry into a family with a higher socioeconomic status, as also suggested by Shavarini (2005). Our participants' narratives suggest that families, and especially parents, award great value to their daughters' education, while at the same time expecting them to preserve traditional roles and establish marriage, motherhood and homemaking as a primary life project, as Balqís revealed here:

> My mother says 'It's okay that you study' But when I say to her 'I also want a Master's degree and a Ph.D', she responds 'No, you stay at home and help me'. And my father looks at her with disapproval and says 'Such a bad mindset!' My father has always been very proud of me [for getting into university]'.

An analysis of the study participants' narratives reveals that in families with 'traditional' roles – i.e. where mothers are in charge of the household while fathers work outside the home – the mothers expect their daughters to conform to traditional roles, while fathers are more willing to support their academic expectations in the face of family pressure, as in Balqís' case. However, a different situation is observed when the mothers are the main breadwinners for the family and the fathers are absent or unemployed. In such cases, the young women reported receiving a different discourse from their mothers, as Marna expressed here:

> My mother tells me not to think about boys or marriage. She says 'Think you have to be worth it for yourself, not depending on anyone else'.

The participants in this particular family situation stated that their mothers encourage them to study so they can work and become economically independent from men, as Fer mentioned:

> My mother tells me 'when you finish studying, you work. Buy yourself a house and a car. And when a man wants to be with you, he must know that there are limits; that what you have is because you earned it by yourself".

Given the above perspectives, we observe that HE is constructed as a source of social mobility within our participants' family context. Their parents value HE, although they may have different perspectives of this value depending on the characteristic of each family context. For example, some parents may consider HE as a way of ensuring 'good' marriage proposals for their daughters, which will result in a better socioeconomic status when married. Other parents see HE as an opportunity for their daughters to support themselves and become economically independent, which may entail emancipating themselves from men's authority – and particularly that of their future husbands.

Islamic feminism: moving 'within/outside'

In our previous analysis, we stated that some of the restrictions and norms placed on these young women are linked to the ideas of 'protection' from the 'dangers' of mainstream society and the preservation of cultural elements and honour. For our participants, these kinds of practices are embedded in what they refer to as 'Moroccan culture', which we interpret as a series of norms and values that characterize their family and community contexts. They consider some of their families' attitudes to be too strict or

even oppressive for women, and they specify that this is related to social and cultural representations of what a 'Moroccan woman' should be. Ikram put it as follows:

> The biggest concern for Moroccans is that a girl has a boyfriend, while boys are allowed to 'fool around'. But this is not religion, OK? It's culture. Religion says that men and women are equal but [Moroccan] culture favours men. So women must be controlled and taken care of.

Our participants strongly expressed the idea that norms and restrictions imposed on women have nothing to do with religion, and are in fact 'erroneously' justified in interpretations of the Qur'an, as Fer noted:

> It's unfair to think that a woman should stay at home when nowhere in the *Qur'an* does it say that a woman can't work, can't be independent. I've never seen it written and that comforts me. It must be a misinterpretation or culture.

In line with this, authors such as Mernissi (1995) and Wadud (1999) have posited the existence of misinterpretations of the *Qur'an* by religious leaders, which encourage gender inequality as well as the reproduction of stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. According to the participants in our study, these interpretations are often reproduced within the families, especially when it comes to gender roles. Lina recounts an experience she had with her father in relation to this:

> One day he recited an *ayah*[12] of the *Qur'an* and said to me that men are stronger than women, but I let him know that he was wrong. Because he goes to the mosque and believes everything the *imam*[13] says without question.

The participants' narratives suggest a distancing from the 'Islam of the fathers and mothers' (Karen, Fleischmann, and Snežana 2012), identifying their stance as a common practice among second-generation young adults who seek a religious identity more suited to the context in which they live. These young women criticize the fact that the Islamic authorities seldom take into account the social and historical context when interpreting sacred texts, and that this particularly affects the status of women (Mendoza 2018). They state that although Islam is a fair religion to women, this has been concealed by misinterpretations of the *Qur'an*, as Ihssane explained here:

> Women have a very important role in Islam, although many people don't believe it. This is because culture influences a lot, but that is a mistake. Muslim women have the right to vote, to make their own choices and to participate in all aspects of society.

Such discourses are related to Islamic feminism, which states that women's rights have been legitimized by the *Qur'an* since the beginning of Islam, when women actively participated in social, political and academic spaces (Wadud 1999). According to authors such as Badran (2008), Islamic feminism establishes the need to rediscover the elements within the *Qur'an* that vindicate justice and gender equality. Islamic feminism is based on three elements: a) empowering Muslim women through education; b) revitalizing historical female figures who played a part in shaping Islam; c) the use of a *Qur'anic* hermeneutic with a gender perspective (Wadud 1999). Islamic Feminism has received notable support in Spain since the First International Congress of Islamic Feminism held in Barcelona in 2005. This congress promoted a series of important works and reflections on the interpretation of sacred texts, the relationship between feminism and Islam and the roles of Muslim women in diaspora

contexts, and introduced the thinking of feminist scholars such as Asma Barlas, Margot Badran, Valentine Moghadam and Ndeye Andújar.

The results of our research show that all of the study participants have adopted a discourse related to Islamic feminism to a greater or lesser extent and that they learn about Islamic feminism within the university context. According to their narratives, they had a first introduction to various feminist perspectives in their academic training before later beginning to explore and take an interest in this subject on their own. They have promoted lectures about Islamic Feminism within the associations, which has led to other young women learning about the subject (Figure 2).

The participants in our study learned about Islamic feminism within the context of the university, either through their own research or through female Muslim classmates, as in Lina's case:

> My best friend influenced me a lot because I didn't pay any attention to the inequality between Muslim men and women. I used to think 'It's always been like this'. There were things that I didn't notice, but my best friend did. That made me 'open my eyes', especially after I went to the conference on Islamic feminism.

In one of these lectures, one of the participants explained that Islamic feminism is important because it allows her to maintain her religious beliefs, while at the same time giving her freedom and the chance to vindicate her rights as woman, previously denied them due to misinterpretations of the *Qur'an* (fragment taken from the field diary).

The participants in our study claim that Islam has never limited a woman's right to study, and that the *Qur'an* demands that all Muslims seek knowledge and learning. This statement can also be related to Islamic feminism, which views education as being central to Islam. With regard to this, Shaima expressed the following:
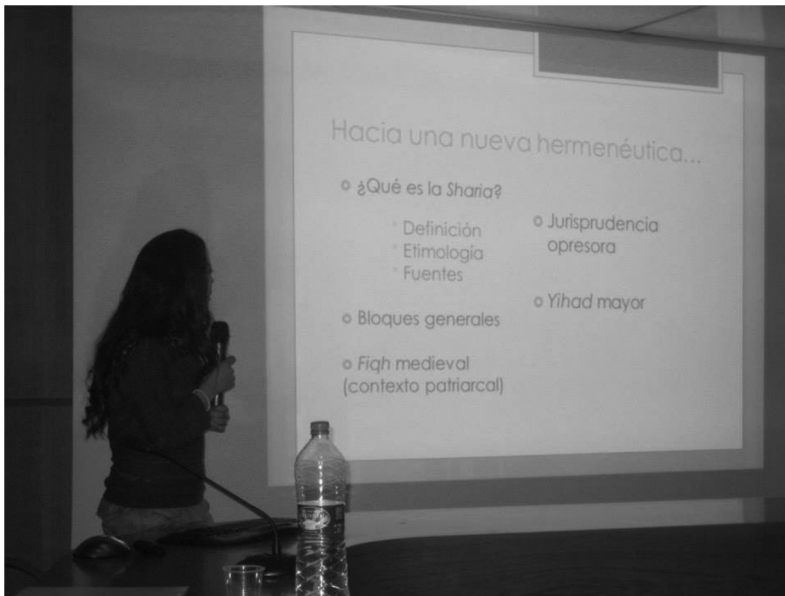

Figure 2. One of the participants during a lecture on Islamic feminism_The title of the slide reads Towards a new hermeneutics.

> The first university was founded by a woman, Fatima al-Fihri, in Fez. So I think people should see that Muslim women have actually never been segregated from school. In fact, Islam was the first religion that gave women rights.

The legitimization of women's rights through Islam holds an important place in the narratives of these young women. In this regard, they believe it is their duty to learn about their religion as 'good Muslim women'. This entails taking a hermeneutic approach to reading the *Qur'an*, so as to avoid misinterpretations, as Manar noted: 'Islam tells you to study. Some *Ayahs* say "Seek out knowledge" Why? To avoid misinterpretations.'

These misinterpretations the participants refer to are mainly related to norms that promote gender inequality towards women. We have discovered that it is within the university context that these young women obtain greater access to a variety of resources, such as discussion groups, lectures and books. Through these, they obtain knowledge that helps them to reflect on situations of social injustice, the role of the Islamic authorities, the structure of Muslim communities, and the expectations on them as Muslim women. Thus, HE has offered these students the opportunity to explore their interests on particular subjects, such as the role of women in Islam (Figure 3).

The participants in our study acknowledge that participation in HE gives them access to greater knowledge and the confidence to express what they think in front of their families and the Moroccan Muslim community. This was also highlighted by Malik and Courtney (2011), who stated that HE enhances the influence women have in their social context. The confidence and knowledge these young women have gained help them argue against situations they believe may interfere with the assertion of their rights as Muslim women. This also impacts on the meanings they give to religious symbols, such as the *hijab*. They criticize the fact that some families impose the use of the *hijab* to preserve traditions and ethnic identity, rather than focusing on its religious purpose, as Lina explained: 'Some families confuse religion with culture. They don't say, "You should wear the veil because Islam says so". Instead, they say, "Wear the veil because your cousin
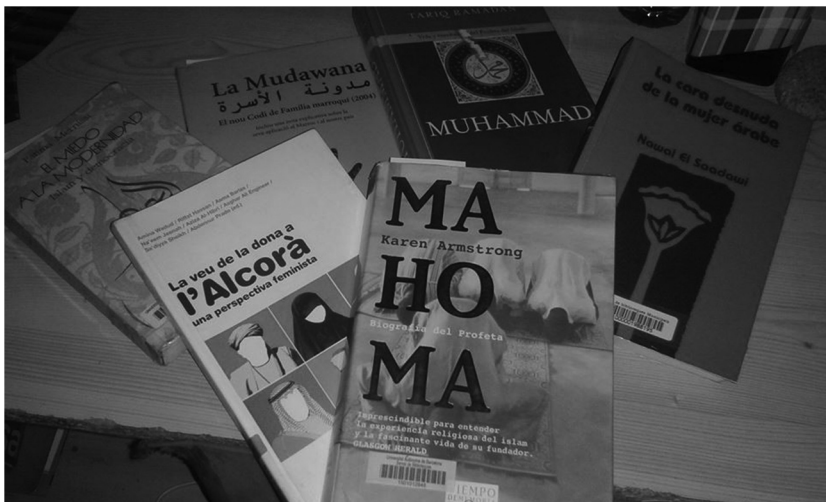

Figure 3. Photo posted on the Facebook wall of one of the participants.

has'". These young women believe the use of the veil cannot be coerced, but rather is a personal decision and a religious commitment with oneself to follow the rules of Islam. The participants that wear the *hijab* expressed that their families never forced them to do it and respected their decision, as in Sara's case:

> I said to myself 'If I really belong to this religion, I'm going to do things right'. So I decided to wear the veil and my mother asked me 'Are you sure? Do you understand the consequences?

The study participants' decision to wear the *hijab* seems to have been based on two main statements: firstly, as an act of faith, and secondly, as a socio-political statement to their families, the Moroccan Muslim community and the non-Muslim society, as exemplified by Balqís' words:

> Wearing the veil is an act of faith. But for me it's also part of my feminist agenda. It's like saying: 'Submissive and ignorant Muslim women? Excuse me, but we are the opposite of that'. So it's a way of reformulating symbols.

Balqís' narration evidences the way in which these young women relate piety, feminism, HE and the role of Muslim women, which is connected to being 'within/outside' (La Barbera 2012). For her, being a successful college student in a Western non-Muslim country, while enacting her religion through the use of the *hijab*, is a way of challenging the idea that Muslim women can only fulfil traditional gender roles. This statement confronts both the prevailing representation of womanhood within these women's families and communities and the stereotypes and prejudices in Spanish society with regard to Moroccan Muslim women. In Lina's words:

> When I hear them [other members of her family] say, 'Women belong in their homes', I reply, 'No, I'm going to show you I can do other things'.

Thus, we observe how the construction of these women's subjectivities is related to diasporic conditions and to the subordination processes they experience in two different sociocultural spaces – Moroccan and Spanish – which origins particular locatedness and negotiations 'within' and 'outside' their ethnic groups.

Towards new roles and intrafamily dynamics: the emancipatory potential of the *borderland*

Due to their participation in HE and appropriation of Islamic feminism, these young women began to reflect on *Qur'anic* hermeneutics and the reproduction of norms that place women in a subordinate role with regard to men, particularly within their family context. They also started to vindicate historical female figures in Islam, such as Jadiya and Aisha,[14] noting the role that women had played in shaping Islam, as expressed by Balqís in a conversation at the university bar: 'Aisha is a role model for me. She was a strong woman who made an important political and spiritual contribution to the consolidation of Islam'. These young women's reinterpretation of religion from the perspective of Islamic feminism promotes changes in their perceptions of how a 'good Muslim women should be' by challenging the traditional expectations of women as being docile and submissive towards a more assertive and critical attitude. In line with this,

Lina stated that she had always complied with this traditional model until she started to learn about Islamic feminism:

> One day, my father had an argument with my mother and he raised his voice to her, and I say to him, 'No. Why do you do this? She hasn't raised her voice to you'. And he was surprised and told me, 'You've always been so quiet and now you do this'.

According to the young women, their parents and older siblings are the ones who most resented these changes in attitude. Having lived most of their lives in a 'traditional Moroccan context', it was hard for them to think of other ways of being a 'Moroccan Muslim woman', as Amira explained:

> My way of thinking is completely opposite to that of my parents. They are very 'Moroccan', very traditional. I think it's because they have had a different life and a different education but I've grown up in another place, seen other things, met other people. And I can't go and try and change everything they believe, so I try to adapt to them while trying to continue being myself.

Through ethnography and life stories, we are able to identify how these young women explain who they are in utterances like 'I feel like I'm from one place or another', 'where I come from', 'where I grew up'. They believe their identities are strongly linked to these two geographical and cultural spaces – Morocco and Spain – and to the diverse systems of values and cultural practices within them. The young women define this as having a 'dual identity',[15] as exemplified by Amira here:

> They [the members of the students' associations] have a dual identity. If they take the Spanish side, they can understand their way of thinking, of seeing things. And if they take the Moroccan side, they can also understand them. They have that ability.

However, this definition only explains who these young women are in some aspects of their lives; it does not define them as a whole. They are aware that there are various other aspects of their subjectivities besides being Moroccan or Spaniard.

For the participants in our study, being 'between cultures' is a space for opportunity, because it allows them to 'navigate between them' and participate in various cultural practices. In this sense, their academic pathways have served as an important tool in challenging stereotypes and essentialist roles about 'Moroccan women', because they have earned them greater recognition in their intra-family context, as in Fer's experience:

> My father says 'Ok, my daughter is turning out fine. She's studying, she's doing something important'. And actually, he now has more communication with me than with my brothers.

Fer explained that as she progressed along her academic pathway while maintaining the religious and cultural values of her community of origin, her parents began to rely on her more by asking her to take care of administrative chores and giving her a role of authority within the family, even above that of her older brother:

> One day, I found my mother arguing with my older brother and she said to me, 'Say something to him. Tell him to get up and find a job. Tell him to get up and do something. Let's see if he listens to you'.

From these data we interpret that there have been some changes in the intra-family roles of these young women. As they became more successful in their academic pathways, they

started to notice that their parents made them 'role models' for the rest of their siblings, and that their opinions were more valued. According to our participants, their 'role model' status had an important impact on the academic pathways of their younger sisters and younger girls in the Moroccan community, because they constantly offered them guidance about various aspects related to entry to HE. Esperanza stated the following in this regard:

> I used to tell my sister and her girlfriends 'You keep studying'. And many of them saw me as a role model and told me 'It's great that you keep studying. I want to do that too, I want to continue'. And they ask me for advice.

During the fieldwork, we also often observed our participants bringing their younger sisters to university events, both academic and social, and that sometimes their sisters also brought their friends along. By attending these events, the younger girls established contact with university students and made new friendships. We believe that these relationships help to increase these younger girls' social capital and encourage them to continue their academic pathway towards university. In line with this, the participants in our study stated that the decisions they have made regarding their academic pathways have also encouraged other relatives and members of the Moroccan community to continue with their education, as Fatima noted:

> I live on the outskirts of the city, where there are many Moroccan people. So when they hear that I go to university they see me as a 'role model' and say to their children: 'Look at Fatima, where she is. You should do what she does and study'.

In this respect, authors such as Malik and Courtney (2011) have highlighted how the process of women's empowerment influences other women close to them. For the young women in this research, their participation in HE and the appropriation of Islamic feminism may also have influenced their mothers. In the quote below, Lina explained how she shares what she has learned about Islamic feminism with her mother so that she can argue when she is in a situation of inequality, particularly with regard to men:

> My mother is 'taking notes' about what I say regarding the misinterpretations of the *Qur'an*. So now when my father says something to her [about men being superior to women], she immediately says something back to him. I'm giving her 'small tools' so that she can defend herself.

Although some participants claim that their mothers have started to appropriate the Islamic feminism discourse through them, they all agree that their mothers still expect them to comply with social expectations regarding marriage and motherhood after university as the primary roles in their lives.

The experiences of these young women reveal how a 'marginalized locationality' (La Barbera 2012) does not necessarily entail a place of privation and oppression, but rather an opportunity for resistance and change. In this sense, the emancipatory potential of the *borderland* – historical, geographical and cultural – guides them towards a more inclusive identity and to reflect on situations where they have felt subordinated and oppressed by expectations of traditional gender roles. From this perspective, the participants in our study have begun to challenge and change cultural practices they believe are oppressive and unequal to women, starting with their most immediate social context, that of the family.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed those elements that encourage the transformation of gender roles and family relationships by young Muslim women of Moroccan descent in Catalonia, Spain. Our study confirms that these young women feel constantly pressured by their families to maintain their cultural and religious identity. They are expected to be 'keepers of the culture', in line with Suárez-Orozco and Qin (2006), so parents tend to put more pressure on them than on their brothers. However, these young women's academic achievements seem to promote a 'flexibilization' of parental control, which favours them continuing their academic pathway. In all of the cases presented here, we observe that at least one parental figure supports their daughters' academic expectations in the face of traditional expectations that may affect their academic pathways. In respect of this, the study highlights the role of mothers who are the main breadwinners in the family. According to the participants, these mothers constantly exhort them to seek personal growth and economic independence before getting married and having children. In contrast, those participants whose mothers take care of the household state that their mothers expect them to fulfil the traditional gender roles, while their fathers seem more supportive of their academic and professional goals, an attitude that increases as they successfully progress in their studies.

In order to cope with family expectations, these young women have developed strategies that allow them to negotiate mobility in public spaces – such as university – which favours their academic pathways without them being accused of 'betraying their culture', as also suggested by Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies (2016). Thus, the study shows how their participation in HE has encouraged their appropriation of Islamic feminism, which allows them to identify themselves as Muslim women while refuting traditional gender roles that promote inequality for women, especially within their family context. The study participants use historical female figures in Islam, such as Fatima al-Fihri and Aisha, to vindicate the importance of education for and social participation by Muslim women. In this sense, the study demonstrates the importance these young women attach to reinterpreting the *Qur'an* by taking into account the social context in which they live and thereby avoiding patriarchal interpretations that put Muslim women in situations of inequality with regard to men.

The data analysed suggest that these women live in a *borderland* location (Anzaldúa 1999), between what they identify as 'Moroccan Muslim culture' and 'Spanish culture'. The *borderland* should not be understood as an oversimplification or a binary construction of their identities – nor of these geographical and cultural spaces – but as a locationality that explains the social conditions of women with alternative identities 'in transit' and a constant state of 'belonging and not- belonging' or being 'within/outside' (Elenes 1997; La Barbera 2012).

In the case of our participants, the *borderland* is interpreted as a space for resistance and negotiation that allows them to redefine and assert their identities in front of their families, the Moroccan community and the mainstream society. Their location of *borderland* helps them to ponder about when, how and under what conditions they resist situations of oppression, and lead them to formulate alternative and complex identities according to the context in which they live. However, the *borderland* concept does not itself grant them legitimacy. This is why these young women use religion as a tool to

vindicate their rights to study, work and have social mobility when dealing with their families. They reinterpret the *Ayahs*, arguing that the roots of gender equality can be found in the *Qur'an*. In order to acquire knowledge to refute what they call 'misinterpretations', these women have taken the initiative to learn about Islam themselves, which encourages the development of a more inclusive and flexible religious identity, allowing them to identify as young Muslim European women.

Our interpretation of the above is that these women do not deny their Muslim identity, but rather reformulate it. This, along with the fact that they have successfully continued their academic pathways, has earned them greater recognition and authority within their family context. In respect of this, we find a change in intra-family gender roles as the opinions of these young women begin to be awarded more value, even above those of their older brothers, leading them to acquire the status of 'role models' from their parents and siblings. A further notable finding from our analysis is how the feminist discourse adopted by these students has begun to also influence their mothers.

In this research, we have been able to observe how this generation of young Muslim women has paved the way for a transformation in gender roles and intra-family relationships, influencing the Moroccan Muslim community in which they live.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term 'women of Moroccan descent' is used to refer to both women born in Morocco and those born in Spain with Moroccan parents.
2. In the context of this paper, we understand gender roles as groups of interrelated cultural and social beliefs regarding men's and women's attributes and behaviours, and beliefs about which qualities are 'masculine' and which are 'feminine' (Redlick 2019). In Moroccan culture, gender roles are deeply rooted in religious practices that tend to legitimize hierarchical relationships between men and women (Scheible and Fleischmann 2013).
3. It is important to mention that Spanish legislation forbids identifying nationals according to their ethnic origin, so we cannot know the exact number of Spanish citizens with Moroccan ancestry.
4. According to La Barbera, 'politics of location aims at using all the different socio-cultural conditions of each specific context as conceptual resources to interpret and represent the mechanisms of social interaction and subordination' (2012, 23).
5. However, as Khurshid and Saba (2017) stress in their research, women's empowerment through HE should not be considered a linear-homogeneous process. In order to know how education can transform the lives of women, it is necessary to take into account their contexts and their multiple forms of agency.
6. We understand 'successful academic pathways' as those which continue into higher education.
7. A variety of Arabic spoken in Morocco.
8. We have decided to use the concepts of second-generation and generation 1.5 for three reasons. Firstly, because both concepts are used repeatedly in the academic literature in the European context, and particularly in the Spanish context (see Aparicio 2007; Crul and Heering 2008; Dalouh and Soriano 2017). The second reason is methodological, since using these categories allows us to characterize our participants in terms of both the age at which they arrive in Spain with their families and their nationality, and to contextualize their academic experiences. And finally, the third reason is because second-generation is an inductive category within our research; that is, our participants use the term in their everyday speech when talking about the children of Moroccan immigrants, including themselves in this category.

9. By *hijab*, we refer to the Islamic veil that covers the head and the chest.
10. In Islamic tradition, *haram* is a word that is used to describe something considered forbidden.
11. Ikram lived in Manresa, a city 65 km from Barcelona.
12. Verses of the *Qur'an*.
13. A man who leads the lead Islamic worship services and serves as a community leader, providing religious guidance.
14. Jadiya bint Juwáylid and Aisha bint Abi Bakr were two of Mohammad's wives. They are recognized for their contribution to shaping and expanding Islam.
15. The idea of 'dual identity' has been widely discussed in the students' associations. An example of this can be found in a video produced by the students themselves entitled 'Dual identity?', where they question several members of the associations about whether they would define themselves as Moroccan or Spanish. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLUK9yhtIcs&t=44s

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