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The Mediated Experience of Girls of Muslim Culture in the French Context as a Challenge to Gender Stereotypes and Islamophobia: An Intersectional Perspective

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Abstract: The paper aims to offer an opportunity to consider intersectionality in the context of digital media. On the basis of empirical research, this paper analyzes the way in which gender, sexuality, color, and religion intersect in online spaces to produce new norms and forms of discrimination, as well as space for agency and for the articulation of different voices. In particular, in adopting an intersectional feminist perspective, this paper explores how Muslim girls produce counter-narratives and new spaces for subjectivation at the intersection of gender, religion, and racialization by actively appropriating digital media. Specifically, the paper analyzes French Muslim girls' relationships with digital media in relation to political life, in the context of growing Islamophobia and the instrumentalization of women's bodies by populist discourses on religion. On the basis of online and offline observations and explorative interviews carried out in Paris, this paper shows that the girls developed a number of individual and collective strategies involving both online and offline spaces to cope with racist and anti-Islamic rhetoric and practices in a context which they perceived to be characterized by contemporary processes of racialization and everyday discrimination against Muslim people.

Keywords: digital media; intersectionality; Muslim girls



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1. Introduction

In November 2019, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, was accused of Islamophobia by voices in the British media after his 2018 comment that a woman wearing a burka “look[s] like a letterbox”.¹ Johnson refused to apologize for his racist remark, claiming that it required further contextualization.² Although this episode is not isolated, it offers a uniquely unambiguous taste of how political discourses and populist rhetoric use the figuration of “Muslim women” to assess values and norms that counterpose a supposed Us—emancipated and progressive in terms of women's rights—to a supposed Other, a female Muslim culture conceived of as radically non-agentic. In this case, Boris Johnson addressed women wearing burkas as “letterboxes”, subjecting these people considered to be the Others to extreme alterization through objectification, dismissing and effectively annihilating their voices and agency.

In May 2018, the president of UNEF—Union Nationale des Étudiants de France at Paris Sorbonne—was interviewed by a TV channel while wearing a scarf. Her interview acquired visibility because a number of public figures felt free to criticize her, her political activity, and the activities of the trade union because she was wearing a hijab. In particular, on 24 May 2018 the French daily Liberation reported a screenshot of a post taken from Facebook made by a male academic who commented “sarcastically” about the interview, devaluing the president's experience and making fun of her political knowledge.³ This episode clearly illuminates some issues that surround the representational (im)possibility faced by Muslim women and girls in the public sphere. This kind of episode reproduces the idea that girls in politics lack agency, a notion that normalizes the cyber-harassment of

girls and perpetuates the message that public display of the veil is incompatible with the idea of a (democratic) nation, thereby paradoxically excluding women's and girls' voices and bodies from the political realm.

The two reported episodes arise from differing national contexts, as well as two different political cultures and discourses; the French experience is characterized by the idea of *laïcité*, while the UK example speaks to contemporary experiences of multiculturalism, yet both highlight two recurrent repertoires of political language: (1) the instrumental use of women's and girls' bodies, deprived of their subjectivity through the construction of new stereotypes and stigmas constructed along lines of gender, color, and cultural religion; (2) these examples speak to the oppression and marginalization of women and girls through the politicization of the veil by some European governments, an act that produces a symbolic geography of exclusion. The discursive order that emerges is characterized by a gendered form of Islamophobia that produces a hostile environment toward Muslim culture. Paradoxically, this produces both a hypervisibility of girls and claims that they lack agency by making their presence in public spaces invisible, calling into question the politics of representation of marginalized subjectivities (Fassin 2018).

Against this background, public discourses and analyses of this populist narrative rarely take into account the responses and counter-narratives offered by marginalized subjects. This reinforces the exclusion of their voices and subjectivities from the online/offline public space. This is particularly relevant in a context in which girls in general—and girls who belong to the Islamic religion in particular—are criticized for a lack of agency in public and media discourse.

Digital media have become central to youth culture in everyday life, identity construction, and peer relationships (Boyd 2014). At the same time, the cultural and social appropriation of the Internet by girls in alternative positions of class, cultural religion, and color has not been a central topic in youth research (Mazzarella 2010). The interest of this paper is to understand to what extent mediated spaces opened up by digital media can foster process of subjectivation among girls of Muslim culture and sustain the circulation of (counter) narratives that challenge the current rhetoric of populist discourse along the lines of gender and processes of racialization.

To analyze the mediated narratives and counter-narratives produced by Muslim girls in a context characterized by growing Islamophobia and the instrumental use of women's bodies by populist discourses on religion, this paper addresses the broader issue of the political participation of girls in the digital neoliberal context. This has been a hot topic both in academia and in wider society because it highlights a crucial entanglement, namely, the intersections of contemporary gender regimes, spaces of subjectivation (both individual and collective), and specific appropriations of digital media (Dobson 2015). At the intersection between age and gender, several public and media discourses frame the "girl" as an ambivalent subject when dealing with social media and digital technologies. Mostly portrayed as at risk of something—namely, sexual predators, sexualization, harmful behavior, individualization, etc.—the online activity of girls is often belittled if not denied. Responding to these assumptions, this paper is grounded in the idea that the discourses constructed by the actions and practices of Muslim girls challenge current rhetoric about their lack agency when dealing with digital media environments, opening up a new understanding of their contemporary political participation. Furthermore, the accounts of girls themselves offer valuable insights into how to respond to racism and anti-Islamist discourses in the mediated space offered by social media. The French context described by Eric Fassin (2019) is investigated as being marked by a "*laïcité positive*", which privileges one religion (Catholicism) and a "*laïcité negative*", which is Islamophobic and which considers the veil as the contested object par excellence. This study, thus, aligns itself with recent research that addresses the theme of Muslim female participation in the context of political life, looking through a feminist lens at the relationship among politics, participation, and subjectivity (e.g., Joly and Wadia 2017). Against this background, one principal question

drives this inquiry: What resources do girls of Muslim culture develop to deal with racist and Islamophobic discourses in French contexts, both online and offline?

The paper is based on data collected in 2018 during a research project regarding online and offline political participation of girls of Muslim culture in the city of Paris. The paper is based upon an ethnographic approach which combines unstructured interviews and observation. This set of methods has proven to be the most effective due to its ability to grasp the processes and meanings of social life, at the intersection of the individual and collective experiences. The observation was conducted both in physical spaces and online. In the case of the former, book and film presentations that focused on the experiences of Muslim girls were attended, and two informal interviews with Muslim girls active in an intersectional feminist association were performed; in the latter, sites, blogs, and pages of collective actors run by Muslim girls were collected in order to build a cartography of the resources that girls have in online spaces. In particular, the paper focuses on the ways in which girls come to terms with this complex scenario by finding resources to build relationships among themselves and the world. Hence, the paper is based upon four exploratory interviews with girls active in the context of intersectional feminism, for the rights of Muslim people, and against racism. Interviews were carried out in public spaces such as bars, and the young women interviewed were between 23 and 29 years old. Unstructured interviews were chosen in order to allow the subjective meaning of the actors to be voiced instead of privileging the viewpoint of the researcher. Points addressed in the different interviews were individual experiences of discrimination, friendship relations, the intertwining of individual and collective forms of political participation, and the use of digital media. Each interviewee was left free to focus on one topic in particular or many, and to delve into it as they saw fit.

The interview space is a relational one in which both subjects co-participate in the construction of the knowledge in question (Marcillat et al. 2017). Therefore, my subjectivity as researcher must also be considered, understanding, for instance, my position as a precarious Italian researcher in a French context: being perceived as white Italian and non-Muslim contributes to the maintenance of some aspects of normative social orders, while my non-French background (non-native French language skills) and my position as a transfeminist sociologist produce a form of complicity with the interviewees.

2. Intersectionality in the Context of Digital Media

Intersectionality is a concept, a method, a practice that has its roots in social movements. In the last decade, intersectionality has become a concept that has spread even in academic circles with ambiguities and limitations, raising concerns about its depoliticization and subsumption (Davis 2020). It is not the aim of the paper to explore these aspects; instead, what is of interest here is to try to intersect an intersectional gaze with the spaces opened up by digital media in order to understand how power relations play out online on the basis of different positioning and subjectivities.

Intersectionality was born within a debate that developed in the context of feminist theory and practice. The concept first took shape in social movements, within collective spaces and discussion, and it has only recently entered the toolbox of scholars who are interested in the analysis of social relations that are structured on the basis of gender. Specifically, the idea and practice of intersectionality originated within the political activity of black feminists during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly through the work of the Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017), a group of black lesbian activists based in Boston, Massachusetts. An intersectional perspective renders explicit the impossibility of universalizing women's experiences and reducing them to one homogeneous group, thus increasing awareness of how other power dimensions (e.g., processes of racialization or class distinctions) together with gender constructs affect lived experience. The intersectional approach proposes, therefore, that we go beyond a reflection centered exclusively on gender difference and imagine relationships of domination and oppression (such as racism, classism, and heterosexism) as interconnected.

Within the context of Internet and digital media studies, this paper focuses on the intersectional sociocultural aspects that produce both forms of subordination and spaces of action (Leurs 2015). This orientation leads studies interested in digital and online practices to explore how various dimensions previously left at the margins—such as age, gender, sexuality, color, class, generation, ability, and religion—can intertwine with each other and create different effects on individual experience. Together, this highlights the ways in which people occupy different positions in the context of their digital media-mediated experience, and how different conditions affect the production of subjectivities and the construction of digital action spaces (Noble and Tynes 2016). In fact, one of the most common mechanisms for the reproduction of privilege is precisely that of obscuring or imposing hyper-complexity onto the knowledge, practices, and contributions of minoritized subjects—such as racialized subjectivities—with the result of denying them the mechanisms for finding legitimacy and recognition in the public sphere. A central aspect of intersectional approaches to digital media is, therefore, to help us better understand how mediation intervenes in the production of the discourses, experiences, and material conditions of power that structure hierarchies on the basis of processes of racialization and sexism that characterize wider society.

In its early stages of development, the Internet was seen as a utopian space without gender and race, a space in which to escape from the racialized dynamics of the physical world. More recent studies, however, have shown that racism persists in online spaces, in continuity with discursive regimes that construct forms of oppression and exclusion offline, as well as by developing peculiar modalities unique to online digital environments. Digital media, in fact, co-participate in different ways in the production of the practices and discourses that support racist processes. A particular contribution is offered by black feminist studies, which question the new configurations of social relations supported by digital media. The ongoing discussion around the black digital feminist framework (Steele 2021) intersects with epistemological and methodological perspectives that derive from technofeminism, cyberfeminism, and feminist critical race theory. Digital media are here conceived of as ambivalent, since, on the one hand, they restructure power relations on the basis of gender and race, while, on the other hand, they open up new spaces for subjectivation.

3. Girls, Islamophobia, and Digital Media

Leila Benhadjoudja (2018), a sociologist who works on the construction of categories at the intersection of different power axes (such as “women”, Islam—intended both as a religious corpus and a space of socialization—and feminism), presented the Canadian context as follows: “When Muslim women mobilize as Muslim women in civil society, i.e., by not renouncing their identification with Islam, their political subjectivation is either ignored or turned into a threat” (2018:3).⁴ Benhadjoudja also recognized a form of “racialised governmentality” (Bilge 2013), where race and gender discourses on citizenship question the legitimacy of girls and women of Muslim cultures as subjects of the nation.

This is part of the vibrant debate around the issue of women’s rights and secularism. On this topic, this paper refers to the seminal work of Joan Scott (e.g., Scott 2007, 2009) on the relationship between sex and the nation. Scott claims that it is necessary to consider the concept of secularism as a stratification of meanings produced over time and in different spaces; thus, she stated that we must historicize the concept by looking at the gendered power relationships on which it is based. This history is characterized by “the oppositions—modern/traditional; secular/religious; sexually liberated/sexually oppressed; gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy; West/East” (Scott 2009, p. 1), a position supported in other studies that have shown how secularism is not only “a construction like religion is, but also a gendered concept” (Aune et al. 2017, p. 7). In addition, Scott critically interrogated the assumption that secularism is a neutral term, contrarily highlighting that it is entangled with sexuality, freedom, and women’s rights. At the heart of the issue is the co-opting of feminist and women issues by contemporary neo-nationalist discourses, which Scott

investigated as a question of religious agency (from a postcolonial point of view, see Saba Mahmood 2015) and in relation to the constitution of the subject (this has also been discussed in relation to feminism; see Giorgi 2020).

In this scenario, a feminist understanding of agency at the intersection of gender relations and religious culture opens up the potential for a different understanding of the public sphere by challenging the privilege accorded to the Christian religion (“normative” secularism), its Eurocentrism, and its relation to racism, coloniality, and sexism (Braidotti et al. 2014). Consequently, some authors (Braidotti et al. 2014) suggested that any investigation that does not seriously take into account the complicity of the dominant idea of secularism with the processes of racialization and sexism risks being responsible for reinforcing Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia.

In order to highlight the responsibility of the neoliberal context in the pursuit of marginalization of girls and women of Muslim culture, Sara Farris (2017) introduced the concept of “femonationalism” to refer to a convergence, an ideological formation, and a political economy that use women’s rights in order to develop Islamophobic politics, mostly by right-wing and populist parties. Against this backdrop, the analysis of the relationship among politics, participation, and subjectivity in the context of Muslim culture has become a significant topic in the academic realm. By looking at the relationship of feminism with religious culture, Ali (2012) explored the existence of a space providing the opportunity for the emergence of Muslim feminism in different contexts. From a sociological perspective informed by feminist methods, Joly and Wadia (2017) investigated the different forms of participation of girls and women of Muslim culture in British and French contexts. They analyzed the agentic possibility of the subjects by looking at obstacles and ruptures that facilitate or impede their possibility for acting.

Recent studies have examined how online hate speech against Muslim people is increasingly common, developing an associated world of meanings and imagery. Evolvi (2018) looked precisely at the Islamophobic discourses produced and spread on the Internet and Twitter that contribute to reinforcing (through the online space) the process of “Othering” subjects considered to be non-European, non-white, and non-Christian. The objectifying process that takes place around the figure of the person of Muslim culture acquires a specific meaning in the case of women through the intertwining of color, racialization, Eurocentrism, coloniality, and gender. Here, the discursive order that emerges is characterized by a form of gendered Islamophobia that produces a hostile environment toward Muslim culture and which, paradoxically, both produces a hyper-visibility of women and girls of Muslim culture—in which the veil becomes the discursive and material space on which attention is crystallized—and contributes to their invisibility in public space.

Gender scholars have, meanwhile, pointed out that the gendered dimension of Islamophobia also persists in the online space. A combination of whiteness, patriarchal ideology, and orientalism in the Global North contributes to producing a space hostile to Muslim bodies online, particularly those of Muslim girls (Farokhi 2019).

However, digital media are also ambivalent spaces. If online spaces are marked with an anti-feminist, racist, and sexist sentiment, the voices of women online can also find safe places for expression. Evolvi (2019), in particular, explored this in relation to the French burkini ban, showing how women were able to challenge the public victim/aggressor rhetoric in line with studies that—by articulating concepts such as politics, culture, gender identity, resistance, and activism—have highlighted the participatory potential of digital media for minoritized subjectivities. Leurs et al. (2012) also used the digital sphere as a privileged angle from which to discern multiple intersecting issues regarding religion and gender. By looking at Moroccan-Dutch youth engagement with the Internet, they found that online discussion offered participants possibilities for discussing topics they did not feel comfortable discussing elsewhere, thereby exploring their identity. Nevertheless, power relations evolve both offline and online, and forms of stigma and racism are reproduced both within and beyond the digital sphere. From this perspective, it is important to note that less attention has been given to the opportunities offered to girls of Muslim culture

by digital media for political participation and for opening spaces for resisting dominant culture on both an individual level (Keller et al. 2018) and a collective level (e.g., Earl and Kimport 2011; Mattoni and Treré 2014; Pavan 2017).

4. *C'était Féministe, C'était Anti-Raciste, C'était en Priorité*": Girls' Mediated Spaces of Possibility

In this section, we explore the girls' experiences discussed in the interviews. The intersectional approach allows us to grasp how, in the intertwining of their gender position as girls and religious culture, experiences of discrimination are produced in the spaces of everyday life—such as friendship—or institutions such as universities, along with individual and collective processes of political subjectivation. Here, intersectional feminism shows itself as a possible resource in the hands of girls to understand their position and articulate their being as subjects in relation to themselves and the world around them. The encounter with this in terms of practices, discourses, and representations takes place precisely in the spaces of the network. For the girls, these are ambivalent places, where inequalities are reproduced, on the one hand, while, on the other, they allow them to come into contact with different experiences and subjectivities with which to build ties and spaces of recognition (Evolvi 2019). The girls' experiences of racism and discrimination operate both offline and online at the level of discourse and practice. Results show that, because of their Muslim culture, the girls experience an everyday dimension of racism in their experience of growing up, and that they reflexively produce a personal understanding of how to actively respond to gendered Islamophobia, an approach that intersects anti-racism and feminism.

The girls interviewed reported numerous racist episodes, mostly in the form of subtle or implicit racism, a form of discrimination that is less showy and supposedly less harmful in that it is formalized and tolerated. In their narratives, a constant reflexive process of recognition of discrimination emerges, a sophisticated elaboration of the process of racialization that surrounds their experiences, producing moments of change in their process of recognition as subjects. In the words of Jasmine, one interviewee, there is a growing up experience characterized by the need to recognize not only "traumatizing" forms of discrimination but, most importantly, the everyday racist environments in which she was and still is immersed.

I started to better understand ordinary racism, not the things that traumatize you in childhood, the proper dimension of ordinary racism. (Jasmine, 24)

In other cases, interviewees also addressed the issue of structural forms of racism against Muslim people and highlighted the connection between contemporary hate discourses and the use of social media. The specificity of the French context emerges in the interviews through an awareness of a form of exclusion from public space connected to the rhetorical figure of *laïcité*, described by Fassin (2018) as follows: "Today, *laïcité* is used by people of the left, right, and extreme right against Muslims". The Internet and social media, thus, become spaces of conflict, a contested object. Indeed, in one interview, a girl highlighted the extent to which digital media have become a critical place in which hate speech, harassment, and discrimination occur.

It has become a political issue for these small groups to aggress minority rights and produce insults all day long. And there is impunity on social networks . . . (Yousra, 26)

Furthermore, when asked about their political activities, digital media appeared to be at the center of the interviewees' activism. Furthermore, this seems to be true not only when it comes to collective political action in the context of informal associations or groups, but also at the level of one's own daily experience. For example, Youshra claimed that digital media has been placed at the center of the political activity of the group to which she belongs.

[...] We're going to think about doing training courses on hate speech/harassment online ... maybe with schools or students ... We need to have relationships with young people because they are the most active on social networking sites ... (Yousra, 26)

On the other hand, for Jasmine, the social network Twitter was a real political socializing space: "It was Twitter that really politicized me."

Two of the interviewees, Mariama and Asia, also highlighted a form of Islamophobia produced along the axes of language and body, such as was the way in which the use of the headscarf in institutional settings such as universities acts as a form of cultural marker of material disparity, a gap (in the words of Mariam). In the context of the rich literature on the topic of the veil in France, [Panighel \(2022\)](#) recently pointed out how the discrimination arising from wearing the veil still concerns continuities and discontinuities with France's colonial past and is linked to the instrumental use of arguments such as laïcité and feminism to justify form of exclusion from the public space.

I grew up in an environment where there were not a lot of racialized people. At the College of Letters, I was the only woman who wore the headscarf. There were three racialized people ... and I was clearly the most visible. It was more and more difficult; I realized that I didn't speak the same language as the others; it created a gap. (Mariam, 25)

Similarly, among peers, Jasmine recognized an ordinary racism linked to Islamophobia against people of Muslim culture ([Camozzi 2019](#)), underlining a recursive frame in the discourses of friends through which the stigmatization of Muslim people was reinforced by considering anyone who did not fit to the gender and racial stereotype as "an exception". Whiteness was preserved in its hegemonic position of goodness, thus maintaining and protecting the cultural and social order of the peer group (white and middle class) on the basis of the figure of the exception.

[...] All my girlfriends up until college were white, non-Muslims [...] And, in fact, I was observing a lot, and there were things that gradually became more and more annoying to me. Not because they didn't respect me; I was always considered as one of them, they always respected my beliefs ... but they told me things about my religion and my culture that hurt me. My trauma was that they said to me, 'But you are an exception'. (Jasmine, 24)

Within this framework, Mariam, like other girls, started to recognize a space of self-recognition in anti-racist and feminist activities, spaces of knowledge and subjectivation.

And suddenly, feminism went with anti-racism. I read books, and I learned thanks to articles. (Miriam, 24)

For some girls, the knowledge produced by intersectional feminism—a feminism that challenges white supremacy with anti-racism—became crucial for developing strategies to deal with racist and Islamophobic discourses, and for constructing their own subjectivity both online and offline. In this regard, the mediation offered by social networks seemed to support specific processes of individual and collective political subjectivation. Girls found different discourses and strategies for representation, narratives and counter-narratives that made it easier for them to be active and politically engaged.

I listened to women on social networks who define themselves as feminists and they were really cool; they were really into feminism, intersectional feminism. And, it became obvious ... Feminism! Before it was not, because, for me, feminism excluded many women—fat, trans, Muslim ... I had to understand the word (feminism) personally. (Jasmine, 24)

As [Panighel \(2022\)](#) stated, some women and girls of Muslim culture in the French context are reluctant to define themselves "feminist" because the word is marked by a Western colonial attitude (p. 146). In general, digital media seemed to offer the possibility

for accessing different discourses and practices related to feminism. In the interviews, white feminism was presented as an excluding discourse. Nevertheless, the possibility to access different voices and representations in online spaces allowed the girls to define themselves as feminists. Moreover, to appropriate the political idea of feminism starting from their situated knowledge and embodied experience challenged the dominant and normative idea of woman (white, middle class, cisgender, and skinny). Specifically, as other research has shown, social media were the “key to actually ‘discovering’ feminism, gaining a feminist consciousness, and making feminist contacts online” (Keller et al. 2018, p. 29). The power of social networks to connect girls to other experiences not only seems to produce new connections and open up new spaces of recognition, but also concretely fosters processes of politicization. In online spaces, girls find resources to help them develop strategies of resistance, both online and offline.

More relevant for this paper is the revelation that online intersectional feminism allows girls to recognize their agentic possibility by connecting religious culture and feminism (Braidotti et al. 2014), despite the fact that public and political discourses in France (as elsewhere) seem to represent this link as nonlegitimate.

For me, digital media were very important. I didn't live in Paris [...] I was able to join an association 2 years before I could be in place. And, through the Internet, I read articles, I followed the debates and I educated myself more and more. The Internet and digital tools have fully educated me. The inspiring figures on Instagram that I follow ... that make me discover another figure, then another ... And, I realized that there was a whole reality of incredible women doing things that inspire me and who give me the desire to do the same! It's essential. (Jasmine, 24)

For Jasmine, the experience of coming into contact with and inhabiting accounts run on Instagram by girls who identified themselves as intersectional feminists produced a change at the level of self-recognition, of the relationship between herself and the world. The mediation offered by social networks, thus, supported a specific process of individual and collective political subjectivation. Mariam, like others, discovered collectives and associations through the online spaces that she decided to join. Girls are, thus, able to find different discourses and forms of representation, new narratives and counter-narratives that make it easier for them to engage with feminist issues and positions. The micro- and the macroscale—new discourse, forms of representation, and political association—connect in the desire to be more active not only online but also through a role in political collectives.

In this narrative, she highlighted how Paris turned out to be a crucial hub for meeting other young women and embracing forms of collective politics. Some of the places in which the girls grew up are living spaces of relationships and confrontations that challenge social norms and help girls come to terms with discrimination. Paris is the nerve center in which to weave collective political relationships.

Digital media, thus, emerge as both a place of conflict and a means of subjectivation that supports transnational dimensions, as well as, more importantly, a place dense with relationships. Indeed, the girls discussed a vast array of collectives, organizations, and informal groups in their interviews, spaces related to intersectional feminism that operated online and offline. Through these spaces, they formed alliances and coalitions, forms of solidarity that are relevant to challenging gender stereotypes and Islamophobia.

To summarize, the results show that, in a context perceived by the girls as characterized by contemporary processes of racialization and everyday discrimination against Muslim people, they developed a number of individual and collective strategies to cope with racist and anti-Islamic rhetoric. These strategies gave life to new projects, collectives, and associations built through relationships with other subjectivities, allies (e.g., intersectional feminism and anti-racism), and institutions concerned with gender, religious, class, and racial discrimination. This research shows the relevance of digital media in the girls' processes of subjectivation; in organizing these strategies, Muslim girls are actually building their own political subjectivity, both online and offline.

5. Conclusions

This contribution sought to (i) analyze the conditions of possibility for girls of Muslim culture to find spaces for subjectivation in a context marked by gendered Islamophobia and discrimination, (ii) highlight the crucial role of digital media in giving girls diverse and rich gender representations and voices, and (iii) foster political awareness and activism.

First, the empirical analysis sheds light on the multiple forms—structural, cultural, and social—that produce a hostile environment for Muslim culture that girls have to face in their experience of growing up. In recognizing the processes of racialization that are active in maintaining the figuration of the Other in everyday life, whether the discourses are addressed to them or consider them “an exception”, one of the results is the maintenance of an order based on whiteness that produces a hostile environment for Muslim culture, in confrontation with which the girls expressed a sophisticated reflexive biographical path that evolved through anti-racist and feminist activism. Secondly, the study places attention on the notion that digital media are, on the one hand, spaces of conflict, perceived as arenas in which offline power relations increase, producing stigmatization and hate speech, while, on the other hand, being tools of connection and spaces for diverse representations of the Other. In so doing, this paper shows the connection between the transnational level of feminist discourses that circulate online in social networking sites (e.g., Instagram) and the individual and local level of girls’ everyday experiences. Third, the paper contributes to the theoretical approaches to agency in the context of religious culture (Giorgi 2020) by focusing on the everyday practices of girls by crossing the blurred borders of online and offline political engagement that characterize a generation of feminists. Here, the individual dimension of political consciousness (“constructing a personal understanding of feminism”) connects through active participation with collectives and associations both online and offline, embodying an intersectional understanding of feminist theories and practices that allow girls today to find possible spaces of existence and intelligibility. Discovering online intersectional feminism helps girls to connect themselves not only to a transnational network of feminisms, but also to other subjectivities and alliances—such as black feminism, decolonial feminism, and transfeminism—with which they find a shared common ground.

Broadly speaking, this contribution aims to show that trying to understand the ways in which populist rhetoric frames Muslim girls’ identities requires consideration of how power imbalances rooted in a gendered hierarchy connect with practices of racial and religious discrimination. As studies are increasingly showing, for further analysis, sexual orientation, geographical background, and class should also be analyzed in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the conditions within which Muslim girls negotiate their capacity to speak and act (Amari 2018). This level of awareness could be an invitation to the researcher to adopt an intersectional lens to look at how power relations work on different levels (Kantola and Lombardo 2017) or to find theoretical and methodological tools (online and offline) that encourage a decolonization of our research practices (De Jong et al. 2018).

To conclude, the paper shows how the experiences and narratives of girls of Muslim culture represent an undeniably important element in the debate around the new configurations—political and theoretical—of feminism in this ambivalent time, characterized by both the co-optation of feminist issues (from the market and institutions) and the emergence of new forms of resistance from an intersectional perspective fostered by digital tools. Most importantly, this study prompts consideration of the fact that girls carry a situated knowledge, and that looking at the discourses, actions, and practices of Muslim girls that also occur online offers valuable insight into how to respond to gendered Islamophobia, racism, and anti-Islamist radicalization, in terms of both public discourse and institutional politics.

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Notes

- ¹ Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/boris-johnson-muslim-women-letterboxes-burqa-islamphobia-rise-a9088476.html> (accessed on 5 May 2022).
- ² Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/boris-johnson-refuses-apologise-racist-burka-comments-191129101017762.html> (accessed on 5 May 2022).
- ³ Available at https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/14/voile-islamisme-de-mennel-a-maryam-pougetoux-des-polemiques-et-des-methodes-qui-se-repetent_1649900?utm_campaign=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook#link_time=1526307439 (accessed on 7 November 2021).
- ⁴ Translated by the author.

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