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The Hijab and Work: Female Entrepreneurship in Response to Islamophobia

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Abstract This article focuses on the emerging phenomenon of Muslim women's entrepreneurial networks in France. It seeks to illustrate a causal relationship between a sociopolitical context where state secularism (laïcité) has been abusively interpreted as a blank check to enforce religious neutrality in France, which has therefore inadvertently encouraged these entrepreneurial networks. As such, this article positions these networks as form of empowerment to overcome the sense of humiliation, isolation, and exclusion produced by the current context of state secularism in France, rather than solely an illustration of an independent entrepreneurial spirit. The labor market appears as a field in which social and political practices regulating religious visibility have been enacted within a context of religious tensions in French society rising since the late 1980s (Baubérot 2000). This occurs between the pre-eminence of individual freedoms in secularism and the anticlerical tendencies that can be inferred from recent decisions made by French courts. Based on observations of participants in two women's entrepreneurship networks made as part of my doctoral research on the impact of la nouvelle laïcité on the lives of Muslim women in France, this article also draws on qualitative interviews with over 30 Muslim women entrepreneurs and dozens of participants involved in professional network initiatives. Because these networks are rapidly evolving and relatively new, my fieldwork data addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning this particular aspect of the debate concerning laïcité. This study makes it possible to observe how in a key part of the private sector—that of entrepreneurial self-employment—the question of the place of religion and its expression in society is a consequence of a particularly French shift away from a common-sense duty of religious neutrality, the result of mounting layers of political debate over the hijab at schools, universities, and hospitals. The Baby Loup case legally confirms the gradual prohibition of public displays of religion outside of the public-sector work environment.

Keywords France · Secularism · Laïcité · Muslim · Headscarf · Women

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In this article, I present and analyze two organizations for Muslim women entrepreneurs which have emerged in the wake of the implementation of what Baubérot (2011) refers to as the "New Secularism." This movement functions by extending the duty of political, philosophical, and religious neutrality historically required of state officials into the larger population of France. The law of December 9, 1905, concerning the separation of church and state, required religious, philosophical, and political neutrality from state officials during the exercise of their public duties. The law of March 15, 2004, which applied the principle of secularism to limit the wearing of signs or clothing showing religious affiliation in public schools, constituted a first step towards the establishment of New Secularism. It extended this duty of neutrality to the users of public education institutions. As a direct consequence, this has since inspired attempts to expand the duty of neutrality of religious expression to apply to any citizens in public spaces, as demonstrated by the different polemics concerning the ban on wearing headscarves for mothers accompanying school trips, or the municipal decrees banning Muslim women from appearing in a burkini on beaches during the summer of 2016.

Beyond the public sphere, this neutrality is also enforced in certain private enterprises. Corporate regulations tend to enforce the obligation of neutrality among employees. As Hennette-Vauchez and Valentin (2014) demonstrate, the Baby Loup case gives credence to this regulatory tendency, and the decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) on March 14, 2017 confirms it. Indeed, the CJEU (2017) concluded:

> that the prohibition on wearing an Islamic headscarf, which arises from an internal rule of a private undertaking prohibiting the visible wearing of any political, philosophical or religious sign in the workplace, does not constitute direct discrimination based on religion or belief. (para. 45)

However, the Court also expressed reservations as to the indirect discrimination such rules may cause. This decision by the CJEU powerfully calls attention to the vagueness that surrounds this extension of the duty of neutrality into the regulations of private enterprises. This phenomenon has been documented by Ajbli (2011). Her study on the Lille metropolitan region illustrates the difficulty Muslim women have in finding employment, in that their religious affiliation is immediately communicated in the act of wearing a headscarf. The pressure to abandon wearing their headscarves during working hours represents for many women a negation of a fundamental freedom—the freedom of conscience—while also dealing a heavy psychological blow.

It is this link between the extension of the principle of religious neutrality to private employees and its discriminatory impacts that I intend to explore in this article. In fact, one of the consequences of New Secularism policies is the growth of forms of self-employment. This article seeks to demonstrate a causal relationship between sociopolitical context and religious entrepreneurship.

This legislation sheds light on the issues faced by Muslim women wearing a headscarf in private-sector workplaces and what drives female Muslim entrepreneurs to become self-employed. They do not accept having to submit to religious neutrality, which means, in their case, removing their headscarves at the workplace. My interlocutors experienced this removal as structural violence; they subsequently chose to innovate through entrepreneurship. Muslim entrepreneurship networks have indeed emerged within communities of French Muslim women. Entrepreneurial networks are new within these communities. These networks have often been described as the result of the simple desire of Muslim women to operate within a Muslim-only community, or else they are depicted as a dangerous communitarianism, as in the example of far-right discourses. The

religious dimension is sometimes more of an after-the-fact reality than a choice or a goal. In other words, what leads these Muslim women entrepreneurs into entrepreneurship is first and foremost their experience of discrimination, which prevents them from accessing the job market. Inherited religious signs, such as the headscarf, are a natural component of the goods and services offered by these women entrepreneurship networks, along with the centrality of religious ethics. What is lacking, however, is an analysis of the motivations, drives and goals behind these networks, and a dialectic of a discourse in the private sector which is increasingly hostile to religious signs. My key finding is therefore that the experience of religious and racial discrimination, rather than having any preexisting entrepreneurial ambitions, has been a constant variable in leading these women into social entrepreneurship, and more particularly into self-employment.

Among Muslim women we interviewed, the desire to start a business of one's own was at once an expression of a refusal to negotiate the right to wear a hijab, which is constitutive of one's identity as a Muslim woman, and an act of overcoming the negative stereotypes to which they are subjected. This desire is a direct consequence of the experience of discrimination in the professional lives of the women we studied. As job applicants, their chances are hurt not only because they wear a hijab, but also because they are women and of sub-Saharan or North-African descent (Beauchemin et al. 2015). In the context of France, our research also focuses on how the new entrepreneurial practices of Muslim women impact their notion of identity, and what this reveals about their agency in the face of systemic discrimination. In this article, I demonstrate how this process is directly linked and encouraged by new secularism and the limitations that market forces have placed upon the idea of Muslim women's emancipation.

A sociological analysis of the agency of Muslim women allows us to examine the fields of power they navigate and the practical modes of resistance available to them in daily life. I start by examining the relationship between structural forms of constraint and the agency of the women subjected to them. To what extent are the entrepreneurial projects of Muslim women who wear a hijab an assertion of agency, in opposition to the discrimination they face on account of the visibility of their religion?

This article is based on fieldwork in Paris and a nearby suburb in which two organizations were studied: one devoted to networking (forming business contacts) and another devoted to coworking (working together). I conducted my research by compiling qualitative observations and interviews. The organizations were exclusively composed of Muslim women who had been victims of discrimination on the basis of their religious affiliation or African descent. Then, I will outline the strategies they have adopted in response to the limitations encountered in the job market. It looks into the identity politics of Muslim women's networks, and raises the questions of power, agency and the daily strategies of resistance to an unwelcoming political context. It shows these entrepreneurial initiatives from the perspective of women exercising their agency to overcome the feelings of exclusion produced by ethnic and religious discrimination. It identifies as well the relationship between structural limitations and the agency of the women affected by them as the starting point of the desire to become an entrepreneur. To realize these plans, they seek support from a group of peers who share the same experiences.

Methodology

Meetings of these organizations took place in the form of day-long networking or coworking sessions. I attended four sessions and conducted 15 qualitative interviews with members of these two organizations. The first organization, *Akhawate Business*, hosts events in Paris for

Muslim women entrepreneurs to meet and interact with one another. The second, *Bee Working*, organizes mutual-aid work sessions in Paris suburbs like Montreuil, as well as in cities in the outer provinces like Lyon.

The *Akhawate Business* event took place in Paris on September 20, 2015, at La Cartonnerie, a space in the 11th arrondissement rented for the occasion. The all-female event brought together 30 women entrepreneurs to celebrate their business accomplishments. The program began with a talk by the winners of a contest launched by the organization to highlight the successes of women entrepreneurs and to promote the sharing of experience. This was followed by a discussion with a woman theologian of Islam, who addressed the issue of business and ethics. A networking activity was organized to close the day. A vegetarian lunch and a "fair trade" coffee bar gave attendees a chance to sample the catering businesses run some of the women entrepreneurs present at the event. This also created the opportunity for friendly, informal exchanges between attendees. Their ages ranged from 20 to 40 years old, and their fields of expertise were very diverse, including career consulting, graphic design, vegetarian cuisine, and "Muslim pride" catering. I also studied the different supplementary communications of *Akhawate Business*, which consist of a blog and a recurring newsletter. The women who make up the organization's membership are practicing Muslims, most of whom wear a hijab, and religion is frequently referenced in the blog, newsletters, and event communications. *Akhawate Business* has 45 members currently, but reaches a much larger audience during entrepreneurship events.

The second organization, *Bee Working*, gathered together 20 women in the Paris suburb of Montreuil. The day-long coworking event was organized around mutual aid and skill sharing. The participants were all Muslim women who wore a hijab. An evangelical church was rented for the occasion to serve as a meeting place. The large premises afforded ample space for prayer as well as relaxation over coffee, tea, and biscuits. This setting allowed me to conduct short interviews with participants in order to understand their motivations and expectations with regard to the event. Some were already employed, but were never given a chance to prove their worth, whereas others were unemployed and took on entrepreneurial work to compensate for their professional inactivity, an act often justified by the Islamophobia operating within the labor market. Also aged between 20 and 40 years old, their professional titles varied from lawyer, to beautician, to automotive mechanical engineer, to teacher and personal development coach.

These women have predominantly risen up from a lower social standing due to the employment status of their parents' generation on immigrating from North Africa in the 1970s. They are therefore "first-generation" entrepreneurs, neither equipped for nor familiar with entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship in the Feminine Plural

Before analyzing the motivations of these women entrepreneurs, I must explore the consequences tied to gender and related characteristics in the professional experiences of women. Indeed, studies by Petit et al. (2011) show that the probability of being offered a job interview for a foreign-born woman belonging to a minority group in France is much lower than that of her male counterpart. Being a woman, of African descent, belonging to a minority group, and practicing Islam and wearing a hijab are all significant penalties on the job market, and transform what is commonly known in the professional world as the "glass ceiling" into a "glass labyrinth." I distinguish the circumstance of being a woman, which induces one specific

effect in one's relationship to work, from that of being a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, which highlights the intersectionality of the discriminations faced by minority women.

The Glass Ceiling and Intersectionality

A Response to the Constraints Caused by the Gendered Division of Labor

To a significant degree, the gendered division of labor acts doubly on the professional lives of women. It is first of all characterized by a *horizontal segregation*, in which women are limited to a certain number of business sectors and highly feminized professions. This concentrated sectorization operates in tandem with a *vertical segregation*, which as Maruani (2011) has demonstrated can limit women's access to upper-level leadership roles. The structural aspects of these segregations remain in spite of the steady growth of female employment, which reinforces the limitations on the types of careers women can have. These persistent obstacles necessitated the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" to describe the structural limitations that women encounter in their careers. But with the addition of the multiple constraints outlined above, the "glass ceiling" becomes a "glass labyrinth," which evokes, according to Fortier (2008:61), "the complexity of the path which awaits women on their way to leadership roles: work-family balance, higher expectations, prejudices, a less substantial network of relationships, a smaller number of mentors, etc.".

Despite these well-known inequalities, which have been proven to function as structural impediments to the advancement of their careers, women tend to blame themselves for the limitations they encounter in their professional lives, as illustrated in the words of the entrepreneur Leyla (an unmarried, 26-year-old lawyer and project leader): "We create obstacles for ourselves because we are women. I have never experienced any difficulties, and I have no interest in making any for myself".

Leyla claims that she does not feel the presence of any obstacles in her professional life, and that she is determined to overcome any she might encounter in the future. Such a statement comes as a surprise, because it seems to conflict with her interest in being a member of a group of marginalized entrepreneurs, which in itself testifies to the structural inequalities faced by women. Yet Leyla holds the conviction that the difficulties women experience are of their own making, and that determination alone should allow them to overcome anything.

Like Leyla, Rim (a black, married, 37-year-old automobile engineer with four children) stated that she could overcome any limitations through sheer force of will: "It's important to learn to not create obstacles for oneself. Even if there are things we aren't supposed to have, or if the world is against us, we have to go on". Rim, like Leyla, refuses to limit herself. But unlike Leyla, Rim does not deny the existence of structural limitations, even if she still refuses to accept them. These statements illustrate one of the consequences of the gendered division of labor, in which the professional (in)abilities of women are naturalized as personal (in)abilities, as dispositions incorporated into the habitus. Leyla and Rim refuse the incorporation of any gendered limitations which would prevent them from accomplishing what they have set out to do.

If work is characterized by gendered social relations, entrepreneurship can serve as a relief for women who feel torn apart by multiple responsibilities. Indeed, the professional independence that comes with it is for women an attractive alternative to what Cornet and Constantinidis (2004:196) have referred to as "the family and its constraining division of gender roles". The statement given by Fatou (a married junior manager with two children)

shows how the difficulties of balancing one's career with family obligations can push a woman into becoming an entrepreneur:

> The challenge is how to strike a balance between family life and professional life; it's how to make sure that one doesn't impinge upon the other. That became a burden when I went back to work. It was very challenging. I had very long days. And as a result, I started thinking that if I could work for myself, it would all be much easier to manage.

Exhausted, Fatou explains that she stopped working as manager because of how difficult it was to simultaneously navigate the demands of her position and her family. At no point does she mention her husband, who seems to be unburdened by the responsibilities she has had to assume.

After a year of inactivity, Fatou felt the urge to return to work. But this time, she chose a much less demanding track than management. She chose to work with young children. This brings us to the issue of the loss in social status brought about by breaking from the traditional labor market. Faced with being overworked to fulfill the professional and familial duties which fell upon her, Fatou's decision to reevaluate her professional trajectory was clearly informed by experience and rational calculation. This double workload directly affects the professional ambitions of women, and according to Delphy (1998) the effects of both "productive" and "domestic" work weigh on their morale. They express their feelings of guilt, and their fatigue, but also talk of an ethical dilemma between familial duties and their professional development. The naturalized incorporation of the ideals conveyed by gender stereotypes, such as those of the good mother or the sexually available wife, render their structural dimension imperceptible. This partly explains why such a large proportion of women hold positions that are part-time, temporary, and precarious.

Intersectional Limitations: Gender, Race, and Religion

If the career paths of women are structurally affected by the social relation of gender (Kergoat 2010), it is complicated further by the relations of race and religion for women belonging to minority groups. Testimonies of women indicate that the rejections they receive as job candidates are justified according to this formula: "You are qualified, but. .." These women are therefore at the intersection of several types of discrimination: sexism, racism, and Islamophobia. African descent is a decisive factor in discriminating between applicants. Recent studies on the career paths of the descendants of migrants reveal that the inequalities encountered by the immigrant generation persist for those subsequently born in France. People of North-African, sub-Saharan, and Turkish descent find their skills devalued on the labor market. Their ancestry constitutes a genuine handicap, which according to Meurs et al. (2006:793) "is experienced by them as an entire spectrum of limitations, not only in terms of their chances of getting hired, but also with regard to the type of jobs they are offered", which leads to a loss in social status. These systemic discriminations produce entry barriers in the job market, an overrepresentation of immigrants in precarious jobs, and a much greater vulnerability to unemployment and inactivity among women. This handicap, tied to ethnicity, intensifies when one's religious expression reinforces one's racial assignment.

Women are doubly penalized for their gender as well as for their ancestry, skin color, and whether they wear a hijab. The effect of discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, which is significant for women who wear a hijab, has been little studied. Yet after the

politicization of the hijab, which led to the enactment of the law of March 15, 2004, as well as the anti-burqa law of November 2010, and in the wake of recent terrorist attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam in France and elsewhere in Europe, we should be able to ask if the potential rejection of Muslim women who wear a hijab is due to Islamophobia. A "CV testing" was performed by Tisserant et al. (2014) to measure this specific discriminatory effect. Fictional applications were submitted in response to job advertisements for secretary positions. The qualifications of a majority applicant (Valérie Mauron) were systematically matched with those of a minority applicant (Djamila Khimssi), whose CV included a photo of her either with a bare head or wearing a hijab. Test applications were sent to 404 prospective employers, and 149 applications received positive responses. The bare-headed minority candidate received 42 positive responses against 50 for the majority candidate, while the minority candidate wearing a hijab in her CV photo received only one positive response against 56 received by her majority counterpart. A continent-wide study conducted by the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) (2016:17) confirmed this trend:

> some studies, including CV testings and victimisation surveys offer evidence of the intersectional discrimination faced by Muslim women, especially at the level of access to employment, which appears to be at the core of discrimination experiences of Muslim women, according to the national reports. Muslim women are subject to three types of penalties in employment: gender "penalties," ethnic "penalties," and religious "penalties." (p. 17)

The experience of Rim corroborates these analyses. An automotive engineer and mechanic since 2012, she recently retrained to become a professional makeup artist and launched her own business. Her goal is to become financially stable in order to leave her engineering job. She wears a hijab, and she is also black. Her experience is rather characteristic of the intersectional discriminations that affect the lives of non-white women. She explains: "There is religion to take into account, there is skin color to take into account; there are lots of factors—the city. .. where you were born, like Seine-Saint-Denis. That can close doors." Rim has worn a hijab for three years, which is also how long she has worked as an automotive engineer. Her employer, as she explains, does not allow her to wear a hijab at the workplace: "I think that motivated me, because I would really like to wear my hijab at work. But I can't, it's internal regulations. Every morning my heart aches to arrive with it on and then have to remove it." However, the impossibility of wearing a headscarf at work was not the decisive factor in Rim's decision to change careers; it was rather an additional complication along with being a black woman, living in a *banlieue*, and wanting to free herself from wage labor and find a more creative job. Entrepreneurship for her was a way to make these goals come to fruition.

Why Entrepreneurship?

In this section, I describe the process that leads to becoming an entrepreneur. It appears that women in France who have both received a university degree (bac + 2 to bac + 5) and found a job generally choose to become entrepreneurs for access to greater opportunities, while those with degrees who have not found a job become entrepreneurs out of necessity. In both cases, these women are motivated by the desire to overcome the negative perceptions that follow them either in the search for employment or on the job.

Starting a Business out of Necessity

There is no standard experience that leads women into entrepreneurship. The women I spoke with started their entrepreneurial projects for access to greater opportunities as well as out of necessity. When undertaken for personal and professional development, I identify these projects as "opportunity entrepreneurship," as in the case of Rim. Yet the relative success of these Muslim women entrepreneur organizations indicates that the decision to start a business of one's own can also be a strategy for circumventing the extensive reach of New Secularism; this I identify as "necessity entrepreneurship" (Giacomin et al. 2016:181). A lack of autonomy can be a motivating factor in becoming an entrepreneur. Thus, constraints and professional innovation are linked by a causal relationship. This is what Louiza (a 22-year-old who recently earned her business degree) explains:

> I wanted to be independent. And I also thought that I would like to work for my own company and be myself: not make this or that concession for others, in order to work. For me, [removing my headscarf in order to work] was a very difficult choice.

In this interview excerpt, Louiza emphasizes the psychological cost of discrimination, which she qualifies as "difficult". She has not looked for work in the private sector, as she is apprehensive about being rejected for wearing a headscarf. She prefers to focus on becoming professionally independent, which allows her to "be herself". Exclusion can foster a variety of attitudes towards employment: disengagement and self-censorship, but also a desire to redefine one's professional goals. In the latter case, the suffering caused by discriminatory or stigmatizing experiences can be a motivating factor in the decision to quit one's job and start a business of one's own.

Before withdrawing into family life, an initially painful experience which she later came to appreciate, Maria (a 37-year-old mother of four, who has been married for 19 years to a logistics manager) had attempted to find a job and develop her professional skill set:

> This law [the law of March 15, 2004, which was intended to prohibit conspicuous religious clothing from being worn in public schools], it made me . . . in fact, for me, it was . . . I couldn't go to work freely. I couldn't go to work in the outside world, because people were conditioned there to put us in boxes. It really felt like we were being rejected by society.

Maria no longer contemplates returning to work "in the outside world", where New Secularism is the dominant ideology. The experience of total exclusion convinced her that she had no place in the world of work.

Inès (a 28-year-old Algerian immigrant) had worked in Algeria as a computer engineer before moving to France to be with her husband, who has the same professional and ethnic background. Her husband had no difficulty finding work after immigrating, which allowed Inès to come to France in 2013 through the process of family reunification (the couple does not have any children). Though she speaks perfect French, what distinguishes Inès from her husband on the job market is that she is a woman and she wears a headscarf. She spent a year applying to jobs and collecting rejections, all on account of her headscarf, despite the fact that her professional qualifications were recognized by her interviewers. When she decided to start her own business, she thus had little confidence that her efforts would succeed:

> It has been two and a half years since I launched my online store. Today, it still doesn't allow me to be financially independent—it's my husband who ensures the financial

> stability of the household. But I am an entrepreneur now, even if I wasn't convinced in the beginning. I made this choice out of spite. I couldn't find work after coming to France, even though I had all the qualifications.

Inès's story illustrates how the lack of access to employment for women who have degrees, practice Islam, and wear a hijab can force them to look for other forms of work within their communities (in her case, by starting a headscarf business—a matter of profitability more than one of conviction, as we will see later). What we observe here is confirmed across the European continent by ENAR (2016):

> Muslim women often develop avoidance strategies in order not to be confronted with discrimination. . . . Some women turn to their religious or ethnic community to find at least some professional fulfilment and acceptance. Others become entrepreneurs and create their own business. . . . Some of the women resort to removing their headscarf. This can represent a difficult personal decision for these women. (p. 20)

Overcoming Negative Perceptions

Vast ambitions underlie the decision to become an entrepreneur, both on the individual and societal scale. The women I interviewed all referenced the experience of being negatively stereotyped due to being Muslim and being identifiable as such. They are however set on transforming how they and others like them are perceived. The experiences of the women entrepreneurs I interviewed confirm the analysis made by Tixier and Notais (2015:112) on the exclusionary society: "Constrained by society and the relatively exclusive world of work, they decide to put on the face of the woman committed to society, and in turn act to change it" (p. 112). In addition to the freedom from discriminatory regulations offered by professional independence, these women also turn to entrepreneurship in order to overcome the negative stereotypes associated with them and to push social boundaries. Tixier and Notais (2015) further explain:

> These women hope, through their projects, to reverse and reinvent their "destinies," while at the same time escaping the mechanisms of discrimination. . . . The meaning that they ascribe to this future work, and the new place they hope to occupy in society, are legible in their entrepreneurial projects, which in turn come to serve as the breeding ground for a new professional identity. (p. 112)

Mounia (a 27-year-old former technical translator) intends to open a marketing consulting firm. She explains that she would much prefer "to be included, rather than be forced to accept being on the margins." She emotionally explains this feeling of rejection:

> I see it as a betrayal. Because when we are young, we tell ourselves that we are on the inside, that we are included. But when we choose [to wear a headscarf]. . . .
> The Declaration of the Rights of Man, it echoes in our heads [laughs]: We are all equal! And then, well, no. In terms of freedom, there are choices we aren't supposed to make. Not only do we experience this as a betrayal, as a reduction of our individual liberties, but we are then told not to recognize it for what it is. We are intellectually diminished.

> We are told that we alienate others, that are unknowingly hurting ourselves. But this whole argument is what hurts us, what makes us suffer.

Suffering, as a consequence of their stigmatization, is mentioned often by these women. Their tears give palpable expression to the indelible mark left on them by the humiliations of being stereotyped. In fact, over a third of the women I interviewed cried as they spoke, their tears expressing what was otherwise too difficult to say. Suffering was also reflected in the watery eyes of those who stood nearby, listening as this pain was expressed. One of the organizations, according to an informal interview, has even made it part of its mission: “to listen without judgment, to offer support with kindness and respect”. The friendly atmosphere maintained during the day of coworking effectively provides a safe space for women who have been victims of exclusion, and for whom professional life has been an otherwise painful experience. Joviality and kindness are therefore essential tools used by these organizations to rebuild self-esteem. Participants work together to form relationships that will help them avoid professional defeat and violent stigmatization. The objective of these coworking sessions is, according to Rim, to create “the power to talk openly. We boost each other up. It’s also an opportunity to pass on information and promote our work.” Due to what these women assumed to be our biographical, ethnic, and religious proximity to them, they confided in us readily. Our trust in them and our willingness to listen, neither of which these women regularly encounter, were essential to our ability to compile such emotional testimonies.

Endowed with willpower and resilience, these women help each other escape their isolation and realize their desire for professional autonomy. Fatima (a 38-year-old with a master’s degree in healthcare management, who worked as an international project manager in the pharmaceutical industry for seven years) defines herself as a “militant entrepreneur” of the women’s social and solidarity economy. Her goal has always been to start a business of her own, but she feels obliged to impart her actions with meaning. She is cofounder and president of *Équilibre*, an association which provides assistance to all entrepreneurs. She is also a coach in business development and ethical leadership, and she has founded two fair trade, ethical commerce companies—one in the fashion industry, and the other in healthcare. According to her, “Muslim women who wear a hijab, who are excluded from the job market despite their skills, are especially motivated to successfully start businesses of their own that will be respectful of their Muslim identity.” In these remarks, the causality between being excluded from the job market and the emancipatory entrepreneurial project is clearly affirmed. In the place of a hijab, Fatima wears a turban over her hair and a turtleneck sweater. The first solidarity position offered by one of her businesses was filled by a woman who wears a hijab, which conjures the idea of “revenge,” because Fatima refuses to accept the limitations which are imposed on Muslim women who wear headscarves. Negative stereotypes have led to the emergence of a new professional identity, which is evident in the religious or ethnic aspects of the projects these women undertake. Muslim women entrepreneurs create novel career paths, merging an entrepreneurial spirit with ethics informed by Islam.

Islamic Ethics and Entrepreneurial Spirit

Reversing Stigmatization

In the process of overcoming social stigmas, the act of wearing a hijab—which is central to the discrimination that victimizes Muslim women—comes to condition the activity of these

entrepreneurs, and even directs them towards adopting a religion-positive professional identity. Unburdened of the professional practices which forced them to minimize their visibility as Muslims, these women initially make religion a central aspect of their projects. But as our observations suggest, this tends to give way after a few years to an interest in expanding marketing targets and forming alliances which will lead to further empowerment. At the networking event organized by *Akhawate Business*, the visiting theologian reminded participants that "the Sahabiat [the female companions of the prophet Muhammad] were given names that reflected their work in society." *Akhawake Business* is distinguished from *Bee Working* by the central role reserved for religion in its organizational mission. Social responsibility, professional status, and religious identity are thus closely tied. For these Muslim women, the preoccupation with one's responsibility to society is marked. Linda (a 28-year-old teacher at a religious school and personal development coach) explains this further: "It's a way of overcoming the sense of voicelessness and invisibility we experience because of the current political and social climate. We need to be reassured that we have a place in society, that we matter."

Another participant explains that she wants "to share the global heritage of Muslims." The concept of *da'wah* is fundamental to the professional mission of *Akhawake Business*, and manifests in its members as a desire to participate in the construction of an ideal society, to both improve the economic circumstances of their religious community and to change the manner in which it is perceived and represented. Work can become an act of worship, a way of practicing Islam, like a political cause, in an innovative way. This is the case of Maria, who left school at 16 without a degree. Entrepreneurship, she says, has "forced itself" on her. Her sense of calling to her community corresponds with the piousness of her actions. Very devout, she follows the teachings of the Tablighi movement—a rigorous, proselytizing Islamic revivalist practice which has amassed a large following, the center of which is in Pakistan. During the process of making the jeweled bookmarks she sells, she takes time "to make invocations for guidance," so that the lures of profit and recognition never overshadow her desire to please God. Maria also mentions her concern that "making the religion more beautiful" is not socially valued, though it is central to her vocation as a pious Muslim: "I make products, like Quran covers and bookmarks, that help make each Quran precious, so that you will want to open it and engage with the words of Allah."

Maria works from home, and aside from weekly religious meetings with other women, she has few interactions with other people. Between sending her three children off to a private Muslim school, maintaining her apartment in a popular neighborhood of a Paris suburb, and managing her online store, she is almost always busy. Yet it is precisely her entrepreneurial work which makes it possible for her to contribute to her children's costly education. In so doing, she manages to provide her children with access to a space in which they will not be stigmatized for their religion.

Communication, as well as overcoming stigmatization, are essential to Muslim women entrepreneurs, regardless of which organization they belong to. So too is the issue of who controls the image conveyed by a woman wearing a headscarf, which means their efforts in the long term have to do with transforming societal perceptions of Muslim women. They hope to demonstrate through their own examples that Muslim women are endowed with the ability to act. Entrepreneurship is for them more than just a profession; it is part of a process of identity valuation in which the religion for which these women have been stigmatized is transformed into an ethical asset.

Through her entrepreneurial work, Mounia hopes to transform the stigmatizing imagery associated with Muslim women who wear headscarves. Though this desire to transform the negative perceptions of Muslims also extends beyond women entrepreneurs. This concern has been demonstrated by Jouili (2015), in her work on the religious performances of pious Muslim women, to apply to Muslims as a whole as well. Mounia hopes:

> to encourage people to see Muslim women and the community differently, with all the potential and richness they bring to society. And not only in terms of religious prejudice. I'm talking about society's image of Muslims. To show that we are dynamic, that we are totally open-minded.

These hopes are also shared by Rim:

> It's true that in these times, there is a certain image of the Muslim community. For example, at my job [in the automotive industry], people say that Muslims are there just to collect a family allowance. We really hear things like that! But we shouldn't have to hide it there as well.

Rim has adopted an aloofness towards these issues. Because of her professional objectives, she can accord little attention to this stigmatization. With less than two years gone by after our interview, she has already found success as an entrepreneur. Through her precocious work on multiple projects (films, commercials, magazine covers, etc.), she has gained recognition as a talented makeup artist.

The remarks of Fatima perfectly summarize the manner in which entrepreneurship, religion, and the reversal of stigmatization can operate within an ethical framework:

> Entrepreneurship within the Muslim community should not content itself with simply expanding the market (products or services, for the community or not), but should above all deeply question the entrepreneurial process itself, and its tools, its ethics. Islam, before being reduced to an entrepreneur's claim to identity or a feature of their product or their target audience, should show the entrepreneur how to work ethically, how to add value to society, to humanity.

Fatima has used her faith to bolster her entrepreneurial project with a sense of social solidarity. She advocates for an entrepreneurial ethic which questions the typical goals of professional pursuits. The problem as she sees it is not the capitalist production of profit, but the lack of ethics in entrepreneurial activity.

The meetings arranged by these organizations therefore contribute to rebuilding self-esteem, which for *Akhawate Business* also entails legitimizing one's professional practices through social aims informed by religious belief. This religious legitimization is not a stated goal of *Bee Working*, though its members share a common religious and social background. As Lebègue (2015) has shown, classical entrepreneurial support structures necessarily struggle to respond to the specific needs of individual entrepreneurs. Those in this position look elsewhere for social solidarity. In the organizations I have studied, Islamic religious practice serves as a shared asset, which for those individuals with the most qualifications and experience—like Rim and Fatima—takes the form of a guiding ethical system, and manifests for those with more limited resources in business platforms centered on the idea that "Islam is beautiful."

Islam as Symbolic Capital

While similarities with the practice of *da'wah* might seem obvious to the observer, some of those interviewed totally deny that it plays a role in their motivations. Inès, who manages an online hijab and accessory shop, sat alone in front of her computer throughout a *Bee Working* event making improvements to her website. She explains that while she attends events like these to escape the isolation of working from home, to meet other women in her industry, and to discuss her problems and aspirations with them, she emphasizes that she does "not like to be exclusively among Muslims. For me, this emphasis on being a Muslim is annoying." This constitutes a clear critique of forced collectivization. Moreover, the motives behind her actions contradict appearances:

Q: "Why did you choose to start a hijab store?"
A: "In fact, entrepreneurship was an obvious choice. When I arrived in France, I was shocked by the number of women in Paris who wore a hijab. When I decided to open a shop, I immediately thought that would be an interesting market."
Q: "So, do you consider this a religious business?"
A: "If it is, this is mostly because I have mastered the field technically, as I used to work as a project manager and computer engineer for an IT consulting and integration firm. Because of my experience with IT development and digital marketing, I could intuitively see that the hijab was an untapped market. No market research or anything. I wasn't totally convinced, but I wanted to get started professionally."

Inès's economic objective only goes so far as the success of her business project. She makes no mention of the idea of *da'wah* practiced by certain social entrepreneurs in France. She even tries to distance herself from religious business networks. In so doing, she perfectly illustrates the words of Benaissa (2015): "This leads to the conclusion that the activities of an enterprise are determined by religious beliefs, while at the same time, religious beliefs contribute to the operation and objectives of that enterprise" (p. 122). In the case of Inès, I find a confirmation of the hypothesis of Benaissa (2015) that "there is a homologous effect between a certain degree of adhesion to a system of rituals and beliefs and an enterprise's objectives" (p. 121). I note that, in terms of constituting a business community, shared economic objectives and a successful entrepreneurial vision are essential factors, but are secondary to the shared experience of stigmatization.

The women I interviewed frequently talked of their desire for more openness in terms of social diversity. Though as Mounia attests, this goal has not yet been reached: "We're forced to see ourselves as a group. We motivate one another, and I think it's a good thing, even if I'm not pro-community. I don't want to live *exclusively* among Muslims." While a religious business orientation is most often adopted in order to extend the expression of one's faith into the professional world, several *Bee Working* participants expressed their sense of being in a "forced" community due to being marginalized by Islamophobia. The dynamic of this organization is one of collective empowerment, mutual assistance, and skill sharing, and though the participants at the event we observed were predominantly Muslim women in headscarves, this was not a stated goal.

Between the reversal of stigmatization and the creation of symbolic capital, Islam expresses itself in multiple ways during these coworking sessions. But this should not obscure the fact that some participants also hope to expand their professional networks beyond other Muslim women entrepreneurs. These organizations are relatively young, and it seems that they can be

strengthened through an openness to more diversity, which could lead to increased opportunities and member engagement.

Conclusion

Our observations confirm the analyses made in the extant research on female entrepreneurship by Jennings and Brush (2013)—namely that it is a social phenomenon induced by the social relations of gender, that it arises from a need, and that, as Léger-Jarniou et al. (2015) have asserted, its objectives are not limited to economic gain. One difference is notable however: These women are not familiar with entrepreneurship, and access it together through organizations of Muslim women entrepreneurs—which explains the relative success of these groups.

Exclusion can lead to new career perspectives for women who do not fit the traditional mold of the entrepreneur, who are on the margins of French society: outside the realm of job-search and training institutions, employment centers, or chambers of commerce and industry. The observations and interviews compiled during these networking and coworking sessions suggest that Muslim women are pushed into entrepreneurship by prior experiences of discrimination in the job market.

Because they are stigmatized for being visibly Muslim, these women have an interest in continuing their development in a safe environment, far from the humiliations and discriminations they too often suffer. This marginalization allows them to redefine the codes around which their work will progress: Islamic ethics, solidarity, and good will. In such fashion, structural limitations, painful experiences of discrimination, and social exclusion become a driver of entrepreneurship. In fact, the entrepreneurial projects of Muslim women who wear a hijab are part of a larger effort to resist the process of exclusion which makes innovation the only alternative to unemployment or being relegated to the lowliest of positions. Involvement in an organization adapted to one's lived experience is essential to escaping isolation, rebuilding self-esteem, and sharing skills. Thus, these women actively participate in the construction of a social and professional life in which their religious identity will no longer be an obstacle. It is upon this effort that agency, resistance, and empowerment hinge. Empowerment is defined as an egalitarian, participatory, and local process through which women develop a 'social conscience,' or a 'critical consciousness,' which allows them to develop an 'internal power' and acquire the capacity for action—a power to act both on the personal and collective level, with a view to enacting social change.

Resistance is inherent to the agency and the position of non-resignation that these women have adopted, through which they overcome many difficulties to establish their place in an unwelcoming society.

The organizations I observed empower their members in three stages: developing their critical consciousness and their ability to act, developing their interpersonal awareness in order to act *with* or *on*, and developing a social conscience that implicates transforming society as a whole. This article illustrates how these different levels of action—on oneself, on one's environment, and on society—are informed by a critical consciousness which emerges through the reversal and overcoming of stigmatization, and an ethical conscience which redefines the central notions of entrepreneurship itself.

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