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Paper 6

Understanding agency differently: female youth's Muslim identities

Barbara Crossouard, Máiréad Dunne and Naureen Durrani

Abstract

This paper draws on our recent research into Muslim youth identities to consider theoretical and methodological issues with respect to gender and Muslim women's agency. Western constructions of Muslim women often portray them in essentialised ways as subordinated and without agency. Mahmood's (2012) analysis of the practices of the 'women of the mosque' usefully helps to disrupt these facile associations by highlighting the limitations of modern understandings of the self and agency, and in particular how these associate agency with autonomy. She alerts us to the different 'ethics of the self' of her participants and shows how their cultivation of Islamic values and submission to the will of God involved agonistic work on the self which was not without agency. We then draw on this theoretical discussion to discuss the different discursive formations framing women's agency in our research, as well as to consider the methodological limitations of our research approach. In particular, we explore the agonistic and agentive work on the self which is implicated in the production of a pious Islamic self. We then trouble our research approach, suggesting how this agonistic work could readily be flattened and rendered invisible within a focus group discussion and considering what kinds of research spaces could have been more productive for a richer portrayal of Muslim women's agency. Our paper then turns to our data to explore the complex entanglements of our participants' submission and agency, indicating the different ways female youth assumed, negotiated, and contested 'subordinated' identities.

Key words: agency; poststructuralism; gender; Islam; postcoloniality

Word count: 7582

Introduction

In much contemporary Western media we encounter stereotypical representations of Muslim women which portray them in essentialised ways as subordinated and lacking in agency. Recent

examples include the comparison of women who wear burqas to ‘letter boxes’ by Boris Johnson (now the UK Prime Minister) and the regular villification of women who wear the veil in France for failing to embrace its ‘republican’ values. The need to ‘trouble’ such simplistic and homogenised representations was a critical part of the rationale for our research into the construction of Muslim youth identities with respect to the intersections of nation, religion and gender in the four different nation-state contexts of Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan and Senegal, each of which have significant Muslim populations, as well as youth populations (Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard, 2017). At the same time, despite our initial intentions, as we engaged in our analyses, we became troubled ourselves by the extent to which our focus group data seemed to suggest our female youth participants were accepting of patriarchal gender and religious norms, rather than contesting them in overt and visible ways.

In this paper, we take up Saba Mahmood’s (2012) analysis of the religious practices of the ‘women of the mosque’ in Cairo to help us better understand the different ways our female participants were agentic. This involves us in a theoretical excavation of different understandings of agency, which in turn helps us to question our initial interpretations. This discussion engages with Butler’s (1990) reconceptualization of agency as involving the discursive re-signification of dominant norms, in ways that are relatively unknowable or indeed undecidable. These understandings challenge the association of agency in Western liberal philosophies (and liberal feminist positions) with the concept of ‘autonomous’ action, where individual agency is demonstrable through outwardly observable behaviours that signify resistance. As discussed further below, Mahmood (2012) alerts us to the socio-historical contingencies of this modern understanding of personhood. She draws on Foucault (1997) to suggest the possibility that alternative ‘ethics of the self’ may prevail in different sociocultural and socio-historical contexts, whose ‘telos’ does not seek out or valorise autonomy. Her ethnography shows how cultivating submission to the will of God involved extensive and enduring work on the self which was deeply agnostic and not without agency. However such agency is not readily recognisable in terms of ‘autonomous’ actions, or the resignification of dominant norms. While we also dissociate agency with ‘autonomy’, our analysis does however question Mahmood arguments about resignification, and holds on to this as an undecidable possibility.

Our paper also takes up the implications of this discussion for our research methodology, and questions the extent that the qualitative methods through which we pursued the research (focus group discussions) may have debarred us from gaining deeper understandings of the complexities of female youth’s religious identities and their agency. While highlighting how focus group discussions

(FGDs) aligned well with our theoretical frameworks, we draw on methodological literature to discuss the power relations of their interactions, and what alternative approaches could have been more productive. Finally, we provide a cross-case analysis that explores the paradoxes and complexities of Muslim women's agency, illuminating the different ways female youth assumed, negotiated, and contested apparently 'subordinated' identities.

Understanding agency differently

As we outlined above, as we analysed the data, we became increasingly troubled by the extent these seemed to suggest female youth's complicity with dominant gender and religious norms and indeed their complicity in their subordination. However Mahmood's (2012) ethnographic study of the 'women of the mosque' in Cairo proved useful for helping us reconsider these interpretations, and develop more nuanced understandings of our participants' agency. The section that follows elaborates upon these different theoretical understandings of agency and of the self.

Mahmood's discussion of her participants' agency first takes up Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) to contest the liberal association of agency with autonomy. She then turns to Foucault (1990; 1997) to question the importance Butler attaches to the re-signification of dominant (gender) norms, suggesting that this may still retain a progressive ethos that valorises change. As an emphasis on resignification seemed irrelevant in her study of the women of the mosque, she draws on Foucault's (1997) concept of an '*ethics of the self*' to understand the agency of her participants differently. Foucault's understanding of 'ethics' here is not a modern framing of ethics which reduces them to 'a set of regulatory norms'; ethics are instead understood in a more existential and less normative way, as 'a set of practical activities that are germane to a certain way of life' (Mahmood, 2012, p. 27).

Foucault's development of the concept highlights the socio-historical contingencies of how particular kinds of personhood come to be valued within different cultures. It also illuminates how different configurations of personhood have been and can be possible, including those whose overarching telos may not valorise resistance or change.

Mahmood (2012) argues that different 'ethics of the self' should be considered on their own terms, rather than assuming that a particular ethic of the self is superior to others, or indeed that it is universal. She seeks to give value to the 'ethics of the self' that she found to be implicated in her participants' cultivation of Islamic virtues such as patience and modesty, as part of their acceptance of and submission to the will of God. Crucially, while this might seem at one level to involve women's subordination, Mahmood (2012) shows how considerable work on the self was required to

cultivate the values that these women desired. She argues that such work on the self was not without agency or contestation. As she puts it, 'the cultivation of *'sabr'* [the Islamic virtue of patience or endurance] does not mark a reluctance to act [...] it is integral to a constructive project, [...] a site of considerable investment, struggle and achievement' (Mahmood, 2012, p. 174).

This elaboration resoundingly challenges modern understandings of agency that are associated with the autonomous actions of the sovereign, knowing subject. The performance of such a subject is typically enacted in the public rather than the private sphere, and in ways that are highly gendered. The ethics of the self of this sovereign, rational being requires the performance of a masculinised, individualised authority that is resistant to the authority of others. In modern understandings, this questioning of authority specifically included the authority of religion. Indeed the ethos of modernity constructed religion as superstitious, irrational, and therefore 'pre-modern' (Asad, 2003). Instead of accepting received truths, the modern self was defined through the 'capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles' (Mahmood, 2012:8). The cultivation of piety by the women of the mosque therefore represents multiple overt challenges to liberal understandings of agency.

It is intrinsic to our critique and the theoretical framing of our research that poststructural theorisations of identity decentre the sovereign subject and undo modern understandings of the self as a rational, fully conscious agent. Our identities are seen instead as involving ongoing processes of becoming that are affectively charged and never complete. Rather than language being a 'tool' at the disposition of the sovereign subject, our subjectivities are constructed within and through discourse. This discursive construction of our subject positions - our subjectivation - is contingent, socially located, and shot through with power relations. By implication, this is always also political and agonistic (Butler, 1992; Mouffe, 1992; Hall, 1996).

Claims to 'autonomy' clearly become highly suspect and indeed untenable from these theoretical perspectives. For Butler, agency can never be reduced to the autonomous action of any sovereign individual - any such claim misrecognises the social relations through which one is constituted, and which are integral to our being and doing in the world. From this perspective, claims to autonomy are tantamount to a 'disavowed dependency' (Butler, 1992, p. 12). When we consider our identities as something that we do or perform within discourse, in other words, as 'a *practice*, and a signifying practice' (Butler, 1990, p. 198), agency has to be located within these practices of signification, rather than the individual and independent acts of a supposedly sovereign subject. Butler highlights

how the repeated re-citation of norms have constitutive force in the production of our identities, and specifically in relation to gender, describes our gender identities as being constituted through a '*stylized repetition of acts*' (p. 191, italics in original). Agency for Butler then lies in the possibilities for subversive repetition of those acts. In particular, she highlights how 'practices of parody' can show what has been taken as 'the original, the authentic, and the 'real' to be themselves *effects* - which are therefore open to contestation and possible re-signification (p. 200). From this perspective, a 'critical task' for feminists is therefore:

... to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions [of identity], to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating precisely in those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, 1990, p. 201)

While Mahmood (2012) shares Butler's critique of modern understandings of the subject that privilege notions of the autonomous self, she challenges Butler's discursive theorisation of agency as being related to subversive repetition. She asks if the emphasis this places on the resignification of norms means that Butler's theorisation retains a progressive ethos, within which resistance is still privileged. She questions the implicit understandings of personhood this presupposes, and the implications for her research subjects, who are not bent on resistance, but are engaged in the cultivation of a mode of being (telos) that is accepting of authority (religious authority in particular), rather than resisting it. We return to the importance we attach to resistance and contestation in our research in the section below.

Importantly, Mahmood (2012, p. 120) briefly highlights how different and potentially conflictual 'configurations of personhood' (different ethics of the self) can co-exist within the same cultural-historical space. These different ethics of the self are products of different historically-specific discursive formations and could include for example the different understandings of personhood that are proposed within the discursive practices of economic, legal, medical, religious or wider cultural (ethnic) domains. Their discursive formations and the configurations of the self are not discrete, but co-exist in ways that can produce contradictory interpellatory demands that can be experienced in a conflictual way.

We find Mahmood's insight that different configurations of the self can co-exist within a particular culture very relevant for our research. To give an example, this allows us to consider the overt

engagement of some of our female participants with national legislative discourses promulgating gender equality, while at the same time they were required to navigate the (apparently more passive) subject formations proposed within religious and wider cultural discourses.

In concluding this section, we note how these different discursive formations are integrally bound up with institutions associated with the emergence of the modern nation state, such as systems of government, legal systems, and education systems. The previous papers of this special edition have drawn attention to the particular complexities of nation state formations in contexts of postcoloniality. They also illuminate the continuing significance of the colonial past in youth's identity narratives, such that the colonial 'other' was a central axis through which they articulated their identities. Later in this paper we again take up these complex axes of difference when we explore the ways in which our female Muslim participants were agentic. Prior to that, we engage in a critique of our research methodology and its limitations, particularly focusing on the extent this allowed a deep appreciation of the agency of our female participants.

Troubling our Research Approach

The previous section has drawn extensively on Mahmood (2012), whose research adopted an ethnographic approach. As described in introduction to this special issue, our study depended mainly on focus group discussion (FGD) data with male and female youth. As discussed in the introductory article of this edition, the main aim of the FGDs was to create a space for youth to narrate their identities. In other words, the selection of FGDs as a method was explicitly provoked by our performative understanding of identities (Hall, 1996; Butler, 1993; 2011). As discussed below, this theoretical framework aligns with a Foucauldian understanding of power as capillary (Foucault, 1990); in other words, this acknowledges the significance of power relations within the focus group, rather than assuming these can be overcome.

Across the four countries, a total of 58 FGDs were conducted, in which 276 youth were involved, these being an equal number of males and females. The mean age for participants in each country was 24 for Nigeria and Senegal, 23 for Pakistan and 19 for Lebanon respectively. The research was open to those who self-identified as youth. In Africa, youth is defined as those aged 16-35 (African Union, 2006) and in both Nigeria and Senegal a handful of participants were over 30. Each focus group involved a maximum of six participants and was segregated by sex and by religion (Muslim and Christian). Through this, we aimed to give participants greater freedom to address sensitive issues, particularly with respect to gender relations. However, the FGD interactions were still subject

to important power relations between the participants themselves, as well as between the participants and the researchers. An advantage of FGDS can be the insights that their interactions afford to power relations (Ayrton, 2018) as well as how gender (and sexuality) is performed (Allen, 2005). As highlighted above, such advantages were important in our selection of FGDs as a research method and our analysis took account of these interactional, performative identity dynamics. On the other hand, it has been suggested that FGD interactions can create pressures that encourage conformity, or silence some participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998). Durrani and Crossouard (this issue) also illuminate the ways affective processes circulated in our FGDs, intensifying participants' performances of their national identities. Ethical processes included asking all participants to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of the others, including explicitly asking them not to repeat what was expressed in the FGDs afterwards. However many of the participants knew each other, given the different avenues through which they were identified. In some cases, they were identified predominantly through educational institutions. In others, participants were identified mainly through the social networks of the local researchers, so included many whom they knew through their own schooling and higher education. The various webs of social connectivity that were implicated in each context are largely unknowable to the lead researchers, but will have shaped what was possible to say in the FGDs in multiple ways. It could be argued that these personal connections encouraged a freer space for expression of participants' views. However, the reverse is also possible, such that these connections would constrain what could be said (Merryweather, 2010). Overall, despite our attention to confidentiality and anonymity, and our concern to encourage diverse perspectives, the focus groups could be considered a relatively public and regulated space.

This is particularly salient in relation to participants' religious identities and the possibilities the focus groups offered for any overt critique of religious practices. Instead, the public forum of the FGDs seem more likely to have put respondents under pressure to profess and conform to dominant Islamic ideals. As Krämer (2013) comments, the doctrine of secularism assumed a functional differentiation of religion and state, the inevitability of religious decline in a modern age, and the withdrawal of religion to the private sphere, or what has been called the privatization of religion. Dunne et al. (2017) and Crossouard and Dunne (this issue) have questioned the extent to which the first was ever achieved in nation-states which have proclaimed their secularity. The second tenet (the supposition of religious decline) is self-evidently now *untenable* - religion clearly continues to be integral to the lives of many citizens around the world. It is also clear that religious commitments can sit alongside 'modern' ideals

and aspirations for social reform, both historically and in contemporary times (Asad, 2003; Badran, 2009).

With respect to the privatization of religion, Krämer (2013) further argues that this is an impossibility in the case of Islam, given the obligation for Muslims to publically profess their religious faith. One's religion is a way of life, integral to one's being, involving daily actions and often communal performances of rituals that cannot be confined to the 'private' sphere. Although Krämer does not bring gender into her discussion, our data also suggest that there are clear gender differences in the extent to which public profession of one's religious belongings is mandated for men as opposed to women. As a female youth in Senegal explained, not only can women not lead prayers, when women do pray, they are relegated to a position that is either separate from or behind all males (even young boys), they have to ensure their bodies and heads are covered, and constrain their proclamations of their faith when praying:

when he prays, a man has the right to raise his voice, he says 'Allahou Akbar' - that is to say 'God is unique'. But as a woman, you don't have the right to speak loudly. (Female Senegal)

As discussed later in Dunne, Fincham, Durrani and Crossouard, (this issue), pressures to publically profess one's religion resulted in strong appeals to masculine authority and religious certainties in the male FGDs in particular. Our interpretation of the female FGD data is that a concomitant effect was to regulate what females could voice towards religious and cultural conformity, and what *could* be interpreted as 'subordinated' identity formations. The discussion of our FGD data which follows illuminates the precarious boundaries that our female participants had to navigate between voicing overt critique of religious practices, and the public profession of their religious convictions.

While contestation was not impossible within the FGDs, a more open engagement might have been more likely in private spaces, as Krämer (2013) also suggests. While we included observation data in our study as far as possible, our research engagement for this study did not permit us to develop the depth of relationships that would have given us access to these more private spaces. While we feel confident that the relationships we enjoyed with our participants and our local researchers could have supported us in developing a more extended ethnographic approach, this would also have required a longer timeframe than we had available.

However, even when seeming to perform in a 'subordinated' way in FGDs, we want also to highlight how this supposed 'subordination' can involve work on the self that is inherently agonistic and

conflictual. For example, Mahmood (2012) describes the tensions between Abir and her husband over her participation in the piety movement, and her resistance to his pressures to desist (pp. 176-180). Mahmood also shows how over time Abir led her husband to be more observant of Islamic codes, so that he gradually curtailed 'errant' behaviours such as drinking alcohol. While Mahmood (2012) is concerned to stress how religious observation within the piety movement involves agonistic work on the self, the performance of her participants' identities in the private sphere (as embattled wives) would also appear to have been a site of struggle and contestation.

What also seems possible is that these bodily performances could work in terms of the subversive repetition of norms, whether in their actions within the mosque or in the domestic sphere. At the same time as opening this up as a possibility, we recognise this being ultimately unknowable. Resignification does not lie within the field of action of any individual, but nor are its possibilities closed over and confined to the particular moment of an action. The iterability of the sign means that possibilities of resignification can be considered open in an ongoing, interminable way to *difference* (Butler, 1992; 1997). Importantly, this opening to resignification makes no assumptions as to whether this might be for better or worse; this also is indeterminable and largely unforeseeable. At the same time, this does not diminish the importance of illuminating and contesting how gender norms work to exclude and indeed preclude the recognition of particular subject formations within any particular context - on the contrary, it can be argued that loosening the 'coercive hold of norms on gendered life' remains a critical imperative (Butler, 2015, p. 32).

Some implications for the exposition of our data are firstly, that we must recognise that discourses that suggest female youth's complicity with 'subordination' does not imply a lack of agency. Secondly, we seek to illuminate in our analysis the ways our participants contested and resisted gender (and religious) norms, without seeing this as reflecting a 'progressive' ethos. In what follows we include both individual quotes and more extended excerpts that illustrate the FGD interactions. Our use of individual quotes is to illustrate the discourses available to youth for their identity work; it does not imply that we use the individual as a unit of analysis.

Agency in action: female Muslim youth identities

In the remainder of the paper we turn to our data to explore the different discursive registers of female Muslim youth's agency, while nevertheless acknowledging the limitations of our research approach and what could become knowable to us through this. We address the data in three different sections, each of which take up different discourses that reflect different registers of female agency. We resist throughout our analysis any temptation to reinstall a sovereign subject.

We understand the FGD narratives as discursive productions and therefore always imbricated with the wider social institutions within which our respondents were interpellated.

We begin by focusing on discourses that were suggestive of a gender regime where women's place was in the home, in a subordinated (or submissive) position, although insist as discussed above that we cannot assume this to be non-agentive. We show how religion could be invoked as the authority for this positioning, by both Muslims and Christians, male as well as female. We conclude this section by highlighting the different ways that discourses of 'rights' could be invoked within discussions of such gender relations.

The second section shows women drawing on Islamic codes to comment on and critique male practices and their unequal gender relations for being 'un-Islamic'. We discuss the ways this is distinct from the work on the self that was highlighted in Mahmood's analysis, and again how this challenges stereotypical constructions of Muslim women as 'non-agentive'. We also highlight the complex boundaries female youth were obliged to navigate when contesting these relations.

Finally, we take up points in our data where female Muslim youth invoked more modern discourses of equal rights between men and women to contest their contemporary positioning in the public sphere.

Through this structure, we attempt to illustrate the different discursive registers through which the female youth participants were agentive in the ways they assumed and resisted their gendered positioning. All quotations are from Muslim youth participants, unless otherwise indicated.

Performing 'the good (Muslim) woman'

This section addresses the multiple instances in which youth depictions of national ideals for men and women illuminated a gender regime dominated by powerful patriarchal relations in which women were almost invariably positioned in a subordinated way. We nevertheless recall that all of the previous papers in this special edition have shown how national and religious identities were closely bound up together, so that religion was often invoked in response to questions about youth's national identity. Our analysis also shows that religion was often invoked as an authority for patriarchal gender relations, but that power of this regime could not be attributed in any simplistic way to being Muslim. We also again remind the reader that our research approach invited the re-citation of dominant norms, and these 're-citations' could not sufficiently attend to the agentive and agonistic ways that such norms were assumed or contested.

We begin by recalling how the ideals of being a *national* in our four country contexts typically reflected a strong public-private divide, where the proper place for a man was the public sphere and the proper place of a woman the domestic sphere.

Men participate in politics, not women. No woman achieved anything in politics because the man is the supreme ruler. (Male Lebanon)

Women in Nigeria, most of them are house wives. Most of them are restricted to domestic roles. More especially here in the north (Male Nigeria)

The right of the woman is to love her husband, to respect him, to abide by him, to take care of his children. The ideal woman in Senegal is [...] someone who is submissive (soumise) (Male Senegal)

While these excerpts are all male voices, women also cited similar gender norms, where women's role was constructed in relation to the domestic sphere:

[As an ideal Senegalese woman] I take care of the house, I take care of the family, be a good housewife, be a good mother, be a good wife, and with regard to the man, he must take care of the family financially speaking. He must go to work, and all that. (Female Senegal)

Some educated women prioritise work over family ... By ignoring the home, they ignore the whole generation. (Female Pakistan)

The last quotation suggests some cracks in the dominant gender regime related to the effects of education, even if in this instance this is critiqued for having diluted women's commitment to their responsibilities for the reproduction of traditional norms. In other FGDs, the effects of education on gender norms were valorised, and the ways that education was creating possibilities for women's engagement in work outside the home were constructed as a force for positive change.

It is important to note that these powerfully gendered national ideals were not only to be found in the narratives of our Muslim participants. Many Christian respondents (both male and female) portrayed similar national ideals with a similar gender divide between public and private spheres:

... the Senegalese woman stays at home to do the household, cook, take care of children, and the Senegalese man goes to work to look for what to bring home to feed the family. (Female Christian Senegal)

Earlier in this issue we have highlighted how youth saw their religious identity as the most important to them. We turn now to instances where such gendered ideals were overtly attributed to religion, typically when we were exploring differences in men and women's religious practices. In many cases, this produced similar invocations of a strong public/private divide, but with the difference that women's domestic, reproductive role was portrayed as integral to her obligations before God. This was evident again in both male and female FGDs:

Women have to leave her work and raise the children to make God happy. (Female Lebanon)

In Islam the rightful place of a woman is within the four walls of her house. (Female Pakistan)

Although nation and religion could be brought together in powerful ways to justify patriarchal relations, others critiqued the ways Islamic discourses had been deployed to justify women's position in the domestic sphere. For instance, in the following example, we still see a powerful assertion of male patriarchy, but a rejection of the use of Islam in support of this:

people use Islamic discourse to set the limits of women and define their role. A woman's place is inside the house and her role is to raise and nurture her children. But Islam doesn't say that it's a woman's responsibility to feed and wean her babies. (Male Pakistan)

In another instance, the entry of women to the public sphere whether in professional and political contexts was recognised as now more acceptable, but this did not disrupt the gender hierarchies of the home, which, in contrast to the example above, were seen as having a religious basis:

In the domain of religion, a woman should be submissive; she should be in the service of her husband (inaudible). Now, in professional contexts, in the electoral lists, we talk about parity, but you can't possibly talk about parity in the house, if not it would undermine religion... (Female Senegal)

Here we recall our earlier discussion of how different discursive formations with different configurations of personhood can be in play in a particular context. This is conflictual and agonistic -

navigating the contradictory ideals of subjecthood that can be in play in different contexts is a source of considerable tension. It is also pertinent to remember the power of religion for our participants. As indicated in several papers of this special edition, religion was the most important identity structure for the majority of youth across all our cases; being Muslim was intrinsic to their identities, an embodied way of being that was far from being a question of rational ‘choice’, or a ‘set of beliefs to which an individual ‘gives assent’” (Mahmood, 2012, p. xiii; Asad et al, 2009).

When considering these gender relations it also seems important to bear in mind the ways coloniality contributed to the erasure of local power structures and the institutionalisation of power relations that resembled those of the colonisers (see also Paper 7 of this special issue). As Mamdani (1996) and Oyěwùmí (2005)xxx both highlight, colonial rule brought new concepts and new systems of power in its wake. These erased complex systems of community relations, including those of matriarchal cultures, and super-imposed flattened structures of male domination, involving strong heteronormative binary relations within which women were constructed as subordinated or submissive. Overall, an implication of such arguments is that the powerful patriarchal gender hierarchies that were often reflected in these FGDs should be considered as a complex product of colonial history and local social relations.

We also need to highlight the complexities of the word ‘submissive’ and the extent to which this implies a position of non-agency. It was striking for example that one of the few women to be identified as a national heroine in Senegal (Aline Sitou Diatta) was venerated by a male participant for being ‘*submissive*’. This Jola leader in Casamance in the south of Senegal was particularly admired for her resistance to the introduction of cash crops by the French during the colonial eras. Her case illustrates well how local power structures included women in positions of power, in contrast to the colonial systems of rule which imposed male domination. Importantly, at the same time as being admired for her acts of resistance (she was deported by the French and died in captivity), she was also described in the FGDs as ‘submissive’ in terms of her faith. Discussions in the Senegalese FGDs clearly demonstrated that the word ‘submission’ was becoming contested however - for some respondents, it was an admirable quality, and did not mean that women lacked agency, while for others it had become untenable to construct women as submissive to men. We return to this discussion below.

In all such examples, we are acutely aware that youth are invoking dominant stereotypes in response to our invocations of their national and religious identities. What is not necessarily always evident is the extent that they agreed with these norms, or how these related to the ways they lived

their lives. As pointed out before, we also cannot assume that acceptance of submission - or what might appear to be subordination - means that women are non-agentic. As Mahmood (2012) shows, a desire to submit to a religious authority on the part of her female respondents involved active work on the self, and moreover could involve highly contested relations with other family members, which were clearly not devoid of agency.

Having acknowledged the limited extent our research accessed such more intimate spaces, we now turn to moments in the FGDs where the register of the FGDs was more openly questioning of dominant regimes. The first of these involves female youth drawing on Islamic codes to hold 'male usurpers' of the power of God to account. The second involves their invocation of discourses of gender equality and women's position in the public sphere.

Holding male 'usurpers' to account

Mahmood (2012) recognised in her analysis how different 'configurations of personhood' associated with different discursive formations can co-exist in particular times and spaces. While the section above mostly suggests female youth's complicity with and subservience within patriarchal relations, this was not the only register in the FGDs. We now turn to points where female youth discourses more actively and visibly contended male domination, notably by invoking religious discourses, in several distinct ways.

First of all, we show how female youth invoked the key tenets of Islam to highlight how men and women were considered equal before God, despite the differences in their worldly practices of religious observation. As this female youth put it:

when it comes to being in harmony with the Lord, when it comes to being a very good Muslim, there's no difference. [...] . There are differences in practice [e.g. women could not lead prayers], but when comes to access to the Lord, when it's about Heaven, there's no longer a difference. (Female Senegal)

Invoking Islam to contest gender inequality sits in striking contradiction to the ways gender and Islam are constructed in the preceding section, but importantly this also disrupts assumptions that Islamic codes are intrinsically antithetical to modern gender equality discourses. Indeed, it was striking that some respondents saw the promotion of gender equality as befitting both national *and* religious ideals. For example, the female participant below invokes Islamic codes to critique gender relations within her national context, arguing that greater respect for women's rights would enhance her country's credibility as an Islamic nation:

Lebanon would be better as an Islamic country to give women their rights. (Female Lebanon)

The unspoken assumption here is that proper observation of Islam is entirely congruous with improvements in women's rights, in complete reversal of stereotypical constructions of Islam as the antimony of all that is modern.

As we have shown above, male (and female) youth could bring discourses of nation and religion together to confine women to the domestic sphere. At the same time, some female youth drew on Islamic codes to refute such messages. They called attention to 'false interpretations' made of the Qu'ran, which had resulted in women being constructed as subordinate. They saw men in positions of power within Islam as having usurped the authority of God in what they had added to the original messages of the Qu'ran. This is illustrated by the argument below within a female FGD in Senegal which revolved around the question of whether a women's ascent to heaven depended upon her husband:

P1: But is this is it said in the Koran? Because sometimes there are people who add things, that are not part of the Muslim religion. [inaudible]

P2: ...it's something crucial in the Muslim religion...

P1: Sometimes there are exaggerated interpretations. It's true that they scare people, but in reality they don't exist in the Holy Koran.

P2: We're going to cast doubt the texts of Islam.

P1: No, we are not casting doubt on them [inaudible] were those texts written by the Prophet? No, by men, the 'Sahabas'? [Mohammed's disciples] - I don't know, who wrote that? (Female, Senegal)

Importantly, however, as well as critiquing men's 'exaggerated interpretations' of the Koran, this excerpt also illuminates the sensitivity about open critique of Islamic texts. The concern about 'doubting the texts of Islam' invokes the issue of blasphemy, which is criminalised in many countries around the world (including in the Americas and in Europe), and has been at the centre of international controversies about Islam. Here these issues are raised in an explicit way, but they are likely to have shaped what could be voiced in many other FGDs.

The critiques above address how (male) interpretations of Islam had inscribed patriarchal relations within the ways Islam was now practised in these contexts. A further strand of female critique focused on men who did not properly comply with Islamic codes, particularly with respect to the practice of polygamy. The female youth in the Nigerian FGD below were especially critical of men

who had more than one wife but did not respect their obligations within Islam to treat each wife equally, and to marry again only if they had the means to do so:

P1: Ok, for the men, you know in Islam is permitted for you to marry four wives you have to treat them equally. But now they take it as you just marry somebody and neglect the other one.

P2: You are only permitted to marry four wives, that is, if you are capable. Some of them they don't have anything and if you ask them they will say that Prophet Mohammed (SAW) did that. (Female Nigeria)

In this FGD with Nigerian female youth, several women then joined in to voice similar critiques. Perhaps the sense that they had a common standpoint allowed the discussions to go further, so that a more trenchant critique could be voiced of the unequal gender relations that polygamy involved for them, and what this meant for women who found themselves in an unsupported marriage:

P2:... for the Muslim men they have too many wives while the women just one husband, and the Muslim men are to go outside and look for what to take care of the family, while the women you're going outside without your husband permission is totally unacceptable (Female Nigeria)

P3 You see in Qu'ran they tell woman to stay indoors, but the main problem the Muslim women are having they don't agree, if they do that ... for the men when they are not capable of doing that, it brings problem to their lives. (Female Nigeria)

However, the difficult boundaries that female youth had to navigate when contesting such gender relations were again illuminated by a Senegalese participant who talked of the consequences of challenging women's 'status of weaker sex, of women at home' and the conflation of this with religious norms. She described how the stance against polygamy by the renowned Senegalese author and feminist, Mariama Ba, had been constructed as being anti-religious:

... people didn't see that positively. Because she said that the fight for women's emancipation should start by the fight against polygamy [...]. Religion says that men can have four wives, but provided that you have the means to take care of them all, to treat them equally. Now people interpreted this badly, they haven't understood that. They say this woman, she wants to undermine religion. (Female Senegal)

Appeals to the authority of Islamic codes to contest gender subordination were therefore fraught, and could all too readily be turned against women who questioned their patriarchal biases.

We are equal!

We turn finally to points where our analysis identified a discursive register which focuses on legal frameworks, including sometimes discourses of women's rights, as opposed to the religious registers of the previous section. Instances of this were relatively infrequent, but nevertheless demonstrate points where female youth did demonstrate an awareness of or dissatisfaction with women's rights. The first illustration shows a strong awareness of women's positioning as inferior to men, but then turns to the ways legal frameworks are themselves stacked against women, and some implied concern that this was not provoking any female activism:

The man takes his decision without referring to anyone, but the woman always has to refer to the man. The man's testimony is equal to two women. Inheritance for women is half that of a man. It bothers us, but women are not fighting for more rights. (Female Lebanon)

Other instances where a more modern discourse of equal rights was visible involved more active contestation and female resistance to assumptions of male superiority:

I was the President of the Youth Movement. One day three guys waylaid me [asking] 'actually, how come it is that you are a woman, the others are men and you become the President? You lead both women and men?' And immediately I replied 'And if the men are less competent than me? And if I am more competent than the men? What's wrong with me leading?' I was not going to let myself be abused. (Female Senegal)

However while gender parity laws had been passed in Senegal, many discussions in the FGDs also demonstrated that this remained highly contested. We show elsewhere (see Paper 7 of this special issue) how such laws could be constructed as an imposition of the West and its understanding of modernity, and as such, as alien to local cultures and religious practices.

Conclusion

This paper was provoked by our concerns to attend to the agency of our female youth participants, in the face of many accounts which seemed to re-cite patriarchal relations of domination with little visible contestation. This prompted us to engage in a theoretical excavation of the concept of agency, which resists its association with autonomous action, and recognises instead the agency that

is intrinsic to the agonistic work on the self that is implicated in both conforming to, as well as resisting gender norms. Our reading of Mahmood (2012) also prompted our methodological critique of our research processes. Here we recognise the limited extent that we could access more private and agonistic moments of our participants' lives, in which more critical commentary on gender relations and their intersections with religion could have been more likely.

Our analysis of the FGD discourses focuses on three different (although intersecting) discursive registers. The first of these would suggest a gender regime dominated by patriarchal relations, in which women are constructed as subordinate and 'submissive'. We demonstrate nevertheless the need for caution in interpreting the concept of 'submission', not least for the extent such interpretations might imply reinstalling a sovereign subject whose agency is understood in terms of 'autonomous' action. In keeping with Mahmood's (2012) call for researchers to value the ethics of the self of the participants, we also sought to understand how this discursive regime came into being. We called attention to the ways women's agency has been consistently diminished through the imposition of colonial systems of rule, as well as in the fabrication of the (western) myth of secularity that is intrinsic to the project of modernity.

Our analysis then turned to more overt moments of contestation in our FGD data. We highlighted how female youth invoked Islamic discourses to contest gender relations in a range of different ways. The final register drew on notions of women's rights that were framed in more legalistic ways. Throughout our analysis we also showed how these discourses could be rebuffed, often through the construction of women's claims as alien to local cultures or to religious ideals. At the same time, we must remain optimistic that female youth discourses were introducing elements of subversion into what seemed largely patriarchal gender regimes and hope this paper will also contribute in some way to such re-signification. We return to a fuller discussion of the powerful gender symbolism in the youth discourses of nation and religion in the concluding paper of this special issue.

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