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'Mothering Through Islam': Narratives of Religious Identity in London

LOUISE RYAN* AND ELENA VACHELLI

Abstract

This paper draws upon research with mothers of diverse Muslim backgrounds in London to explore how these women use 'conservative' interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices to underpin their parenting strategies. In particular the paper looks at how mothers use religion as a frame to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences and encounters in Britain. We suggest that the women use Islam in four key ways: (i) as a framework for teaching their children right and wrong, (ii) as a means of protecting children from the 'moral' dangers of British society, (iii) as an authoritative voice that reinforces parenting and (iv) as a means of critiquing specific aspects of both the traditional and British culture in which they live and daily negotiate their different cultural and religious belonging. In attempting to instil religious values in their London-based children, these mothers have to negotiate the hostility that Islam increasingly provokes in British society's public arenas.

Keywords

parenting; Muslim religion; culture; migration; London

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Introduction

Much has been written about the inter-generational clash between migrant Muslim parents and their British-born children.¹ The literature suggests that parental authority, gender roles, cultural identities and religious practices may become sites of inter-generational conflict.² While this may be common for parents and children in many societies, the experience of migration adds further layers of complexity and potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication. Parents, who grew up in different socio-cultural, religious and economic environments, may find it difficult to comprehend the experiences and expectations of their British-born children.³ Within these complex inter-generational relationships, cultural heritage and religious beliefs may take on new significance.

This paper draws upon research with mothers of diverse Muslim backgrounds in London to explore how women use conservative interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices to underpin their parenting strategies. We are especially interested in how the women use religion as a frame to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences and encounters in Britain.

In recent years there has been a burgeoning of work on Islam and on the role of religion in negotiating different forms of belonging within a range of migratory contexts across many countries.⁴ This literature highlights the extent to which public discourse on Muslims in Europe is increasingly framed around the alleged incompatibility between Islam and a notion of 'Western values'⁵ widely

¹ A. Ijaz and T. Abbas, 'The Impact of Inter-Generational Change on the Attitudes of Working-Class South Asian Muslim Parents on the Education of their Daughters' in *Gender and Education* 22:3 (2010), 313–326; C. Dwyer, 'Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women and the Negotiation of Difference' in *Gender, Place and Culture* 6:1 (1999), 5–26; H. Ramji, 'Dynamics of Religion and Gender Among Young British Muslims' in *Sociology* 41:6 (2007), 1171–1189.

² P. Werbner, 'Veiled Interventions in Pure Space: Honour, Shame and Embodied Struggles Among Muslims in Britain and France' in *Theory, Culture and Society* 24:2 (2007), 161–186.

³ S. Thaper-Bjorkert and G. Sanghera, 'Social Capital, Educational Aspirations and Young Pakistani Muslim Men and Women in Bradford' in *The Sociological Review* 58:2 (2010), 244–264.

⁴ P. Hopkins and R. Gale, (eds.), *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, University of Edinburgh Press 2009; T. Abbas, (ed.), *Islamic Political Radicalism: a European Perspective*, Edinburgh University Press 2007.

⁵ A. Korteweg and G. Yurdakul, 'Islam, Gender and Immigrant Integration: Boundary Drawing in Discourses on Honour Killing in the Netherlands and Germany' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32:2 (2009), 218–238: 218.

based on liberalism.⁶ As Tahir Abbas suggests, 'Muslim minorities in the West face a whole range of issues in relation to identity, the adaptation of religio-cultural norms and values, and issues of everyday citizenship'.⁷

In Britain public debates about Muslims are increasingly framed by concerns about securitization.⁸ Sardar and Ahmad argue that Muslims were seen during the 1950s and 1960s as law-abiding, 'docile folks'.⁹ However, especially in the post-9/11 and 7/7 era, a range of Muslim people from different origins have felt under attack from government policies, media stereotyping and suspicion among the wider British population.¹⁰ The atrocities of the terror attacks in New York and London contributed to define Muslims people as the 'danger within' and their identity become increasingly framed by global events. Visible displays of Islamic beliefs have become associated with violent extremism, the threat of terrorism and an apparent refusal to integrate into British society.¹¹ According to Haleh Afshar, faith 'becomes a newfound surrogate for race and ethnicity in erecting barriers to the equality of rights and entitlements for many citizens'.¹² Nonetheless, the attacks on Islam in many Western countries both reflect and reinforce an increase in religious observance and the adoption of Muslim religious symbols, such as the *hijab*.¹³ Moreover, the increase use of religious symbols can be understood as a way to challenge negative stereotypes and stigmatization; asserting a positive self image¹⁴ such as pursuing education and professional careers whilst also religiously Muslim. However, public displays of Muslimness are fraught with tensions in societies where Islam is regarded with suspicion.¹⁵

⁶ E. Kofman, S. Saharso and E. Vacchelli, 'Gendered Perspectives on Integration Discourses and Measures' (forthcoming in *International Migration*).

⁷ Abbas *Islamic Political Radicalism*, 3.

⁸ T. Modood, 'Muslims and the Politics of Difference' in Hopkins and Gale (eds.), *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*. Edinburgh University Press 2009, 193–209.

⁹ Waqar Ahmad and Ziauddin Sardar (eds.), *Muslims in Britain*. London and NY: Routledge 2012.

¹⁰ S. Vertigans, 'British Muslims and the UK Government's War on Terror' in *British Journal of Sociology* 61:1 (2010), 26–44.

¹¹ C. Joppke, 'Limits of Integration Policy: Britain and Her Muslims' in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35:3 (2009), 453–472; N.C.D. Meer and T. Modood, 'Embodying Nationhood? Conceptions of British National Identity, Citizenship and Gender in the "Veil Affair"' in *Sociological Review* 58:1 (2010), 84–111.

¹² H. Afshar, 'Secularism, Racism and the Contemporary Politics of Belonging: Muslim Women in the UK' in *Secularism, Racism and the Politics of Belonging* (2012), 33.

¹³ S. Bilge, 'Beyond Subordination Versus Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women' in *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31:1 (2010), 9–28; R.H. Williams and G. Vashi, 'Hijab and American Muslim Women' in *Sociology of Religion* 68:2 (2007), 269–287.

¹⁴ L. Ryan, 'Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatisation: We're Just Normal People' in *Sociology* 45:6 (2011), 1045–1060; J. Jouili and S. Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany' in Anitta Kynsilehto (ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives 2008 – Tampere Peace Research Institute Occasional Paper* 96.

¹⁵ L. Ryan, 'Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatisation' and L. Endelstein and L. Ryan, 'Dressing Religious Bodies in Public Spaces: Clothing, Gender and Negotiations of Stigma Among Jews in Paris and Muslims in London' in *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science*, forthcoming.

Many of the public debates about Islam, especially in Western media, focus on migrant Muslim women. There is a stereotypical argument that 'Muslim immigrants are ill-equipped to adapt to Western norms of gender equality'¹⁶ given their visible and embodied difference from majority society.¹⁷ Across many European countries, the headscarf or *hijab*, more than any other single issue, has become the source of controversy.¹⁸ For many political commentators, the *hijab* is a sign that Muslims 'are a problematic minority refusing to integrate'.¹⁹ As Sima Bilge notes, the paradox of public displays of religiosity is that veiling simultaneously is interpreted as a sign of Muslim women's assumed 'passivity' and also as a mark of their apparent 'threat' to Western values.²⁰ However, the voices of Muslim women are frequently absent from these public debates and their under-representation tends to reinforce the view that Muslim women are passive or disengaged.²¹ There is some evidence to suggest that Muslim women are beginning to play a more active role 'at the interface between the public and private spheres'.²²

Our paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how women who identify as practising Muslims interact at local levels and use religion to negotiate their day-to-day encounters with other social actors. We are aware that defining different variants of Islam is complex and within the literature there are numerous discussions about how religious practices and identities can be classified, such as 'liberal', 'moderate', 'fundamentalist', 'extremist'.²³ In this paper we define our participants as religiously 'conservative' in the sense that they prioritize a religious identity based upon devout practices and strict interpretation of religious texts. Drawing on our data gathered in London between 2009 and 2010, we consider how these religiously conservative mothers draw upon Islam in four key ways: (i) as a framework for teaching their children right and wrong, (ii) as a resource to protect children from the physical and moral dangers of British society, (iii) as an authoritative voice that reinforces parenting and (iv) as a means of critiquing specific aspects of both their 'traditional' and

¹⁶ C. Diehl, M. Koenig and K. Ruchdeschel, 'Religiosity and Gender Equality: Comparing Natives and Muslim Migrants in Germany' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32:2 (2009), 278–301: 281.

¹⁷ Korteweg and Yurdakul, *Islam, Gender*, 222.

¹⁸ J. Jouili and S. Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'; C. Hancock, 'Spatialities of the Secular: Geographies of the Veil in France and Turkey' in *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15:3 (2008), 165–179; Afshar 2012; S. Saharso and D. Lettinga, 'Headscarf Debates as a Prism for Conceptions of National Identity' in N. Yuval-Davis and P. Marfleet, Runnemed Trust (eds.), *Secularism, Racism and the politics of belonging* 2012, .

¹⁹ Werbner, *Veiled Interventions*, 163.

²⁰ S. Bilge, 'Beyond Subordination Versus Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women' in *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31:1 (2010), 9–28.

²¹ Bilge *Beyond Subordination*.

²² S. Thaper-Bjorkert and G. Sanghera, 'Social Capital, Educational Aspirations and Young Pakistani Muslim Men and Women in Bradford' in *The Sociological Review* 58:2 (2010), 244–264: 247.

²³ T. Modood and F. Ahmad, 'British Muslim Perspectives on Multiculturalism' in *Theory, Culture and Society* 24:2 (2007), 187–213.

British culture in which they live and daily negotiate their different cultural and religious belonging.

Framing Religion in Migration

Religion may perform many different roles in the migratory experience and, indeed, migration may in turn shape religious expression.²⁴ As Stanczak notes, religion can provide a space for 'maintaining, reclaiming, and altering' aspects of identity.²⁵ At the same time, he adds, religious authority can help to guide and inform migrants' integration into the destination society without fear of undermining faith. Hence, for migrants in particular, religion can provide a means for both maintaining and expressing continuity of faith and practice while negotiating integration within a new environment.

The work of Goffman, although not specifically focused on religion, is useful to understand forms of social interaction and the presentation of self in new and unfamiliar social contexts. We argue that this framework provides a helpful analytical tool for exploring how religiously conservative Muslim women encounter and negotiate their role as mothers and social actors in the social context of London.

The theoretical framework used in this article combines elements of classical sociology with critical psychology and draws upon Goffman's frame analysis²⁶ and on the concept of 'interpretative repertoire'²⁷ as a device that a speaker uses in order to construct order and continuity within a life narrative. Goffman argues that we seek to make sense of our social situations so that our world appears knowable, predictable and reliable. He uses the concept of 'frames' to describe the methods that people employ to organize their experiences into meaningful activities and to settle on a clear definition of reality. Thus a 'frame' can be understood as a schema of interpretation through which social actors make sense of the world around them using particular sets of meanings and values. Goffman's frame analysis suggests that human interaction is based upon processes of interpretation as actors use a complex range of signs to make judgments about social reality.²⁸ This process of framing begins in infancy through socialization when we learn the rules of social interaction. Identifying and following the rules of society become normalised, taken-for-granted: 'most actions which are guided by rules of conduct are performed unthinkingly'.²⁹ By employing

²⁴ See also papers by Jackson, Rey and Hüwelmeier in this special issue.

²⁵ Gregory Stanczak, 'Strategic Ethnicity: The Construction of Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic Religious Community' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29:5 (2006), 856–881: 857.

²⁶ E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, London: Penguin Books 1972; E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, London: Penguin Books 1974.

²⁷ S. Taylor and M. Wetherell, 'A Suitable Time and Place' in *Time and Society* 8:1 (1999), 39–58; S. Taylor, 'A Place for the Future? Residence and Continuity in Women's Narratives of Their Lives' in *Narrative Inquiry* 13:1 (2003), 193–215; S. Taylor, 'Identity Trouble and Opportunity in Women's Narratives of Residence' in *Auto/Biography* 13: (2005), 249–265; S. Taylor and K. Littleton, 'Biographies in Talk: A Narrative – Discursive Research Approach' in *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3:1 (2006).

²⁸ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.

²⁹ Goffman, *Interaction Rituals*: 49.

frames social actors reduce the complexity and restrict the uncertainty of our environment. Goffman argues that only when these rules are ruptured and no longer simply taken-for-granted do we become aware of them. This may result in 'misframings' – when reality does not fit with people's expectations and understandings – when the 'signs' cannot be easily interpreted – which can lead to misunderstanding and distrust.

Although Goffman does not apply his analysis to transnational migration, many of his concepts are useful in explaining the experiences of migrants. Moving to a new geographical location and social situation requires identifying and following new rules so that 'normality' can be re-established. Amid the process of relocation migrants may experience 'an adjustment'³⁰ that can be understood as a quest for 'normality'. This process of 'adjustment' involves not only adaptation to a new situation, but also elements of 'continuity' with former frames of reference.

Similarly to Goffman's frame analysis, work in feminist oriented social psychology³¹ has identified ways in which social identities are shaped through narratives which are both enacted and constrained by pre-existing social meanings. This approach is particularly useful when looking at the shaping of religious identities in a migration context and contributes to understanding how personal narratives are in part shaped by collectively held narratives. Interpretative repertoires are participants' discursive resources which are recognized within a particular community and are mobilized in order to make sense of the speakers' belonging. As they are used to construct coherent narratives, they are not just given directly by external events but they are produced in talk through a continuous process of reflexive work and incorporation of pre-existing discursive frameworks in the narrative.

In this paper we suggest that Islam may be used as a 'frame' providing a set of 'interpretative repertoires' which are mobilized by some Muslim migrants when talking about their experience of migration and parenting in London. In this way, we suggest that the frame of Islam provides a recognizable logic and set of interpretative repertoires which are systematically used by the research participants in order to describe their relationship to new places of residence and to family while, at the same time, contributing to make certain identity claims problematic and providing an efficient tool to challenge conventional and static constructions of Muslim family relations.³²

Insufficient attention has been paid to ethnicity and religion as cultural resources which are mediated in discourse through language and narration.³³ However, it is important to consider the context within which religion,

³⁰ Goffman 'Interaction Rituals'.

³¹ M. Wetherell and N. Edley, 'Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices' in *Feminism and Psychology* 9:3 (1999), 335–356; S. Taylor, 'Identity Trouble and Opportunity in Women's Narratives of Residence' in *Auto/Biography* 13 (2005), 249–265.

³² A. McGinty Mansson, 'Formation of Alternative Femininities Through Islam' in *Women's Studies International Forum* 30 (2007), 474–485. Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

³³ See B. Shah, C. Dwyer and T. Modood, 'Mobilising Ethnic Capital' in *Sociology* 44:6: (2010), 1109–1127; Williams and Vashi, 'Muslim Women in America'.

ethnicity and cultural resources may be mobilized. These are not fixed resources that are simply packed up and moved around from one country to another.³⁴ Their meaning, interpretation and significance are spatially and temporally dynamic. To understand the role of Islam it is necessary to 'take seriously the meanings and workings of religious devotion in women's lives'.³⁵ Within the context of migration, in particular, religion may help to provide women with guidance on how to interact with 'others' and how to conduct themselves in public spaces.³⁶ Within contemporary Islam there are diverse views on female piety, modesty and ways of interacting in the public realm.³⁷ Muslim feminists provide new interpretations of Islamic texts suggesting ways of improving women's lives by challenging gender power dynamics and encouraging female education and self-improvement.³⁸ Nonetheless, there remains a wide range of views on key issues such as veiling. For many Muslim women power over the veil represents freedom of choice, ability to choose whether to veil or not in accordance with their own personal interpretation of Islamic faith and morality.³⁹ This is at the very heart of what Islam represents to Muslim feminists: 'the basic Qur'anic ethic of the sovereign right of both women and men as human beings who have the freedom of self-determination'.⁴⁰

However, for Muslims, in particular, drawing on religion as a frame to make sense of their lived experiences may be fraught with complexities and contradictions. In Britain, as in several other European countries, there are widespread discourses about the apparent culture clash between Islam and the beliefs and practices of modern, Western, liberal, secular societies.⁴¹ As Ramji suggests, 'religion is increasingly seen as *the* problem, especially if you are Muslim'.⁴² Some commentators have referred to 'a polarization' among Muslims broadly divided between those who 'gravitate to Western secular liberal identities and those who are becoming more committed to their faith'.⁴³

³⁴ U. Erel, 'Migrating Cultural Capital: Bourdieu in Migration Studies' in *Sociology* 44:4 (2010), 642–660.

³⁵ Bilge, *Beyond Subordination*, 22.

³⁶ Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

³⁷ K. Omair, 'Arab Women Managers and Identity Formation Through Clothing' in *Gender in Management* 24:6 (2009), 412–431.

³⁸ J. Zine, 'Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling' in *Equity and Excellence in Education* 39 (2006), 239–252.

³⁹ Women's National Commission (2006) Report.

⁴⁰ Ashfar 2012: 37.

⁴¹ E. Kofman, S. Saharso and E. Vacchelli, 'Gendered Perspectives on Integration Discourses and Measures' in *International Migration* (2012), (forthcoming); T. Modood and F. Ahmad, 'British Muslim Perspectives on Multiculturalism' in *Theory, Culture and Society* 24:2 (2007), 187–213; T. Modood, 'Muslims and the Politics of Difference' in Hopkins and Gale (eds.), *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, Edinburgh University Press 2009, 193–209; for data on France and Germany see Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

⁴² H. Ramji, 'Dynamics of Religion and Gender among Young British Muslims' in *Sociology* 41:6 (2007), 1171–1189: 1173 emphasis in original).

⁴³ S. Hamid, 'Islamic Political Radicalism in Britain' in T. Abbas, (ed.), *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, Edinburgh University Press 2007, 57.

In this paper we suggest that religion may be used as a frame to make sense of social experiences in British society, to provide solace, certainty and reassurance in negotiating a new and unfamiliar environment. Islam provides a recognizable set of assumptions and the ways in which our interviewees mobilize a particular repertoire is contextual and constructed in talk. At the same time the migration context provides means of challenging and shifting some collectively shared interpretative repertoires of Islamic religion. However, we also suggest that in London, Islamic religion may be a marker of difference, which frames unbelonging, marginalization and a sense of being 'under attack'.

This will be done by looking at the repertoires that mothers use when encountering a new environment in a migratory context, as a way of giving meaning to their life experiences. Secondly, the article illustrates the ways in which migrant women of different Muslim origins successfully use religion and its shared narratives to criticize specific aspects of both their 'traditional' and 'British' culture and to operate shifts within their different cultural belonging. Thirdly, the paper will show that religion is used as an orienting framework for parenting rebellious teenagers and a similar pool of interpretative repertoires is used to explain different expectations from their children according to gender. Finally, we consider how our participants negotiate the challenges and contradictions of presenting themselves as highly visible Muslims in contexts of increasing negativity towards Islam.

Methodological Notes

This research forms part of a wider, four-year study of Muslim communities in an area of North London. Fieldwork took place during 2009–2010. This part of the project aimed to explore the concerns, experiences and aspirations of mothers of different Muslim origins. Four women-only focus groups were conducted with a total of 31 participants.

Participants were recruited through community organizations.⁴⁴ Because of this way of recruiting, participants tended to be conservatively religious; all self-identified as 'Muslim'. Although working through Muslim community groups inevitably skewed our sample, on the other hand, these organizations enabled the research team to recruit women who may otherwise have been harder to reach. Conservatively religious women are a particularly under-researched in Britain and without the support of Muslim community organizations it would have been difficult for us, non-Muslim researchers, to gain access to these participants.⁴⁵

This qualitative study makes no claims to present a representative picture of the Muslim population in London. Nonetheless, unlike many other studies which focus on one ethnic group, this study involved participants from a wide range of ethnicities. Two focus groups were organized through ethnic-specific community

⁴⁴ These included; Somali, Afghan, Muslim Women's Organizations, a Mosque and a Muslim School.

⁴⁵ L. Ryan, E. Kofman and P. Aaron, 'Insiders and Outsiders: Working with Peer Researchers in Researching Muslim Communities' in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 14:1 (2011), 49–60.

groups. One of these groups was made up entirely of women from Afghanistan, while the other group was made up entirely of Somali-born women. The third and fourth focus groups were organized through Muslim women's groups and involved more ethnically diverse women including Eritrean, Algerian, Bengali, Indian and Pakistani. A few women had been born in Britain, or had lived here for many years. Community translators were present in focus groups to assist with language interpretation when required, so that those women who were less proficient in English could equally participate in the discussion. The participants ranged in age from 20s to 40s, but most were in their 30s. The ages of their children reflected the range in the women's ages. Some had young, pre-school children, while others had teenagers.⁴⁶ The analysis of focus groups data was mainly thematic and informed by discourse analysis, in particular with regards to interpretative repertoires.⁴⁷

Adapting to a New Environment

London was defined as a global city at the start of the 1990s⁴⁸ and increasingly as multicultural,⁴⁹ characterized by a level of diversification and juxtaposition of different cultures depicted as 'super diversity'.⁵⁰ Current debates, both in policy and academia, frame social cohesion in terms of the difficulties of integration for Muslim migrants in British cities.⁵¹ As noted above, all the participants embraced their Islamic faith as a strong and positive force in their lives. The complex relationship between culture and religion is a common repertoire that emerges continuously through their narratives. While the women were drawn from different national and cultural groups, religion is the common denominator and the 'frame' that unified them as Muslims.

Given the vast majority of participants had arrived in London as adults, it is unsurprising that 'estrangement' in a new socio-cultural environment was a recognizable theme running through the focus groups. Many participants underlined the connection between being in a new environment and the

⁴⁶ For a full description of the participants see L. Ryan, L. Banfi and E. Kofman, *Muslim Women: Communities, Identities and Aspirations*, London: Middlesex University Research Report 2010. www.sprc.info.

⁴⁷ M. Whetherell, S. Taylor and S.J. Yates, *Discourse as Data. A Guide for Analysis*, London: Sage 2001.

⁴⁸ S. Sassen, *The Global City: London, New York, Tokyo*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991.

⁴⁹ J. Eade, *Placing London. From Imperial to Global City*, London: Berghahn Books 2000; C. Hamnett, *Unequal City. London in the Global Arena*, London and New York: Routledge 2003.

⁵⁰ S. Vertovec, 'Super-Diversity and its Implications' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29:6 (2007), 1024–1054.

⁵¹ T. Cante, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, London, Home Office 2001; Kofman et al. (2012) 'National Frame for the Integration of Newcomers in the United Kingdom'; PROSINT (Promoting Sustainable Policies for Integration) European Commission; Contract: JLS 2008/EIFX/CA/1039 ABAC No Supported under the European Integration Fund.

challenge of parenting. Several suggested that parenting would not be so difficult in their native country:

Every mother knows how to feed her children, or how to keep them safe but in our society, where we come from originally, and in the society where we are at the moment, it's a bit different in culture and in religion (Iman).⁵²

Islam provided not only a form of identification but also solace and meaning in these women's lives. In one focus group women stated that they drew 'a lot of strength' from their faith, when they had problems they prayed to God: 'You pray that your enemies will stay away from you and your own family will be protected' (Lateefa). Islam offered a guide for how to be a good person and a good parent. In another FG, Mona summed this up by saying: 'for us being a Muslim is not just a religion, it is a way of life'.

Nonetheless, despite professing a shared Islamic identity, it is apparent that specific ethnic cultural values and identities also frame the women's interpretative repertoires. The extent to which culture is inextricably linked with religion was a common trope emerging throughout the focus groups. For example, in the Somali focus group, several women said that they hoped that their children would adopt Somali culture and respect the Islamic faith.

In the focus group with Afghan mothers the following exchange took place:

Hafa: the difficult issues for us here are the family, family life is completely different here in the UK, we expect children to respect their parents, but here they have too much freedom, they don't respect their parents. Children are rude.

Cala: yes, here children want freedom, to be too independent.

Hafa: we have to explain to our children about our culture, our religion, and how it is back home, but still most families have problems with children, it is very difficult for them.

In this exchange religion and culture appear to be used inter-changeably so that Afghan culture and Islam become conflated and set in opposition to the dominant culture and beliefs in British society. Similarly, in the focus group with Somali women, Islam and Somali culture were also presented as interchangeable. The discussion above suggests that these women are using their frames from Afghanistan and Somalia to make sense of life in British society. They are continually comparing Britain to the social norms and expectations that they learned '*back home*.' However, it is important to acknowledge the different voices in the focus groups. Even among the same ethnic/national groups there were some disagreements between participants. It would be misleading to suggest that all the women shared the same views on parenting or interpreted religious teachings in the same way. For example, two women presented a more critical view of Afghan culture:

Rukhsana: it is difficult for our children because they are between two cultures. Afghan culture and English culture are very different.... Afghan culture is strict with the children, '*don't do this, don't do that, this is wrong, that is wrong*'. So the children get angry, they go into their room and close the door. There is too much pressure on them.

⁵² The names of all participants have been changed.

Afia: unfortunately in our own country, sometimes the rules aren't good.

Rukhsana: especially with the girls, we say you have to stay at home, don't go out.

Here Rukhsana and Afia state that some aspects of Afghan culture need to be changed otherwise children will become frustrated and alienated from their parents. In an earlier quote Hafa explained that she wants her children to respect and adhere to Afghan culture which she saw as indistinguishable from Islam, while Rukhsana and Afia sought to separate their faith as Muslims from the traditional constraints imposed on women by Afghan culture. This may be interpreted as a form of 'switching frames' as Rukhsana and Afia adopt a more critical view of traditional cultural practices and expectations. They are able to separate religious from cultural repertoires and through talk they situate themselves in a critical position towards aspects of their culture with which they disagree. It is noteworthy that Islam, as a guiding narrative for these women, offered a framework through which to interpret and in some cases critique the culture they had left.

Several participants drew upon Islam as a way of navigating gender relations. Islam can provide a framework for challenging restrictive cultural practices.⁵³ In another focus group, several women were critical of men who did not encourage their wives to work outside the home. For example, Mona asserted: 'it is more of a cultural thing with those men who don't push the women, it is not an Islamic thing'. By mobilizing the recurrent trope of separation between cultural and religious values, several participants saw traditional culture rather than religion as limiting their opportunities in society. As Ramji reminds us 'The sustained focus on Islam as the definer of self-identity has the effect of ossifying religious identity' and thus obscuring the varied gendered and structural positioning of Muslims.⁵⁴ Focusing on the specific experiences and strategies of these Muslim mothers reveals how 'patriarchal gender relations may be subverted by the mobilization of religion'.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, while some women questioned patriarchal cultural traditions, this was usually done through an interpretative repertoire that emphasised female morality, modesty, self-control and purity. As Jouili and Amir-Moazami argue, Muslim women's use of Islamic teaching to challenge patriarchal cultural practices should not necessarily be interpreted within a narrow Western feminist lens of 'empowerment'.⁵⁶ In an Islamic context, women may seek guidance from religious teachings that emphasise obedience to the law of God.⁵⁷ In this way they espouse duty to religious authority rather than empowerment or emancipation from such authority. This was particularly apparent in relation to parenting teenage children.

⁵³ McGinty Mansson, 'Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam'.

⁵⁴ Ramji Dynamics of Religion and gender among young British, 1173.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Jouili and Amir-Moazami 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

⁵⁷ S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety, the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005.

Mothering Rebellious Teenagers

The extent to which religion can be mobilized as a form of capital has been discussed elsewhere in the literature.⁵⁸ In the case of Muslim mothers it was apparent that their Islamic faith is a resource that the women activated in various ways to support their parenting, especially in relation to rebellious teenage children.

Clearly, most of these women are parenting in a society which is very different to where they had experienced childhood. This could result in dilemmas around practical issues such as the use of physical punishment. The question of how to discipline children was a theme running through all the focus groups:

You do have problems within the family with teenagers, the way you discipline children here is different. Like giving a child a slap across the face is not seen as wrong but here it is child abuse (Shirin).

In the context of migration the challenge of socializing children is made more difficult. For these migrant women, the challenge is not simply that children want a different lifestyle to that deemed appropriate by their parents. There is the added complexity of different socio-cultural constructions of childhood. In another focus group Anwara, from Eritrea, noted that she regarded her 15-year-old daughter as an adult and had to come to terms with the fact that legally in Britain, the girl was still a child and should be treated like a child. Many of the women's concerns about parenting related to teenagers. Clearly, puberty raises challenges for many parents, not only Muslims. However, the mothers across all four focus groups tended to present their concerns about their teenagers mainly through the interpretive framework of religion.

The influence of non-Muslim friends was mentioned by several women. For example, Lateefa suggested that London-born Muslim children may be influenced by their non-Muslim school mates: 'They see other kids and they don't fast, they don't pray, they are very confused because of that' (Lateefa). This comment suggests the extent to which children are positioned within the conflicting interpretative frames of their parents' Islamic belief system and the secular influences of their non-Muslim peers. In the same focus group Iman expressed the concern that: 'At the age of 18 in this country it is legal for them to do whatever they want but in our religion ... they can't drink alcohol, they can't go to nightclubs'.

Many women spoke about wanting to keep their children 'on the right path' through instilling strong religious values. However, it is necessary to explore the extent to which the concerns about children had a gendered dimension. As noted in the literature, Muslim parents may have different concerns for their sons.⁵⁹ For example, they may worry that sons will be negatively influenced by peers and take drugs, smoke, drink alcohol and even become involved in gangs and criminal activity. In the Somali focus group a discussion developed about a Somali youth who had recently been arrested in the local area. The women

⁵⁸ Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'; Shah et al, *Mobilising Ethnic Capital*.

⁵⁹ Ijaz and Abbas, 'The Impact of Inter-generational Change'.

described this as 'shocking'. They were all 'praying' to keep their children 'on the right track and not to be involved in crime or anything like that'.

Although we as researchers tried to get the women to talk about their sons as well as their daughters, most of the discussion tended to focus largely on concerns about daughters. Iman recalled an incident that occurred with her daughter:

when she became at the age of 13, 14, she's becoming mature as a girl, she got her period and everything and then she tells me she wants to go to the cinema with [school friends] for New Year. I tell her we are not allowed to go to the cinema, its *haram*, it's not allowed in our religion. But my daughter say its cultural its not religion, it's cultural. I said no it's a religion. It's not cultural. We had to go to her Islamic teacher just to teach her the Qur'an to explain more, and then he explained more and then she believed. But if I said it's a religion, you cannot do this, she would have a problem (Iman).

This incident is highly illuminating and can be seen as an example of a clash of interpretative frames between mother and daughter. While her school friends go to the cinema, Iman's daughter must learn that the cinema is *haram* (forbidden) by her religion. Interestingly, the girl challenges this view by arguing that this is a cultural practice not a dictate of religion using the common repertoire of religion/culture that many mothers also use in order to distinguish religion from culture. By being cultural and not religious, the rule can thus be changed. Much has been written about how second-generation Muslim young people challenge their migrant parents by prefacing religious teaching over cultural traditions.⁶⁰ However, here we see that Iman did not accept such a challenge but instead brought her daughter to the Islamic teacher to prove that the cinema really is forbidden by her faith. It is noteworthy that she used this teacher to reinforce her own authority as a parent. As noted elsewhere in the literature, knowledge of Islam may be used to reinforce parental authority.⁶¹ Iman thus avoided a personal conflict with her daughter by invoking the expertise of the Islamic teacher and sought to reassert Islam as a frame to guide behaviour and its rules as interpretative repertoires in order to make sense of her parenting practices.

It is worth pointing out that after the focus group, a young woman, wearing *hijab* who was acting as translator approached one of us and said that she did not think that the cinema was necessarily *haram*, provided the film was not immoral, and she enjoyed going to the cinema. This suggests that there is far from unanimous agreement, even among pious women, about how the frame of Islam should be interpreted. While Iman and the religious teacher offered a conservative interpretation of Islamic texts to underpin parenting, clearly this view is not shared by all Muslims and there is some ambiguity for interpretation.

While parents could ensure children's conformity and obedience within the family sphere, once outside, it was impossible for parents to be sure what their children were doing. The home could be a safe Islamic space but the outside world was often perceived as fraught with dangers and temptations:

⁶⁰ Williams and Vashi, Muslim women in America.

⁶¹ Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

it is hard because of everything going on outside, I have heard about children having two identities, they are Muslim at home but then when they go outside with their friends they behave differently (Iftikar).

This quote powerfully suggests the extent to which children, caught in a nexus of clashing interpretative frames, are switching back and forth between the two in a seemingly uneasy mix of two identities. Within the home the children appear to conform to parental expectations on religious norms but once outside with their non-Muslim friends they adopt a different set of behaviours. The mothers in our focus groups expressed particular concern about the corrupting influence of Western values on their children, especially on the morality and modesty of their teenage daughters. However, it was not only cinema or other entertainment venues which were sites of potential corruption. Interestingly, school sports were repeatedly mentioned as sites of conflict and clashing value systems. A range of sporting activities were discussed in the focus groups. The following discussion about swimming was typical of many.

Anwara: my daughter used to go swimming [but] I couldn't find girls only swimming club, single sex....

Nina: ... in our culture and in our religion you are not allowed to see a naked girl and if there are children from other backgrounds even if they are girls they can't just change themselves normally in front of others which is something ...I don't know...it's a bit showy... so maybe she can cover herself and go swimming but she can't prevent the others from doing it in front of her and she can't just keep covering her eyes, you understand what I mean...

Kanwal: We are shy

Nina: yes she can't see other girls naked

Thus, the problem is not merely mixed swimming classes for boys and girls, but also communal changing rooms where girls are likely to see each other naked. The mothers seem to be in agreement that girls are not allowed to show their bodies and they are also not allowed to see another girl naked. This means that simply covering their bodies is not enough. Muslim girls would therefore need individual changing cubicles so that all female bodies are concealed. Within Islamic scholarship there is much debate about the nature and extent of female covering.⁶² Clearly, there is a diversity of views on this topic. Many FG participants presented an orthodox, conservative frame based on Wahabbi interpretations of Islamic teaching without acknowledging any room for dissenting views.⁶³

So far the discussion suggests that mixing not only with the opposite sex but also with non-Muslims of the same sex is regarded by some parents as problematic and a source of potential corruption. The extent to which young people do and should mix with their non-Muslim peers was discussed in another focus group. Many of the focus group participants sent their children to Muslim schools as a way of ensuring that their children were educated in a strict Islamic environ-

⁶² See for example Zine 'Unveiled Sentiments'; Bilge, 'Beyond Subordination Versus Resistance'.

⁶³ See also see K. Omaid, 'Arab Women Managers and Identity Formation Through Clothing' in *Gender in Management* 24:6 (2009), 412–431.

ment. This meant however, that these children had limited contact with non-Muslim peers. Moreover, there is also a suggestion that it is simply not 'safe' for children to play outside with other children. Many of the participants perceive the world around them as hostile to Muslims. In some cases this was graphically borne out by incidents of harassment and verbal abuse.

Encountering Negative Stereotypes of Muslim People

Despite high degrees of diversity and multiculturalism in London, tensions around Muslim bodies arise as they are 'othered' in urban space and made recognizable by their clothing choices.⁶⁴ Although the women were keen to assert the positive nature of their religion,⁶⁵ they also needed to make sense of the negative stereotypes which they repeatedly encountered. Drawing on the work of Goffman and Wetherell and Taylor, we are suggesting that these women use Islamic interpretative repertoires to understand and explain their life experiences as migrants in London. However, this interpretation is being continually undermined and discredited within many Western societies, including multicultural London. Through this discussion, we aim to develop the understanding of how religiously conservative Muslim women actively negotiate public visibility in the context of increasingly negative and hostile public reactions. Instead of demonstrating their moral standing as 'good people' their Muslimness can be perceived as an example of what Goffman calls a 'spoiled identity'. When a group becomes stigmatised, negatively labelled and stereotyped through media, political and public discourses, their social integrity may become 'tainted' leading to a 'spoiled identity'.⁶⁶

As visibly identifiable Muslim women, their clothing of *hijab*, *jilbab* and in a few cases *niqab*, can mark out these mothers as outsiders, foreigners, aliens, who are apparently refusing to conform to British norms of dress and rules of social interaction.⁶⁷ Nina, who comes originally from Algeria and wears full *niqab*, described an incident when she was boarding a bus with her baby in a pram.

there was no space, I was trying to go in and she [another passenger] was trying and to be honest I was smiling under my *niqab*, she didn't see that but she thought that I want to push in and force my way in before her, and she said 'what are you doing', I said 'nothing, I'm just trying to go in the bus before it goes'...then I just tried to hold my pram and tried to go in and then with no reason she said, 'if you are going to attack me, don't attack the pram.' What do you think, I really start crying. Why she's saying that, why should I attack a baby, even her, I don't have the intentions to attack her (Nina).

⁶⁴ S. Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' in *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (2001), 202–236.

⁶⁵ See Jouili and Amir-Moazami's discussion of *da'wa* and public displays of pious behaviour.

⁶⁶ E. Goffman, *Stigma: Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1963.

⁶⁷ For a longer discussion see Ryan (2011) 'Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatisation' and Endelstein and Ryan 'Dressing Religious Bodies'.

Nina broke down and cried again as she told this story. She was not wearing her *niqab* in the all-female focus group and her face clearly showed the upset and anger that this incident provoked. However, she seemed unaware of any irony when recounting that although she had been smiling under her *niqab* the woman on the bus 'didn't see'. The fact that her emotions were entirely concealed from the other passengers on the crowded bus may partly explain the confusion and misunderstanding. But Nina makes no allowance for that fact. She could see them and their reactions but they could not see her facial expressions. They could not see that she was smiling and friendly. Without these visual clues, the woman on the bus drew on stereotypes to perceive Nina as a veiled, threatening, unknowable outsider.

Several women described similar types of incidents on London public transport. This space could become a site of tension as their highly visible clothing marked out these religiously Muslim women as potentially threatening and disruptive figures in the public domain.⁶⁸ As Pnina Werbner argues, 'the *hijab* raises a series of questions about meaning, diasporic mobilizations, identity, multiculturalism, cultural difference, political Islam, gender, agency, transnationalism and globalisation'.⁶⁹ Across the focus groups there appeared to be a trend that the more conservatively dressed the women, the more they seemed to attract negative public reaction.

Iftikar who wears full black *jilbab* and *hijab* recounted how she was verbally abused by a passing youth while walking on the street with her children. Iman, who also wears *hijab* and *jilbab*, was called a 'fucking terrorist' while walking her children to school. It is important to note that several women experienced verbal abuse while in the presence of their children. It was apparent that repeated incidents like these were deeply upsetting to the women. They needed to make sense of and explain such incidents particularly to their children.

For mothers who seek to transmit a strong Islamic identity to their children, the public debasing of their beliefs, the 'spoiling' of their identity requires explanation. Thus, while Islam is drawn upon as a resource to assist these women in their parenting, it is apparent that embracing a visible Muslim identity also carries the risk of stigma and harassment.

I explain to my children; that's because of what people hear from the media and what they know from what they read from the newspaper, it's completely wrong, we just have to tell them the right thing about Islam. Islam is not what they think, it's the completely opposite and by showing them with good manners, we are showing them that we are good Muslims and they need to treat us like human beings, not like some people how they think about us (Nina).

Thus, these women seek to challenge erroneous, anti-Islam stereotypes by showing that they are good human beings. However, for these conservatively religious mothers, being a good human being is synonymous with being a good Muslim. In seeking to demonstrate their goodness through visible presentations of Islamic piety, they risk further stigmatisation as foreign, threatening outsiders who are seemingly refusing to conform to the norms of Western liberal secular societies.

⁶⁸ Zine, 'Unveiled Sentiments'.

⁶⁹ Werbner, *Veiled Interventions*, 173.

Conclusion

This paper looks at the ways in which Muslim women mobilize faith and narratives of religious identity when mothering their children in London. The women who participated in our focus groups were in the main conservatively religious, from a variety of national backgrounds, the vast majority of who wore *hijab* with the full *jilbab*.

Drawing upon frame analysis and on the concept of 'interpretative repertoire', we have argued that the women used Islam to interpret and make sense of their lives as migrants and religious minorities in London. Islam provided them with a code of behaviour, norms and values which clearly influenced their parenting strategies. The women in the focus groups were using religion to keep children on 'the right track'; protecting them from potential dangers and 'moral corruptions' of British society. In addition, through mobilizing a shared narrative about contrasting repertoires of cultural and religious identity, some women were beginning to question aspects of their traditional culture and social practices while also at the same time re-framing religion as a dominant set of interpretative repertoires shaping their migrant identities.

As the paper demonstrates, religious knowledge can confer a form of authority to women.⁷⁰ While religion offered a frame through which to critique aspects of traditional culture, it also provided a frame to critique aspects of British culture and lifestyles which are at odds with Islam on issues such as modesty, morality, binge drinking, drugs and sexual licentiousness. However, the impact of such authority cannot be taken for granted and is not easily equated with Western notions of feminism and liberation. The women invoked this authority in complex ways, for instance with regards to the interpretation and teaching of religious texts by Islamic teachers. As noted by Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2008), interpretations of sacred texts may vary and thus may be invoked to either challenge or reinforce particular practices.⁷¹ The extent to which going to the cinema is *haram* being just one such example.

The gendered nature of our participants' concerns about their children was apparent in the different ways they talked about boys and girls. Much of the concerns about girls focused on the body and its control in a culturally diverse context. Girls' bodies needed to be covered not only in front of boys but also in front of other girls. Sites of exposure such as swimming pools and school sports clubs were treated with particular apprehension. Potential conflicts around mainstream school practices, such as sports, led some parents to seek out Muslim schools as a way of avoiding an apparent clash of moral values and threats to female modesty. However, it is apparent that the shift towards Muslim schools may reduce opportunities for children in conservatively religious families to interact with peers from other faiths (or no faith).

Several women in this study prioritized their Islamic identity over ethnic culture. As ethnically diverse women, it could be argued that their religion gave them access to the wider 'Muslim community' or *umma* in the UK, thus offering

⁷⁰ S. Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' in *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (2001), 202–236; 2005; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2008; Bilge, 'Beyond Subordination'.

⁷¹ Jouili and Amir-Moazami 'Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority'.

a strategy for overcoming isolation and marginalization. However, it was apparent in the ethnic-specific focus groups, i.e. with Somali and Afghan women, that ethnic identification continued to shape the lives of many recently arrived migrant and refugee women. Nonetheless, all the women were united in the shared challenges of mothering in the context of migration. Within the context of isolation, separation from wider extended family support networks, in unfamiliar environments with different concepts of childhood, religion was a solace.

However, while their faith was in many ways a comfort for these religious women, it is also apparent that being a Muslim is not easy in the current political climate where Islam has become a 'spoiled identity'. Many felt misunderstood and misrepresented in contemporary London. It is somewhat paradoxical that the more they attempted to demonstrate their moral integrity as 'good people', through identifiably religious clothing, the more these women experienced harassment and abuse as violent, dangerous, threatening outsiders.⁷² In attempting to instil religious values in their children, these mothers had to explain the hostility that Islam appeared to provoke in many public arenas.

Thus while religion may be regarded as a resource which they are able to mobilize to help negotiate the cultural shifts they need in order to live in a Western society, it is also apparent that in so doing these mothers have to navigate the challenges of asserting an Islamic identity at a time of increased negative stereotyping and stigmatisation.

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⁷² For a fuller discussion of this point see Ryan, 'Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatisation'.