Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccom20

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To cite this article: Blanca Mendoza, Jordi Pàmies & Marta Bertran (17 Oct 2023): Negotiations, costs, and continuities: analysing the upward educational and social mobility of young men and women of Moroccan descent in Spain, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2023.2268515

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2268515

Published online: 17 Oct 2023.

COMPARE, 2023
https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2268515

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Negotiations, costs, and continuities: analysing the upward educational and social mobility of young men and women of Moroccan descent in Spain

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between the upward educational and social mobility processes of young men and women of Moroccan descent in Catalonia, Spain. Through data obtained from two ethnographic research projects and life stories, we analyse and compare the experiences of twenty-four young men and women of Moroccan descent who are attending university or in the admissions process. From an intersectional perspective, we analyse how gender, religion, ethno-racial and class-based inequalities have conditioned their pathways and their opportunities for upward educational and social mobility. These young men and women use a 'minority culture of mobility' to establish various strategies and negotiations to gain better opportunities for academic continuity and social mobility. Our findings show that the benefits of upward educational and social mobility do not necessarily reflect 'outside' but rather 'within' their ethnic group.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 December 2021
Accepted 3 October 2023

KEYWORDS
Upward educational mobility; social mobility; Moroccan; Muslim; intersectionality

Introduction

Social mobility among children of immigrant families in Europe is a field that has been studied extensively (Brown, Reay, and Vincent 2013; Schneider, Crul, and Pott 2022; Suárez-Orozco 2018). The investigations that have been carried out provide us with a range of analytical categories, theoretical bases, and methodological proposals with which to conceptualise social mobility in different contexts and understand the complexity of its processes. Despite the efforts made to date, however, the topic has not been exhausted, since the processes of social mobility and ways of understanding them are not static.

Among the most relevant contributions in this regard is the understanding of mobility as a multidimensional phenomenon that brings advantages and opportunities on the one hand, and dilemmas and costs for 'the upwardly mobile' on the other (Pott, Crul, and Schneider 2022; Shahrokni 2018). The existence of these ambiguities in social mobility pathways indicates that this is not a linear process. Furthermore, ways of measuring

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social mobility do not apply to the experiences of all people 'climbing the social ladder' (Koyama 2013). By way of example, several studies have shown how adding the element of race to class analysis changes how social mobility takes place, how it is experienced, and its influence on social identities (Nivedita 2023; Schneider, Crul, and Pott 2022).

This paper builds on existing literature on social mobility among the children of immigrants. These studies reflect on the complexity of 'climbing the social ladder'. Koyama (2013), Shahrokni (2015, 2018), and Thimm and Chaudhuri (2019) show that upward educational and social mobility are not the rule for working-class families and cannot be predicted. Rather, they depend on the intersectional standpoints of each person or group. One of the most relevant findings is that these intersections are mediated not only by class and ethno-racial backgrounds but also by gender. For example, Naudet and Shahrokni (2019), Buitelaar et al. (2021) and Nivedita (2023), focus on the mobility trajectories of women who are pioneers in their family and community for pursuing a higher education. In the case of men, Pàmies et al. (2010), Shahrokni (2015) and Pott et al. (2022) highlight the role of schools and teachers in the reproduction of stereotypes that merge ethnicity and crime as elements that act as a counterweight to upward mobility of young men.

Other important contributions of the literature are the role of family in the construction of academic pathways, the 'feeling of giving back' that students have to their ethnic communities, as well as 'being role models' to the younger generations. However, mobility brings personal costs and dilemmas like isolation and difficulties in adjusting their religious and ethnic identities to the academic habitus. Also, the children of immigrants feel that they have a 'dual identity' (Naudet and Shahrokni 2019) as they believe their identities are strongly linked to two different social and cultural spaces. One way to cope with these costs and dilemmas is the creation of and participation in religious- ethnic associations that 'serve as a buffer against some of their status anxiety or cultural dislocation and which could ease the pain of the "divided habitus"' (Durst and Beremény i 2021, 245).

Most of the international literature has focused on analysing and predicting social mobility with 'long-standing indicators, such as educational attainment, class schemas, and occupational patterns' (Koyama 2013, 948). However, we believe this kind of analysis does not necessarily cover all the nuances of social mobility or the complexity of the strategies involved in achieving it.

In the case of our study, we propose that elements such as successful academic pathways, gender, ethnicity and religion may be better categories for analysing social mobility than parental educational attainment. The role played by these elements in the social mobility of young Muslim men and women of Moroccan descent is complex, and we therefore consider important to analyse them from a critical and intersectional perspective, understanding that the mobility process will depend on the social, historical and geographical context and the agency of the groups involved (Sin 2013). We also propose that social mobility does not necessarily occur 'outside' but rather 'within' their ethnic group.

Our paper aims to analyse the relationship between the upward educational and social mobility of young Muslim men and women of Moroccan descent in Catalonia, Spain, understanding these in terms of their exceeding the educational levels of their parents, their peers and the community of origin, and obtaining

a better social status and material conditions (Crul et al. 2017). Our analysis takes as a starting point the comparison of data obtained in two research projects carried out in Catalonia during the period 2010–2017 with young people belonging to the second generation of Moroccans in Spain.[1] The ethnographic and life stories approach used in these projects allows us to conduct an in-depth study into the elements and experiences that have promoted their upward educational and social mobility, and the strategies, negotiations, transformations and costs that this mobility generates.

Context

In the mid-1970s, Catalonia became a key settlement for the Moroccan population, mainly in the metropolitan area. According to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia, as of January 2022, there were 235,278 people of Moroccan nationality resident in the region. That is, 3,02% of the total population, making it the largest of the foreign groups of residents registered in Catalonia.

Regarding educational level, 2019 data published by the Catalan Department of Education shows that Moroccan men have had a greater presence in Vocational Training programs (which offer them technical training to enter the workplace), while women have been more present in the Baccalaureate, which gives access to higher education (Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021). By January 2022, the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia reported 438 Moroccan students enrolled in Catalan universities. However, Spanish legislation forbids identifying nationals according to their ethnic origin, so we cannot know the exact number of Spanish citizens with Moroccan ancestry.

Studies in Europe confirm that Moroccan students use different strategies to continue their academic careers towards higher education (Crul 2018). Specifically in Spain, investigations such as those conducted by Holdaway et al. (2009) and Mendoza (2017) have analysed the integration processes and academic performance of Moroccan students from compulsory education to higher education. These studies have aimed to understand the students' school experiences, to identify elements that promote their academic success and continuity, and the benefits and costs of upward educational mobility in terms of negotiations, strategies and dilemmas they experience both within their groups of origin and with the dominant group.

Among the contributions of literature, we can identify the existence of three interrelated dimensions that influence the upward educational mobility of these students. A personal dimension explains that students' expectations about education can motivate a personal life project that furthers their careers by relating these to greater social and economic prestige (Shahrokni 2018). A family-community dimension state that immigrant families' views on schooling influence how their children construct their pathways more than their socioeconomic position (Pámies and Bertran 2018). Community and kinship networks can also be decisive for upward educational and social mobility (Bhopal 2011) since they can exert social pressure that benefits or harms it. And a social-institutional dimension that refers to the social and political conditions that the dominant society offers to immigrants, particularly in relation to the school system (Pott, Crul, and Schneider 2022).

The contributions made by the aforementioned research help us to contextualise the academic pathways followed by students of Moroccan origin through the compulsory and post-compulsory stages of their education and training, in addition to providing an analytical starting point to understand the relationship between these pathways and social mobility in the context of higher education.

Approaches to upward educational and social mobility from an intersectional perspective

One of the concepts we consider most useful in understanding how young Muslims of Moroccan origin construct their academic pathways and the processes of social mobility related to these is that of the 'minority culture of mobility' (Durst and Bereményi 2021; Naudet and Shahrokni 2019; Slootman 2018). Said concept suggests that individuals from minority groups can use the cultural elements of their group as strategies to negotiate upward educational and social mobility in contexts of discrimination and social disadvantage. These strategies can be useful in interactions with both the dominant society and within the group of origin when facing problems related to a 'divided habitus' (Bourdieu 1989; Shahrokni 2018).

Since the 'minority culture of mobility' focuses on analysing class and ethnoracial processes, from the contributions of feminist theories we would include the notion of 'borderland' (Anzaldúa 1999), to explain how the 'marginalized locationality' (La Barbera 2012) that these students, and particularly women, experience does not exclusively imply deprivation and oppression, but opportunities for change and resistance. Since the notion of 'borderland' takes into account the different locations and experiences of subordination that people live through, it also leads us to rethink the construction of their subjectivities and to analyse how multiple 'intersectional standpoints' (Thimm and Chaudhuri 2019) shape diverse and complex upward educational and social mobility experiences. Although intersectionality has been proposed to analyse the relationship between class, race and gender, we consider that it is also useful in the analysis of other factors, such as religion. For example, religion has been part of the international debate on Islam in the European context, particularly about gender and the schooling processes of immigrant children (Buitelaar, Emmrich, and Thimm 2021).

According to Shahrokni (2018), the moral, social and cultural resources that form part of a person's origins and define a 'minority culture of mobility' can be used as a source of social capital. In turn, social capital can have an exchange value that allows people to access advantages in different areas, one of these being academia (Bourdieu 1997). The 'minority culture of mobility' is also related to a person's cultural capital. Sin (2013) made an interesting distinction between 'foreign' and 'local' cultural capital. In the case of the former, it reflects a selective appropriation of 'foreign' dispositions and experiences, which are translated into a set of strategies that allow students to overcome limitations at a social, academic and professional level once they graduate. As for 'local' cultural capital, this entails maintaining a certain continuity in cultural norms, values and elements, which provide individuals with advantages and 'the best of both worlds' (Sin 2013). This has already been reported in other works, where young women of Moroccan origin expressed having a 'dual identity' (Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021; Naudet and Shahrokni 2019), linked to the value systems and cultural practices of Morocco and Spain, and which provides them with the ability to 'navigate' and understand the two different contexts.

The concepts of 'foreign' and 'local' cultural capital help us understand that the processes of social mobility experienced by these students are not limited to accessing new and high social strata only within the dominant society, but also within their own group of origin. The aim of making a distinction between two types of cultural capital is not to define and delimit social mobility to two geographical and cultural spaces – the 'foreign' and the 'local' - but to understand that different types of mobility occur simultaneously while interacting with each other at the same time (Schneider, Crul, and Van Praag 2014). Sin's (2013) contributions help us recognise the complexity of cultural capital in a comparative study, and the distinction between two spaces defined by 'upwardly mobile individuals', in that they have to move 'within/outside' (La Barbera 2012) their ethnic groups simultaneously. It is in this mobility that individuals' subjectivities and particular conditions are defined from their intersectional standpoints, together with the strategies and negotiations they employ.

The role played by higher education in social mobility processes is complex and has many nuances that depend not only on access to it but on the intersection of standpoints. In the case of young immigrants, they state that 'climbing up the educational ladder translates for them into traversing an unequal opportunity structure along class and ethno-racial lines' (Shahrokni 2015, 1051). The contrast between their habitus and the habitus typical of academic institutions generates situations of inequality and symbolic violence, which are not always evidenced unless analysed from a perspective that encompasses class and ethnoracial elements (Brown, Reay, and Vincent 2013). But also others that can lend a particular shape to the mobility process, for example, gender and religion.

'Upwardly mobile individuals' implement different strategies and negotiations 'within/outside' (La Barbera 2012) their group of origin to find a balance that allows them to navigate between the two spaces while also obtaining benefits. In this sense, upward educational and social mobility processes can be ambiguous. Therefore, for these students mobility processes involve not only the construction of flexible identities and different lifestyles from those of their parents but also 'mobility-associated difficulties' (Shahrokni 2015, 2018), which translate into emotional costs and 'habitus dislocation' (Bourdieu 1989; Schneider, Crul, and Van Praag 2014).

Different investigations adopting diverse approaches at the European level have lent visibility to the costs of upward educational and social mobility for the children of immigrants, and particularly Moroccan Muslims (Durst and Bereményi 2021; Pott, Crul, and Schneider 2022; Slootman 2018; Thimm and Chaudhuri 2019). For these young people, 'ascending' generates feelings of estrangement, as they have to adjust to new environments and practices while at the same time remaining 'close' to their ethnic and cultural roots. Extreme academic mobility (for example, being the first person in the family to obtain a higher education) implies achieving a better social status, but also experiencing feelings of isolation and guilt when not completely identify with the rules and regulations of 'university life' imposed by the dominant group, and feeling a distancing from their ethnic and cultural roots when trying to achieve a better social position. In the specific case of Moroccan women, they report receiving 'contradictory messages' from their families regarding the expectations of academic success versus the expectations of preserving ethnocultural roles and values in a context of diaspora (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016; Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021).

To overcome these costs and difficulties that upward educational and social mobility entails, these young people employ strategies related to a 'minority culture of mobility', such as: distancing themselves from their group of origin, seeking support networks within universities with other young people who share their experiences of mobility and migration, and rediscovering their ethno-cultural roots once they have reached a certain social status (Brown, Reay, and Vincent 2013; Mendoza 2017; Shahrokni 2015).

Methodology

This article stems from a comparative analysis between two research projects carried out in Catalonia, Spain. Both projects employed life stories and an ethnographic approach to analyse the successful academic pathways of second-generation students of Moroccan origin.

The first project was carried out over a year to identify the individual, family and community factors that contribute to building successful pathways and educational continuity for the sons and daughters of Moroccan families. The methodology followed was qualitative and involved recording the life stories of 24 young people – men and women – who met the inclusion criteria. Four discussion groups and participant observation were carried out over a year within a cultural association promoted by Moroccan families in a neighbourhood of the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The life stories were conducted during 2010–2011. This project is relevant since it was one of the first to highlight the elements that contribute to the school continuity of the children of Moroccan immigrants beyond compulsory education in Catalonia.

The second project aimed to identify factors promoting the academic pathways of young Moroccan women up to the highest level. To this end, an ethnographic study was carried out over 15 months through participant observation within three associations of Moroccan Muslim university students – men and women- and various events such as weekly reunions, cultural events, solidarity events, religious festivities and social gatherings. The students were aware of the research process from the beginning and gave their permission to carry out the participant observation. The ethnographic work was complemented by the life stories of 17 young female university students. The life stories were conducted from 2015 to 2017. The participants were members of said student associations. They expressed their interest in the research project and gave their consent to participate with their life stories. The analysis of the data was done using qualitative software.

For this paper we have analysed the data obtained from both research: the life stories of 24 Moroccan students – 12 men and 12 women- and data obtained from participant observation. This comparison allowed us, on the one hand, to broaden our data and enhance our understanding of the differences and similarities between the experiences of young men and women of Moroccan descent through their academic pathways. And on the other hand, to compare their processes of upward educational and social mobility. Life histories are a useful technique for a qualitative approach to the complexity of social mobility (Benei 2010). It also allows us to identify the representations and discourses that the participants have of the world. Since life histories only allow us access to these representations and discourses, it is relevant to examine the interactions between 'researchers' and 'informants' in the constitution of the latter's discourses about their life histories (Benei 2010).

Some aspects to consider in the case of our participants – men and women – are the following: a) Most of them arrived to Spain between the ages of 0 and 10 years old. In the case of 8 men and 4 women, they were born in Spain; b) at the time the research was conducted, students were between 20 and 26 years old; c) the parents of the participants belong to the first generation of Moroccan immigrants who arrived to Spain between 1980 and 2000; d) most parents came from rural areas in Morocco. All the fathers have compulsory instruction and most of the mothers do not have any instruction at all; e) all of our participants are from working-class families.

Regarding ethical issues, we have the permission of all our participants to use the information they have provided us, and the transcripts of their life stories were returned to them for their review and approval. The names of the participants were modified in order to protect their identity.

Challenges, costs and opportunities in entering the school system in Catalonia

The students who lived most of their early childhood in Morocco, and were incorporated into the Spanish educational system during primary school, acknowledged that learning the school language (Spanish and Catalan) was a challenge they faced to achieve a good academic performance. For these students, not knowing the language had more personal costs than academic ones, however. They reported that although they felt pressure to adhere to the content of the classes and maintain good performance, on a personal level this implied an even greater challenge, since not knowing the language was an obstacle to socialising and making friends, which generated a feeling of exclusion, loneliness and vulnerability they had not experienced in Morocco. In respect of this, although their incorporation into the education system meant temporarily reducing their academic performance while learning languages, at a socio-affective level it had emotional costs that they considered more important.

> It was the need to communicate with my schoolmates (. . .) that made me learn Spanish in a year. [Amal; biographical account]

These students' willingness and effort to adapt to a new context was key to their learning and establishing relationships with their peer group, despite being in a disadvantaged position. They believe that the feeling of loneliness they had at the beginning due to not having Moroccan companions turned into something positive because it encouraged them to 'adapt' and not become isolated.

> I think having only Moroccan friends is negative because then you haven't integrated. [Lina; biographical account]

The influence of the peer group is also identified as central to everyday school dynamics, both in terms of academic performance and in the acquisition of social and cultural capital. In some cases, our participants report how their classmates adopted the role of 'teachers', accompanying them during their incorporation process in the education system. A close relationship with students from the host group can foster feelings of belonging and acceptance, which is reflected in greater academic commitment, and participation in school activities and other social spaces.

The lack of contact with other people of Moroccan origin, both in their neighbourhoods and at school, was valued positively by young people since they believed it allowed them to establish support networks and friendships with the dominant group.

Regarding relationships with teachers, we found that these are often linked to a deficit perspective on the part of teachers, which is reflected in two ways: 'positive discrimination' or 'downward expectations'. In both cases, these perspectives are linked to the students' ethnic status, but also to elements of gender, religion and social class (Rissanen 2019). Some students considered that their immigrant status led to greater attention from their teachers compared to the rest of their classmates and that they were given 'special treatment'. However, this attention did not imply recognition of their abilities as students, but of how 'despite being Moroccans' they were able to perform well at school.

In contrast with the above experiences, some students reported situations where teachers had 'low expectations', reproducing stereotypes about 'Moroccanness' and being Muslim as something incompatible with social integration and academic success in a Western context. In the case of boys, 'Moroccanness' alone was what gave rise to the perspective of the deficit they are exposed to on a daily basis, both at school and socially, due to stereotypes that merge ethnicity and crime as elements that act as a counterweight to upward mobility and which particularly affect Moroccan men:

> There are also some barriers that get in the way. You find them both socially, in schools, in infrastructures, in many places. And all this puts you in slower lanes, which do not allow you to advance [Omar; biographical account]

To these 'downward expectations' can be added a class component, because moving up in social and academic spheres implies having a certain economic and cultural capital that immigrant families do not always have access to. This is reflected in the case of Ikram, whose parents decided to move her from a state to a private school because they considered that a private school would have better quality education and a better school environment.

> They took me [referring to his parents] to a paid school but of course, I was Moroccan and a paid school means people with money; so I felt out of place. I came from a state school where you could find everything [foreign and Spanish students], and then I went to a paid school where no one spoke to me because they were all 'very Catalan' and I was 'very Moroccan'. [Ikram; biographical account]

The relationship between education and social capital has already been previously evidenced in Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), who stated that more exclusive forms of education can be used as a source of cultural capital, which in turn benefits social status. However, the accumulation of this capital does not necessarily imply greater benefits for students (Sin 2013): ethnicity, gender and class add complexities when it comes to converting capital into advantages.

In Ikram's account, we observe the complexity involved in converting cultural and social capital into upward educational and social mobility, since ethnicity and class can become an obstacle to mobility for students, even if they are in an academic space of greater prestige.

'Contradictory messages', negotiations and new roles: the influence of family dynamics in upward educational and social mobility

International research has shown how physical, academic and social mobility processes generate resignifications in the ideological, political and social structures of immigrant communities. In the case of Muslim Moroccan migrants in Europe, these resignifications are observed in the dynamics and discourses of the second generations (Parella-Rubio, Contreras-Hernández, and Pàmies-Rovira 2022; Rissanen 2019). Research also shows that some Moroccan families in Europe value their children's higher education not only for the academic training but also for the social capital it can provide them with. These perspectives of Moroccan families towards higher education have been more evident in the roles played by their daughters, who are encouraged to continue their education at university and of whom there are high expectations regarding their professional future (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016).

This 'flexibilization of parental control' has provided these young women with upward educational and social mobility, since it has helped them fulfil their aspirations for academic continuity, while also allowing them to access spaces and activities from which they have traditionally been prohibited, previously being sole territory of male children. However, these young women noted that despite this flexibility, they constantly receive 'contradictory messages' about what is expected of them in terms of academic success and being a 'woman of the group' (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016; Pott, Crul, and Schneider 2022), as exemplified by Maha's account:

> I spent the whole day at the university and my father didn't understand why I had to be away from home for so long (. . .). He said 'Enough, you're going out a lot, you should be at home with your mother'. I even got into a big argument with him about it and told him 'I don't want to continue studying if I have to be arguing with you like this'. [Maha, biographical account]

This account shows that, in the case of children who are the first in the family to go to university, extreme academic mobility entails painful experiences and a 'habitus dislocation' (Bourdieu 1989; Shahrokni 2018). For example, in the case of young women, higher education entails certain practices that may contradict traditional roles and values related to gender and honour for Moroccan families, such as spending a lot of time away from home. Maha reported that the restrictions she faced affected only her and not their male siblings:

> If my brothers go out with their friends, my parents don't say no (. . .) Sometimes I got outraged and said [to her parents] 'You let them go out but not me', and they replied 'Because you're a girl'. [Maha; biographical account]

The families of our female participants value the preservation of ethnocultural elements as a way of 'resisting assimilation' (Hamzeh 2011), and in this case, women have the role of preserving these elements, bearing the responsibility of maintaining family honour and cultural continuity. For the young women in our study, meeting the expectations of academic success on the one hand and being a 'woman of the group' on the other entails emotional costs and feelings of 'double the effort' and loneliness. To offset these costs, the young women bring strategies and negotiations into play that allow them to maintain social mobility and continue

their academic careers, such as hiding information from their parents, maintaining high academic performance and reaffirming their identity as Moroccan Muslim women. These negotiations and strategies have earned them greater recognition and authority within their families, and allowed them to participate in decision-making:

> My father says 'My daughter is doing well; she's studying, she's doing something important'. And in he now talks more to me than to my brothers (. . .) One day I found my mother arguing with my older brother and she said 'Tell your brother to get up and look for work, let's see if he listens to you'. [Fer; biographical account]

In her account, Fer explains that while growing up, she did not have much 'voice' or authority in the household decision-making, which was something reserved for their parents and older brothers. However, showing responsibility and academic success gave her greater recognition from their parents, who constantly asked her for help and counselling in administrative matters of the household, even above her older brother.

Our research also reveals that the conjunction of these young people's successful academic pathways together with their visibility as Moroccan Muslims in the context of the diaspora has made them 'role models' for the other members of their group of origin.

> Many girls are studying at university or doing Baccalaureate thanks to my sister. [People say] 'Look at Ibtisan, look at what she's doing' because she's a point of reference. [Ibrahim, biographical account]

In the case of the young men, they have different strategies and negotiations to bring into play than women, as they are exposed to less control from their families and the group of origin. Furthermore, even those boys who have had more discontinuous pathways – including episodes in which they departed from the practices valued by the group – have received greater acceptance, since it is understood that they will return to the group in the future. Regarding costs and obstacles of maintaining upward educational and social mobility, the young men explain that they have not encountered as many difficulties within their families and origin group compared to their sisters.

> I have more freedom [than his sisters]. They have to give more explanations about where they are going or who they are going with, but I do what I want. [Abdelilah, biographical account]

However, their accounts reveal experiences and perceptions of discrimination and racism in relation to the dominant society.

> One day a classmate said about a person in the street 'Look at this Moor, sure is stealing wallets', and then he looked at me. [Ahmed, biographical account]

> When I go out with my college classmates nobody says anything to me, but when I'm with my Moroccan friends people say 'You are dangerous'. [Yussef, biographical account]

These quotes exemplify the stereotypes that link 'Moroccanness' and crime (Shahrokni 2015) in the case of men, and how these stereotypes affect their every day and their experiences of upward educational and social mobility within the dominant society.

The role of student and religious associations in upward educational and social mobility

Most of the young people surveyed viewed their integration into the education system in Catalonia as positive, although there was also consensus that their ethnic origin created a gap in their relationships with teachers and classmates, especially after entering secondary education, which was marked by ethnicity and class, but also by gender and religion. In the case of girls, this was evident in the use of the *hijab* - the Islamic veil – when they entered adolescence:

> (. . .) What I did was talk to the teacher who gave me Islam classes, I told her that my menstruation had come and I asked her for advice (. . .) Then I decided to wear the veil myself when I was thirteen years old. [Marna; biographical account]

The use of the *hijab* implied a change in the relationship with teachers and classmates, who assumed that it was an imposition and a brake on their education. The *hijab* made a Muslim identity visible that until then had gone unnoticed in the school context and that was interpreted as something negative. According to Shahrokni (2015), these symbols and cultural elements can be interpreted as coming from a 'low-class background' incompatible with a successful academic pathway. In their accounts, the young women reported how the traits of 'Moroccanness' and 'Muslimness' are perceived as a barrier to social integration and academic continuity.

> Some of my classmates didn't understand why I was wearing a veil, they said 'But you have integrated very well, why have you decided to wear the veil?'. [Sara; biographical account]

As for the young men, Moroccan descent makes them a threat and a target for anti-Muslim discourse, in parallel with the discussion on Islamist fundamentalism and Islam as a threatening religious practice. The integration debate centres on them, a debate that presents them as 'backward', suggesting that they disturb a social cohesion that worked well without them (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2018).

> I'm a bit angry at the prejudices in society, people think Moroccan immigrants are thieves or traffickers or criminals, [. . .] I've been in Spain my whole life. I have Moroccan roots and culture but I am super settled, integrated into society. [Mustafa; biographical account]

The transition from post-compulsory education (Baccalaureate) to university reveals how student life is structured by ethnoracial, class and gender processes. For young people of immigrant origin, it is not enough to reach university and maintain good grades, it is also necessary to participate in the university habitus, which involves knowing and practicing certain norms and behaviours (Shahrokni 2015) such as going to parties, drinking, having certain language patterns or a certain dress code, and so on. For most of the Moroccan Muslim students of our research – especially for women- many of these 'rites of passage' of university life entail behaviours that are considered prohibited, so they decide not to participate:

> I've always had a good relationship with my classmates, but I was only with them in class or when we had to do some work, because they smoke, drink and party, and I don't do any of that. [Balquís; biographical account]

The above quote reveals the perception of 'disparate youth cultures' (Shahrokni 2018). Relationships with their native peers are limited to academic spaces and activities because differences in social, class and ethnic conditions lead our participants to not feel identified with their peer group. To overcome these mobility-associated difficulties (Shahrokni 2018), these young people have sought to establish friendship and support networks with other students with whom they share cultural pathways and traits. These friendships were a source of social capital that allowed them to maintain upward educational mobility by serving as a support against the isolation they sometimes experienced during their academic career.

> The fact of meeting other students who have gone through the same thing as me, who have the same origins (. . .) what helped me was to see people in the same situation; I didn't feel as lonely as I had been. [Esperanza; biographical account]

Friendship and support networks established by our participants arose either during pre-university schooling or upon their entry into higher education and came about through their participation in associations that we have divided into three types: a) associations that integrate an ethnic and class dimension with an academic one, such as Arab and Muslim university student associations; b) associations rooted in Islamic cultural centres that focus on the teaching and revitalisation of Islam in a diaspora context; and c) associations focused on political activism that are linked to the Arab-Muslim world, for example, pro-Palestine associations. We found that participation in these associations, by both young women and men, is linked to valuing and revitalising ethnic and cultural elements in a diaspora context, making them visible to counter racist and Islamophobic stigmas and discourses (Nyírő and Durst 2018).

However, in the case of minority students, participation is also linked to a feeling of 'debt' with the group of origin, that is, wanting to show that despite their upward educational and social mobility they are still part of the group by 'giving back' to their communities (Durst and Bereményi 2021). In addition to strengthening ethnic identity, associations are spaces where social capital is acquired. In the case of young men, participating in these associations during the pre-university stage allows them to stay away from contexts that are considered more toxic, for example, from other young Moroccans who do not follow the values and traditions of the group, while during university it allows them to accumulate social capital to enter the labour market. The benefit of establishing contacts to enter the world of employment through associations is also true in the case of young women.

Although men and women share motivations, objectives and experiences in their participation in associations, we also identified certain contrasts due to gender that determine the reasons why they decided to get involved in them. The young women found it attractive to join the associations because they were mainly made up of other Moroccan Muslim students with whom they felt strongly identified. For them, it was also important that the associations were led by young people who shared the experience of being the children of immigrants, of being Muslim in a European context and having an 'open mind' towards alternative ways of interpreting Islam:

> We young people who were born in Spain, who grew up here, have a different vision (. . .) If [the religious leaders] want us to get closer to Islam, then they must get closer to us (. . .)

> That's why this association was founded (. . .) People who have an open mind and know the situation of young Europeans. [Maha; biographical account]

In this respect, the associations have also been spaces to 'rethink' Islam based on their experiences as young European Muslims, something that authors such as Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić (2012) and Slootman and Duyvendak (2018) identified as a generational shift with regard to the 'Islam of their fathers and mothers'. These processes reveal the efforts and interest of young European Muslims to assert their identities in a non-Muslim context (Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021), but particularly the interest of young Muslim women to reinterpret Islam from a feminist perspective. In addition, being related to Islamic values, associations offer young women the opportunity to have greater mobility in public spaces, a strategy that young men do not need to resort to.

In this section, we have seen that participation in associations constitutes a 'bonding social capital' (Claridge 2018), which results in different benefits such as obtaining a feeling of belonging to a group, friendship relationships and support networks that will serve not only academically but personally. However, we believe that for these young people this capital does not necessarily translate into processes of social mobility 'outside' their ethnic group, rather promoting mobility 'within' the group of origin, in the formation of networks and job offers, for example.

The meaning of Islam when it comes to mobility processes: Islamic feminism and being a 'good Muslim'

Prior research has revealed two opposing representations of Islam in the European context: on the one hand, a perception that the practice of Islam prevents the process of integration into the majority society and is opposed to the values of modern society, and on the other, that in the experiences of Muslims in Europe, practicing the religion involves complex forms of integrating into the majority society (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2018). In addition, a link has been established between the ethnic identification of second generations of Muslims, their upward educational mobility and alternative religious practices (Mendoza 2018; Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012) that generate re-Islamization processes, within which an intersection with gender can be found. The discrimination and violence experienced by Muslims in Europe have also been a key factor that strengthens the bond the second generation feels with Islam and the emergence of novel religious identities (Phalet, Fleischmann, and Hillekens 2018). In this sense, Islam has become a source of 'applicable knowledge' (Jouili 2015, 2019) that allows them to modulate their ways of behaving and interacting in a non-Muslim context, but also an element of their 'minority culture of mobility', which they use as a strategy to negotiate processes of upward educational and social mobility in contexts of disadvantage and discrimination, and in the particular case of women, in situations of oppression and gender inequality.

We have found that our female participants' relationship with Islam changes as they try to 'balance' their identities as young women, Moroccans, Europeans and university students. This is observed in how they reinterpret religious practices and discourses to construct new meanings about what it means to be a 'Muslim woman' in Western Europe. One of the most relevant strategies that we have identified is the incorporation of Islamic feminism in their daily discourses and practices.

Higher education has played a key role in the approach that these young women have adopted towards Islamic feminism since university has provided the context for their learning about the subject, whether through personal research and interest in it or through other Moroccan and Muslim students:

> I went to the library and found a book by Fátima Mernissi, then I found another book that 'opened life up to me', the title was 'The Emergence of Islamic Feminism'. [Balquís; biographical account]

In this account, we interpret that for some women higher education represents a tool that not only provides them with social mobility but also examines their subjectivities away from the traditional roles historically imposed upon them. Our female participants report that restrictions and norms that are imposed due to their being women are legitimised in cultural beliefs and practices that are erroneously related to religion. Authors such as Wadud (1999) and Lamrabet (2009) have exposed the criticisms that many Muslim women make of how the Koran has been interpreted, and how these interpretations have exclusively benefitted men, fostering oppression and gender inequality. During our fieldwork, we have been able to observe that it is young women who face the greatest restrictions on social mobility, and as a result, they are the ones most interested in creating strategies that allow them to circumvent these restrictions without having to be identified as 'cultural traitors' (Bertran, Ponferrada, and Pàmies 2016). Our female participants stated that Islam is a just religion for women and that it gives them rights to actively participate in political, social and academic issues:

> In Islam, the role of women is important, from issues related to politics to making life decisions. They often believe that this is not the case because culture has a big influence (. . .) Women have the right [in Islam] to decide, vote and participate in all aspects of society. [Ihssane; biographical account]

The young women surveyed seek to legitimise their rights as Muslim women based on reinterpretations of the Koran. They look for associations, readings and activities that allow them to read the Koran and learn more about it to provide bases for their reinterpretations (Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021). In addition, they argue that within Islam it is important to study to avoid 'misinterpretations':

> Islam tells you that you must study. Some Ayahs say 'seek knowledge'. What for? To avoid misinterpretations. [Manar; biographical account]

Since education is an element that Islamic feminism highlights within the norms established in the Koran, young women appropriate this discourse to claim their right to study and participate in all areas of social life. This benefits their processes of upward educational and social mobility in a non-Muslim context, while they still identify themselves as 'good Muslim women' since they are not denying their membership of their group of origin or their religion, but rather reformulating norms and practices given their location, specifically as young, female, European, highly educated and Muslim daughters of Moroccan immigrants (Mendoza, Pàmies, and Bertran 2021).

In the case of young men, the processes of upward educational and social mobility are closely related to the importance they attribute to maintaining the group's privileged symbols and practices. During their academic careers, adherence to Islam even becomes

a strategy, a protective screen, which allows them to circulate successfully among their less academic ethnic peers and avoid the pressures to which they may find themselves exposed.

> We respected him because he went to the mosque and all that. He would go and we would stay in the park. Of course, we told him, but not much because we knew he was doing the right thing, going to the mosque. He always went and we didn't. He had, how can I say it, he was more than us [Ahmed, speaking about Ibrahim]

However, young men do not need to assert their rights at the community level through a reinterpretation of sacred texts, and it is only the young women's influence that conditions any re-interpretations of the Koran they might make, especially at levels of higher education.

Conclusions

Our aim with this article was to examine and compare the relationship between the processes of upward educational and social mobility of young men and women of Moroccan origin in Spain. In addition to this, we wished to show the complexity of these processes and various ways in which mobility is experienced from intersectional standpoints (Thimm and Chaudhuri 2019) such as class, ethnicity and gender, although we have centred our analytical focus, particularly in gender and religion. From our analysis of this ethnographic work and the life stories of these young people, we have found that mobility processes are complex and experienced differently. In the case of this work, we have found that the strategies, negotiations, costs and perceptions of these processes are strongly influenced by gender and religion.

Although the young women surveyed have benefitted from a growing appreciation of higher education in their families and their group of origin, they have also faced contradictory messages regarding expectations of academic success and of being a 'Moroccan Muslim woman', which implies preserving honour, cultural values and gender roles. These contradictions generate costs and challenges for the upward and social mobility of these young women, and they therefore implement negotiations and strategies that allow them to 'balance out' these expectations and continue with their academic careers and mobility in public spaces. One of the most relevant strategies in this respect is their appropriation of the discourse of Islamic feminism, which they have come to know due to their incorporation into the university. Islamic feminism allows them to legitimise their academic and social mobility, as well as negotiate participation in public spaces, without having to deny their identity as Moroccan and Muslim women. The academic success of these young women and their recognition of their ethnicity and religion have made them role models: In the family context, they have modified their roles, since they have a position of greater authority, even more than their male brothers; and they are considered role models within the group of Moroccan immigrants.

In the case of the young men, they have not had to face contradictory messages from within the group, nor have they had to demonstrate their loyalty to it. The spaces that they have traditionally occupied in the intragroup allow them to continue with academic careers with said intragroup's approval, although they do have to overcome greater barriers 'outside' their ethnic group.

Although these young people have become role models within their ethnic groups, their analysis of their own experiences highlights a certain characteristic in their mobility processes, and that is that despite having higher education and accumulating social capital, this has not necessarily been translated into mobility 'outside' their ethnic group; that is, they continue to encounter barriers to their participation in the majority society, generated by prejudices and stereotypes towards 'Moroccanness' and 'Muslimness'. Furthermore, our participants also reported a 'minority culture of mobility' (Shahrokni 2018; Slootman 2019), that is, they use certain cultural elements as strategies to negotiate processes of upward educational and social mobility, which does not necessarily occur 'outside' but rather 'within' their ethnic group.

Our results show that upward mobility processes cannot only be measured based on entry into spaces belonging to the majority society or other social classes but also according to the subjects' social and economic ascent within their group of origin. In addition to their academic success, the role of religion and their interest in 'giving back' (Durst and Bereményi 2021) to their group promote the creation of support networks – linked to their participation in various associations – and 'within' mobility processes (Shahrokni 2018).

The findings presented in this article contribute to understanding the complexity of the relationship between processes of educational mobility, social mobility and the specific experiences of young Moroccan Muslims in Spain, moulded from intersectional standpoints in a diaspora context, in which mobility 'within' their ethnic group stands out. The 'minority culture of mobility' our participants deploy allows them to negotiate and propose new subjectivities as young Muslims in Europe.

Note

1. See Pàmies et al. (2010) and Mendoza (2017).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca [2100 ARF100037]; Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología [250955].

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