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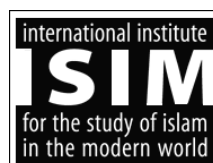
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**Muslim women and the negotiation of autonomous migration.
The case of female migrants from the Maghreb region in Italy**

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*“Muslim Women” in Europe:
Bodily Performances, Multiple Belongings and the Public Sphere*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the case of women from the Maghreb region migrating to Italy in autonomous forms, independently from conventional dynamics of family reunification. In particular, the paper wants to highlight the specificities of women's religious trajectories and behaviours in light of their peculiar migratory status. In doing so, I will focus my attention on the interactions and the overlapping between the private and the public spheres, on the one hand, and the different spaces and geographic scales with which women have to engage, on the other hand, as viewed from the body's to the domestic reproductive and productive realms. In focussing on women's point of view, I will try to show how, while embarking on Islamic practices and discourses, these women dynamically engage with both the host and the home societies and the members of their native communities settled in Italy, in order to pursue their social mobility and empowerment strategies. These strategies are supported by a variegated set of resources. Amongst these latter, Islam plays a prominent role, not only by giving women access to public space and trans-national mobility, but above all in the process of re-interpretation of their trajectories. However, these women have a contradictory use and definition of Islam which is deeply connected with the specificity of their migratory status.

Introduction

This paper deals with the case of women from the Maghreb region migrating to Italy in autonomous forms, that is independently from conventional dynamics of family reunification¹. In recent years, the diffusion of a 'feminine culture of migration' in the Maghreb countries has contributed to the increase of female migration and, at the same time, to a diversification of migrant women's social profiles, thus giving importance to various forms of autonomous migration (Decimo, 2005).

Though 'women moving on their own', as they are frequently labelled, are numerically a minority, they raise important questions about the social position of women in both home and host societies and within immigrant communities. More specifically, the analysis of their life trajectories and social mobility strategies tackles issues about women's access to public

¹ This paper is based on a research project I am currently conducting within the framework of a Marie Curie Fellowship at the Robert Shuman for Advanced Studies, European University Institute. The paper draws on a qualitative research that I have undertaken in Italy since 2004 in the cities of Naples, Turin, Bologna and Milan. Ethnographic observations and biographies are the most relevant sources of the empirical material used in this text. 25 in-depth interviews have been done so far (see in the annex the description of the sample). I am grateful to the women I have interviewed for the time they have accepted to dedicate to this research.

sphere, to particular economic activities and professional niches as well as to specific places such as foreign cities.

This paper seeks to highlight the specificities of women's religious trajectories and behaviours in light of their peculiar migratory status and position both in the home and host society. In doing so, I will focus my attention on the interactions and the overlapping between the private and the public spheres, on the one hand, and the different spaces and geographic scales women have to engage with, on the other hand, as viewed from the body's to the domestic, reproductive and productive realms (Kofman, 2003 ; Silvey, 2004, 2005).

My purpose is to highlight Muslim women's autonomy, considering them as individuals being able to appropriate of and transform their religious identity, contrary to the conventional wisdom portraying them as subaltern and passive social actors (Zannad Bouchrara, 1994). In doing so, I view the body and the techniques that are connected to it as crucial intermediaries and, as such, as crucial revealing factors of the relationship between women and their 'lived space' (Zannad Bouchrara, 1994).

Dressing codes, the use of a certain gesture, the choice of a specific language and the selection of some perfumes are all testifying the embeddedness of women into various social networks and, more broadly, into the society in which they live. At the same time, there are also techniques allowing women not only to appropriate of their own bodies but also of their own personal histories. For this reason, the consideration of these techniques is key to the understanding of the construction of women's social identities. Moreover, these bodily techniques represent an important means of communication. To some extent, these techniques enable women to enhance their familiarity with their environment. As such, they are a powerful tool for expressing themselves as well as an instrument of empowerment.

In focussing on women's point of view, I will try to show how, while embarking on Islamic practices and discourses, they dynamically engage with both the host and home society and the male and female members of their native communities settled in Italy, in order to pursue their social mobility and empowerment strategies. Women's social mobility strategies are supported by a multiplicity of resources. Among these latter, Islam plays a prominent role, not only by giving women access to public space and trans-national mobility, but above all in the process of interpretation of their trajectories. However, these women have a contradictory use and definition of Islam which is deeply connected with the specificity of their migratory status.

To do so, I will first present the conditions of female emigration in order to show how, far from being marginal actors, their trajectories are revealing of the changes occurring in the Maghreb countries. In the second section I will offer a portrait of autonomous migrants, exploring the social, affective and juridical conditions in which they emigrate. I will then describe the conditions of stigmatization and exclusion affecting them. I believe in fact that this situation has a strong impact on the religious behaviour and the personal feelings of these women. After this description, I will focus my attention on the bodily techniques on which women are used to draw in their everyday engaging with productive and public spaces. In the last section of the paper I will, on the other hand, focus the attention on the private spaces and the invisible dimension of women religiosity, in order to highlight the differences existing between the private and public spaces.

1. Changes in the Maghreb countries and the increasing relevance of female migration

Even though we can express scepticism about the purportedly ‘novel’ character of female economic migration from Maghreb², it remains that in all receiving countries in Europe the female population rate has increased in the last decades. In particular, the rate of ‘women moving on their own’ seems to be increasingly significant, though we have lack of data about this phenomenon (Khachani, 1999 ; *Revue Juridique, Politique et Economique*, 1999 ; Ramirez, 1999 ; Carmona Benito, 2000; Salih, 2001 ; Charef, 2002 ; Ramirez, 2002 ; Zontini, 2002 ; Observatoire national des migrations, 2003 ; Ouali, 2003 ; Schmoll, 2005 ; Khouaja, 2006).

This increase of female migration has first to be related to the political and economic changes that have occurred within the societies of women’s countries of origin. In fact, it should be noted how in the last decade the Maghreb region has experienced some relevant changes at the economic level. These changes have been mostly a consequence of the process of adaptation to the imperatives and pressures imposed by the Structural Adjustment Programmes. From this point of view, the pathways to social change followed by Maghreb countries resemble those of other developing countries and regions, especially for the process

of impoverishment that has widely affected the lower and middle classes (Sassen, 2000 ; Fargues, 2004). In particular, the middle-classes – whose status was protected by the State in previous times - experienced a restriction of economic chances, leading to a process of lowering of their social position. This particularly happened in Algeria and Morocco (Musette, 2000 ; Haddad, 2001 ; Baba, 2005). Indeed, some of the migrant women we met were previously civil servants and lost their job as a consequence of the budget restriction policies.

Besides, in Algeria, the outbreak of the civil war in the 1990s has generated a widespread sense of insecurity and precariousness within the local population. Even though the war did not lead to a mass emigration, as pointed out by Philippe Fargues, some women left their country as a consequence of persecution (Fargues, 2004). Working women indeed were one of the main targets of the islamist dissidents. Yet, this emigration is still scarcely documented today, since public opinion mainly focuses on the intellectual, political and artistic elites in exile.

At the same time, in the Maghreb countries, it has become increasingly dangerous and difficult for men to travel because of the reinforcement of migratory controls on the international borders. In this respect, some interviewees point out that they had to embark on a migratory project because it became increasingly difficult for male members of their family to emigrate.

More broadly, the feminisation of migration flows has to be related to the social transformations that Maghreb countries have undergone during the last decades. In particular, it has to be understood in light of a wider process of individualisation within host societies, which gives rise to novel dynamics of emancipation from inherited social codes and norms. Above all, it has to be related to the emerging dynamics of women's autonomisation. For instance, women's participation in the public and professional spheres, as well as their presence in public spaces, is becoming more visible, especially at an urban level (Moghadam, 1998 ; Berry-Chikhaoui, 2000 ; Boulahbel, 1996 ; Jomni, 2000 ; Hadjij, 2000 ; Bekkar, 2004 ; Khouaja, 2006; Roussillon, Zryouil, 2006).

Of course, women's condition in Maghreb countries are problematic and rife with contradictions. Women's legal status needs to be considerably improved (in particular in Algeria) and social control exerted on women is still very coercive and patriarchal models

² For instance Nasima Moujoud observes that during the colonial period, some Moroccan women employed by French colonizers in the domestic service were used to follow their employers in France (Adam, 1968 in

persistently dominate. However, regardless of the heavy structural constraints they have to face, women's presence in the public sphere evolves over time and is more and more relevant. Besides, symbolic and physical violence that is perpetrated against women can be interpreted as a reaction against women's empowerment.

In this context, female migration can be regarded both as a consequence of women's empowerment and as a factor of autonomisation. All these changes that have occurred within women's conditions - along with the rise of transnational communities and the specific labour demand from the receiving countries acting as 'pull factors' - have contributed to the generalisation of what Francesca Decimo calls a "feminine culture of emigration" (Decimo, 2005) and have persuaded many women to move independently.

2. Female autonomous migrants: a portrait

Since the 1990s the general literature dealing with ethnic and migration studies has called attention to the ways in which in a number of cases women's flows appear to be independent from those of men (see, for example, Zlotnik, 1999 ; Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000 ; Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram and Sales, 2000 ; Willis and Yeoh, 2000 ; UNFPA 2006).

This is an important achievement, being capable of disrupting a long-standing conventional wisdom about women as mere followers of male labour migrants. However, women from Maghreb have been almost completely excluded from this literature. Women from Maghreb are indeed customarily viewed as members of a broader collective-family strategy. Thus, the contradictions and the tensions that may arise between the desires of these women, their individual projects and external pressures are generally ignored.

Southern Europe, in particular Spain and Italy, is the prime destination for autonomous female migrants. The importance of Southern Europe as a receiving region is to be related to the job opportunities that these countries have offered to immigrants over the last decades, and most notably to the opportunities arising from the networks of the informal economy. It has also to be related to the existing residence laws offering - more easily than in North-European old immigration countries such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands - the possibility to settle in the host society independently from family reunification (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000 ; Vaiou, 2002).

Moujoud, 2003).

In Italy, which is one of the main countries of settlement for these migrants, women from Maghreb number today 77514. Their number increased from the 15 % of the regular residing population from Maghreb in 1994 to 25 % in 2004. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know the exact rate of women that move 'on their own' within this female population. In fact, the main problem arising when one tries to estimate this population concerns the fact that the idea itself of 'moving on their own' is much more a social construct rather than a clear statistical or juridical category.

In the Maghreb societies, this social representation is above all associated to the idea of 'moving by themselves'. It is also frequently associated to the notion of 'being single women'³. Both these notions are considered outrageous and are associated to 'risk' and 'danger' in the most common mentality, since a woman that moves on her own appears to be no longer connected to (hence, also controlled by) her relatives. From this point of view, one can wonder if the notion of 'women moving on their own' is not a way of stigmatizing these women and attaching to them a status of complete otherness more than a pertinent category. Notwithstanding these limitations, I usually make recourse to this notion since the women I have interviewed regularly use it when it comes to define themselves, more likely in a 'appropriation of the stigma' fashion.

There are, however, different ways of 'moving on their own', which correspond to various levels of transgression and acceptance by the society of origin and by migrant groups. First of all, autonomous female migrants evidence different social and local origins. It is indeed - though only schematically - possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, women originating from the working-class or the lower middle-classes and, on the other hand, those coming from an upper-middle class environment. Usually the former come from mostly rural regions, even though they may have experienced a first migratory path to large urban areas, while the latter usually come from urban areas. People coming from Algeria are usually highly educated migrants who have been born and have been raised in urban settings. Algerian women indeed arrived to Italy during the 1990s following the consequences of Civil War. These women usually come from largest towns such as Algiers, Oran, Annaba, Constantine. On the other hand, migrants from Morocco and Tunisia are much more differentiated as regards their social belonging and their places of origin. Rural regions include Jendouba and Bizerte areas for Tunisian women, Fqih ben Salah and Beni Mellal for Moroccan women.

³ As a consequence I have decided to include in my sample both single women (including widows and separated/divorced women) and women that arrived in Italy out of the framework of family reunion.

Urban areas include cities of the coast as regards Moroccan women (Rabat, Casablanca, El Jadida); Tunis, Sousse and Sfax as regards Tunisian women. Another important difference between women having urban origins and those having rural origins lies in the fact that when women have experienced urban life they have already been going through a process of empowerment before leaving their countries, which is less frequently the case when they have experienced rural life.

There are also, partly as a consequence of what has been said before, important differences in the ways women of rural as well as lower-class origins migrate and the ways in which women with more educated backgrounds come to Italy. These different groups of women do not make recourse to similar social networks: for Tunisian and Moroccan women coming from the lower classes, it is often a man – a partner, the husband or the employer - that gives them the opportunity to come to Italy, most frequently an Italian man they have met during a tourist trip to their places of origin . Other Moroccan and Tunisian women come to Italy as prostitutes, which is one of the few ways to expatriate for many women lacking adequate family resources.

Women having better social backgrounds do not need to engage with these kinds of social roles. They frequently come to Italy as students, even though they usually quit their university studies shortly after having settled in the host country. Other women came when they received an invitation to join special events such as ‘mostre’ and ‘biennali’, festivals, political gatherings and summer courses.

As they originate from different social backgrounds, these women also find work in different economic niches: women coming from the lower middle-class usually find a job in the less attractive segments of the sexually and ethnically segmented labour market. The women I interviewed were thus employed as care or domestic workers, concierge, entertainers (singers or dancers), waitresses or prostitutes, even though some others have better social positions such as shopkeepers, transnational suitcase traders or cultural mediators (*mediatrici culturali*). Alternating various activities or having a double job are, however, frequent practices. For example, trade or prostitution are generally part-time activities, which are alternated to other kinds of job.

Most of the women coming from the lower middle-classes have experienced a family rupture - such as a divorce or repudiation - or have been left a widow. When they have never got married, women are already ‘too old’ to get married in their country of origin. Therefore, emigration appears to be a strategy pursued in order to begin a new life course on ‘novel

bases', thus defining a new life project in the receiving countries (Ramirez, 1999, 2002 ; Zontini, 2002). Some of the women I interviewed decided however to engage in a kind of 'reverse family reunification': making profit from their new status of legal immigrant in Italy, they married a man in their place of origin and helped him to settle in Italy. These situations are likely to create tensions and conflicts within the family because there is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the power that women gained due to their advantaged legal situation and, on the other hand, the fact that their husbands want to run the family once they settle with them in Italy. Interestingly, many women I have interviewed have experienced a sort of 'women's family reunification', helping a female cousin or a sister to join them in Italy. This phenomenon recalls those kinds of 'feminine networks of solidarity' that Vanessa Maher evokes in writing about the collective resources that Moroccan women are able to mobilize in situations of deprivation of power (Maher, 1989).

Some of the women I have met do have children, and generally choose to live with them, except those who work in prostitution or entertainment, who leave their children in their country of origin, or commit them to Italian women's custody.

Contrarily to women from the lower middle-class, women belonging to the elite and the upper middle-class have more chances to find work in the legal economy, especially in the private sector, as secretaries or as entrepreneurs, depending on the resources they have, or in the so-called "third sector". Women with this social background are generally single and have not experienced any rupture in their life yet. Their trajectories are much less disorderly than those of the other women. In spite of that, they still have to cope with certain forms of stigmatization (Zouari, 2002).

3. The stigmatisation of autonomous migrants, both here and there

A common feature of all these female migrants is the fact that they are mostly regarded as transgressors: this attitude can be explained in light of their independent economic status and of their choice to emigrate 'on their own' and thus to perform actively in public life. Such a stance on women autonomous migration can be found both in public discourses in their society of origin and in the discourses of their co-ethnics living in Italy. From a relational perspective, this stigmatisation is translated into discrimination and isolation both 'here' and 'there', more rarely takes the form of material violence against them. Thus, it can be said that

social marginalisation is the most powerful form of oppression that women have to live with. This also explains why, as we said in the previous paragraph, women often rely on peculiar solidarities, such as ‘feminine solidarities’ or they rely on the support of Italian men.

In North-African societies, the issue of autonomous migration has slowly started to emerge within the public debate (Moujoud, 2003 ; Carmona Benito, 2000)⁴. Newspapers and opinion makers have started to engage with this issue and to give normative assessment of female autonomous migration. In the public opinion these women are customarily represented as individuals forced to emigrate because of poverty and trafficking. Victimisation is the most common discourse about these women: according to this interpretation autonomous migration is a tragic situation, a blight that one should fight against⁵. Thus, in Maghreb countries the wider public has little consideration of empowerment and agency gaining processes that may also be constitutive of autonomous migration. One should observe however that victimisation of female migration is not a new phenomenon: historian Michelle Perrot recalls that women autonomous migration has always existed but has always been perceived as a disturbing issue, and to a certain extent, has always been removed from public consciousness:

« le soupçon pèse sur le déplacement des femmes, notamment des femmes seules, she writes, car la femme est une rebelle en puissance, une flamme dansante qu’il faut capter, empêcher de s’échapper » (Perrot, 2006, 183-184).

The same kind of negative opinion can be found within women’s entourage in their place of origin. Autonomous migrants are usually considered ‘lost persons’ as they escape the control of their relatives and the local community. Their relationship with their relatives remains strained and turbulent, due to the ‘original sin’ they have committed, the one of ‘leaving the country on their own’.

Other women tend also to stigmatise them. For example, in Morocco and Tunisia, during my fieldwork I noticed many discussions taking place between women about those who

⁴ See also the allocution of Nouza Chekrouni, Minister of the Moroccan Community Abroad, about female autonomous migration (6th March 2004 available on line: www.marocainsdumonde.gov.ma/documents/Femmesseulsetmigration.doc)

⁵ The male migrants from the Maghreb countries that I interviewed in Italy usually believe that women working as prostitutes do so because they are forced by their husbands or brothers. This belief, however, is not confirmed by my research findings. In Italy prostitutes from Maghreb countries are indeed probably those that do this job under conditions of conditions of autonomy which is not detectable amongst other ethno-national groups such as Nigerian or Albanians (Mornioli, 2003). Nasima Moujoud notes the same kind of discrepancy between the real practices of the prostitutes and the representations of the clientele from Maghreb she interviewed (2005, 228).

emigrated in Europe and raising the issue of the shame that women should feel about moving on their own.

Leyla, a woman I met in Tunisia, speaks of a Tunisian woman working in Italy in these terms:

“She says she is a dancer. In Rome. She has left her son on his own, with her husband that has disappeared, how can't she feel ashamed for this? I don't know how she can do this... The boy is here without anybody, thanks God that I take care of him, I am like a mother to him”

At the same time, these women find themselves deprived of any resource when they arrive in Italy, since they are rather excluded from access to the community resources and organisation in the place of settlement and are therefore unable to receive any support from their co-ethnics. In this respect Nasima Moujoud argues, in a recent work, that the taboo that autonomous migrants are victims of is similar to the taboo of prostitution.

« as prostitutes women are marginalized. However it doesn't mean that they wouldn't have been stigmatised if they had another activity. (...) Because they transgress the dominant norms, indeed, women from Maghreb that emigrate on their own are often assimilated to prostitutes » (Moujoud, 2005, 231-232).

Being perceived as transgressors, they are also frequently stigmatised as “anti-Islamic” and irreligious persons by their co-ethnics. As a consequence, they find themselves in a situation of social exclusion. The following story is illustrative in this respect:

Souad and Nassima were nurses in Algeria. They left their country in 1998, in a condition of deep psychological suffering due to a massacre that happened in the hospital where they worked. They did not have any contact when they arrived in the city, but they knew that a lot of people from Algeria lived there. They decided to go to the mosque, which they considered as the best place where to ask for hospitality. Unfortunately, they were badly welcomed at the mosque and told “here there is no room for women like you”. They were forced to sleep for two nights in the railway station, until the time they met a compatriot who decided to help them and managed to find a room for Souad and Nassima in an immigrants' guest house (centro di accoglienza). Some weeks later, Souad and Nassima found a job in a factory and left the “centro di accoglienza” for a place of their own.

Apart from this somehow extreme example, Muslim community usually seems to not be very welcoming with ‘women moving on their own’. When women engage in some public or political or social activities, they do it in a wide range of social contexts but not in those of Muslim organizations: they are more likely to participate in the activities of the consulates or civic organizations (mostly catholic associations). One of my interviewees said:

“How could I go to the mosque on holy days? The women that are there are all married. That couldn’t be for a woman like me to go there”

Access to worship places indeed seems to be particularly difficult and rather limited to married women. The only women I met that were frequenting the mosque or were those who got married and engaged in a sort of redemption trajectory.

Besides, women also have to suffer from the host society prejudices, viewing women as dominated and freedom-deprived subjects and Islam as an archaic religion.

“I feel myself like being between two fires. On the both sides, you always have to argue and defend yourself from their prejudices. According to the members of my community, I am ‘not enough’ a Muslim, in the general opinion of Italians, what I do is ‘too much’. The truth is that you never know how to behave” (Marina, Tunisia, 32 years).

As a consequence, in the host society, these women experience a twofold condition of social marginality, as they are confronted with both normative representations imposed by the local society and their co-ethnics. However, in spite of the representations they are victim of, these women manage to invent a very personal and original religiosity. Their religious practices can be seen as the product of the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, the obstacles and the stigmatization they have to face within their own environment and, on the other hand, their willingness and ability to develop a distinctly personal relationship with Islam. Through this particular relationship with Islam, they appropriate of different social spaces and become able to reinterpret their own personal histories, as I try to show in the next sections of this paper.

4. A variety of visibility strategies, spatial practices, language and bodily tactics, when engaging with public spaces

Building on some strands of research within the sociology of deviance, one of the goals of my research is, drawing on the study of women’s ‘life careers’ (Becker, 1963), to convey a view of female autonomous migration as an ordinary phenomenon. I do so by critically assessing to which extent women religious practices and strategies reflect the social and economic

conditions in their home and host societies (and in particular of gender relations and women condition) and, at the same time, by seeking to conceptualise women's subjective autonomy. In writing about women's sexuality, Michel Bozon speaks of a process of 'individualization under constraints' (Bozon, 2001): it is this kind of process that I am looking for in order to highlight, on the one hand, how women's religious trajectories reflect the constraints they have to face both 'here and there' and, on the other side, to investigate the specific initiatives, strategies, 'tricks'⁶ and tactics being used as tools (De Certeau, 2002) through which they manage to avoid some obstacles, to create new opportunities for themselves and to gain micro-scale powers in their everyday life.

Women rely on a variety of bodily and language techniques in order to pursue their strategies. Though these techniques refer to very different moral codes and patterns there is not necessarily any conflict between them. For instance, forms of both exalted femininity and masculinity can be adopted by the same woman in their everyday performances.

Similar strategies can be observed with traders:

Leila, a Moroccan woman aged 34, is the only North-African female owner of a boutique in a male-dominated area of Naples. In specific situations, she uses to dress and to talk 'as a man', according to her own words, so to 'be respected by other merchants'. When she gets angry with her interlocutors, she often uses physical and verbal violence in order to remind them that, if necessary, she can put things back in order. I saw her many times fighting with another trader or using machist insults (as 'you broke my balls'). On the contrary, in specific situations, she uses her femininity and the fact of being a single woman, in order to get support from different interlocutors: customers, wholesalers but also lawyers and even usurers. In these situations she insists on her fragility as a single woman and on her need to be protected. She also uses her femininity when it comes to discuss and provide advices to her female customers, in order to show them her competencies in women's dressing.

Similarly, women working in the sex and entertainment industry use to dress and talk in a revealing and feminine way in order to attract their customers, but are also capable of adopting a totally different, covered dressing code during the day life.

However, the use of bodily techniques must not be considered only as a 'labour specific' strategy. For many women, bodily techniques are described as markers of their integration in the host society. This is, in particular the case with specific techniques as make-up, dyed hair and the use of coloured lens, but also with the consumption of certain commodities in a very

⁶ The notion of 'trick' (in French 'ruse') is proposed by Michel de Certeau but is also very present in the Arabic tradition as 'Kay'd' (see for example al Hawrani, 1994).

ostensive way, from the use of the car to masticating chewing-gum, as described by Fawzia, a 40 years Tunisian woman:

“When I arrived in Italy I started to behave as Italian women do. I put the miniskirt, then I cut my hair, I dyed my hair (...) In Tunisia I could not masticate the chewing-gum for my brother controlled me”.

Similarly, the use of expensive perfumes of famous European brands such as Guerlain, Dior, Chanel and Yves Saint-Laurent is both a status symbol and a powerful way of enhancing femininity. During some research visits these perfumes have been offered to me as a sign of friendship.

The use of these perfumes is often criticized by those closer to women in the everyday life:

“I use ‘Samsara’ and my cousin - because she is fat and she cannot understand why I like it - she always says: this is such an expensive perfume, how can you afford it? Are you that rich? I always answer: I am not, but I love perfumes, what can I do for that?”

Other women, though not always wearing a headscarf, prefer having a somehow covered dress:

“I have always been a person that wears respectful dressing. I don’t like dressing a “décolleté”. Oh...never! I like to be covered. Also because I come from a respectful environment, from a traditional, respected Muslim family. So I always put a skirt that goes under my knees” (Najiba, Morocco, 35).

None of the women I interviewed is a ‘full time’ *hijab* dresser, which is certainly meaningful. They usually argued that they didn’t feel allowed to veil themselves it because of the life they were having: we shall see in the next section indeed that women have a strong sense of guilt regarding their situation.

In certain specific situations, however, especially when it comes to the experience of specific public spaces (such as markets, unknown areas or male-dominated places), they are used to dress in an Islamic way. In these cases, they insist on the visibility of their Islamic belonging and their allegiance to the community by covering their body and hair. Wearing the *hijab* is indeed a way to access to the spaces in which women are not welcomed, especially transnational spaces (McLeod, 1991; Cooper, 1997; Djalmy, 2003; Schmoll, 2005). This can be observed for example in the travelling or trading practices, when women have to engage in

face to face interactions, in particular with unknown persons such as customers or passport officers.

Other religious markers are likely to be used in their working places (boutiques, porter's lodge), like putting the Coran or photographs of La Mecca on the walls or organising specific religious celebrations. This is the case of Leyla's boutique.

Leyla's boutique walls are covered with pictures, and some of them represent La Mecca or specific Surat of the Coran. She invokes Islam very often in economic exchanges, especially with her Senegalese and Pakistani customers who represent an important part of her clientele. She often reminds them that "we are the same people, as we belong to the community of believers, the Umma". Leyla also organizes gatherings in her boutique in occasion of the celebration of specific religious events. During the Ramadan, there is, at the moment of break of the fast, always soup and date fruits available for people coming into the boutique.

The notion of 'repertoire of roles', famously proposed by Goffman, is here useful to the interpretation of Leyla's strategies (Goffman, 1959). Leyla relies on Islam as well as on other ethnic and sexual repertoires, according to the exchange situation and the varying publics she is confronted with and depending on the image she wants to give of herself to her interlocutors. It is somehow a policy of resemblance/dissemblance or distance/proximity that she adopts: sometimes she insists on her difference with regard to her customers (notably the fact of being a single woman in a men's area) but sometimes she uses her resemblances with their interlocutors to gain more trust (as in the case of Islam, or masculinity). From this point of view, her condition 'as a unity of nearness and remoteness' is close to the condition of the Stranger described by Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1950, 402-408). Being to some extent excluded from the group of co-ethnics, women gain the ability to develop a variety of social strategies.

More generally, the examples that have been made in this section show how specific Islamic bodily and language strategies deployed by women have importance in asserting their belonging to the community, in negotiating their presence within the places in which they live, in making their autonomy acceptable and even in widening it, as this enables them to be mobile and to get access to specific transactions and spaces. At the same time however, women's strategies are not definable only in religious terms. Religion indeed is part of a wide range of practices (Falah, Nagel, 2005). Women use Islamic dress codes and languages styles and at the same time are able to mobilise different moral and identity patterns, thus highlighting a sort of 'géométrie variable' identity, to put it in Jean-Loup Amselle's words (Amselle, 2000). It is not to say here that the way women's use of "visible Islam" is only

strategic and pragmatic or even opportunistic. My aim is to show how Islamic religiosity, far from being the only possible way to behave, is part of a very broad set of resources. The use that is made of the Islamic faith is a distinctively site- and time-specific phenomenon, according to the opportunities and obstacles women have to face. It is also dependent on the specific economic niches in which they work, the public realms they have to engage with and the situation they have to face. Thus it could be defined a contingent, place-specific and rather denationalised use of 'visible Islam'.

On the contrary, the role of Islam in the domestic and intimate space and in the private sphere of these women is much stronger, though invisible. Thus it can be argued that home is the first place for worship and the interpretation of religion.

5. The body and the domestic spaces as sites of an intense religious life

One might think, in light of the previous examples, that Islam is not crucial in women's trajectories. Rather, Islam is an important factor in the evolving of women's everyday life, but is not a visible phenomenon as it is mostly confined to the domestic and the body spheres. Bodily techniques are indeed not only a way to deal with social interaction in public places. These techniques are also an individualised practice bringing to light the distinctively subjective dimension of the Islamic religion. The act of praying, for instance, testifies to this individualised dimension of the religious belonging in its giving rise to an attempt to purify the relationship to the body (Zannad Bouchrara, 1994). At the same time, individual practices and those taking place in private places are themselves, as repeatedly stressed by feminist theorists, highly political.

At home, women use to pray regularly and to read the sacred book. These practices are however very guilt-ridden and based on the idea that their migratory and professional trajectories are *haram* ('impure', 'forbidden') so that they have to purify at home. As Elisa, a 47 years old Moroccan woman, puts it:

"I don't have lots of time. However time is not the problem. I would like to be more religious, to wear the hijab, but I am not praying enough for this. However I always read the Coran, it is the thing that helps me most. Sometimes I read the same Surat for twenty times"

Some of them, as Mounia, a 32 years old Tunisian woman I interviewed, use a rosary. For Mounia, the use of the rosary is a way of being near to God, without praying though because, as a prostitute, she considers that she has committed too many sins to be allowed to pray.

“I can’t do the prostitute and then pray God...where is this religion?...If you want to be a Muslim, you have to put on the hijab...Above all I can’t earn money from the sin...And then I could pray...Look: what goes around comes around. Doing bad thing brings you only evil because with all the money I made I didn’t save any single euro, because it is a dirty job...But anyway there are so many sins I don’t commit anymore. The rosary yes, it helps me to be nearer to god, I cannot pray but I can use the rosary and invoke God”

One should not think however that these home-circumscribed practices have nothing to do with the public sphere. Internet and the cable television are very important media for women. In particular, they regularly follow television broadcasts and debates focussing on religious issues. The use they make of the home media allows them to confront themselves with a transnational public sphere without having to deal with their local co-ethnics. Fawzia says:

“I never found help from anybody with religion, only the programmes on television that I am watching all the day long can help me”

All these practices have thus to be connected with the exclusion of these women from the public spaces (in particular worship spaces) and public life of the migrant community. Moreover, the importance of religion in the private space is a way to deal with the tensions and contradictions these women have to face in their everyday public life, particularly with the sense of guilt that they associated with their anomalous stories. At the same time, it is an interiorised and personal religiosity, that requires dignity and morality. It enables them to reinterpret their trajectories and to manage with the difficulties and obstacles they have to face in their new environment and in their migratory situation.

One, although extreme example of these religious strategies, is the bodily technique that consists in the preservation of virginity. It is mentioned by two women I met as one of the ways they found to remain ‘pure’ instead of their atypical trajectory. Elisa puts it this way:

“One has to live with healthy principles, that is the most important thing. I have always hated those women that go out with married men, I have always been opposed to that. Here I have never had any boyfriend. Only my fiancé, but I never had anybody before him. Just friendship. When I met him I told him: listen. I want to tell you only one thing. I am not Italian, neither Pole, nor any of these foreigners. I am a Muslim and you must have good intentions if you want to stay with me. He said: my intentions are sincere. Then I said: give me some time,

and then I decided to be with him, after months. And, believe me, he found me a virgin. The first time I had real, profound sex, I was 47. I had fiancés but we never made love. It is a matter of honour. Now we will get married. In our culture you have to be married. I hope he is sincere with me. Because if not, if I leaves me and doesn't marry me, I will cover my body and pray. I already pray, but then I will have to cover my hair."

Similarly, another woman I interviewed explained to me how she managed to remain a virgin, in spite of having regularly sexual relations with men. These two examples clearly show how the control of sexuality is an important tool in women's attempt to re-appropriate of their own life trajectories.

The intense religiosity of women is also reinforced over the course of their life trajectory.

"I never prayed in Tunisia. But when I arrived here I started to pray. When you are abroad, everything that comes from your country starts to be important. My life principles have changed since I am here".

Ruptures that have occurred within the family order or the difficulties encountered in the professional sphere are frequently interpreted as somehow divine messages and often lead to a reinforcement of women's religious feelings. Khadija, for example, became more religious when she had to face her first divorce:

"You know that I am a Muslim. It is in my education...However in my family nobody used to pray, only my grand-parents...When I was a child I used to pray only to show in public that I was a good girl...I had also to put the veil for a certain time, then I put it away and I stopped praying... When I divorced, I was so near to God...Although this was a dark period, I saw everything clear...When I started to work in nightclubs I continued to pray...It gave me the strength to continue because the Coran gave peace to my soul".

Conclusion

Women engage on a daily basis with an intense definition of their Islamic belonging, which informs many aspects of their migratory experience and is reshaped by both trans-national and site-specific opportunities and obstacles. This process gives rise to distinguished forms of religious practice and belief. From this point of view, it can be argued that women's peculiar religiosity reflects their unconventional life trajectory and migratory status.

Besides, women's religiosity challenges the conventional wisdom on migration and religion, considering religion either as an important factor in cultural reproduction and the maintaining of ethnic groups identities or as a tool that enables assimilation in the mainstream religious practices of the host society (Hirschman, 2004). Female migrants appear not to be following any of these paths.

Rather, their example illustrates the religious pluralism existing within Islam both between men and women and amongst women themselves. Female migrants do not use strategically their visibility to affirm their cultural citizenship, but engage in less visible forms of participation and engagement within Islam. In doing so, they contribute to the differentiation and individualisation of religious practices and feelings, as a result of their 'individual capacity to give a meaning to a religious affiliation and to transform some of the practices independently from what the community considers legitimate and intends to control' (Amiriaux, 2003 ; see also Khosrokhavar, 1997 ; Cesari, 1998).

At the same time, women's religious experience is inherently ambiguous. In dealing with the contradictions associated with women's religiosity, one can observe that there is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, a visible but strategic and contingent use of Islam, and, on the other hand, an individualised and rather invisible religiosity, which is mostly confined to the private and domestic space (based on invisible bodily techniques, for instance). Even the ways in which women relate to the public sphere are spatially located within private and domestic places (mostly through home media consumption).

From this point of view, my research reinforces the necessity, along the lines of what frequently asserted by feminist thinkers, to take into consideration a variety of spaces and geographic scales in order to grasp the meaning of the micro-politics of women's everyday life (Moss, 2002).

Female migrants peculiar form of religiosity, which is both the product and an active source of their specific migratory status, reinforces itself over the development of their migratory trajectories. Moreover, women's religious experience has to be connected with the hostility they have to face both within the host and the home societies and within their ethno-national community. Religiosity is continuously reshaped by dynamics of distantiation/proximity in the everyday relationship with their co-ethnics (Simmel, 1950). Is precisely this positionality as 'outsiders' that gives women the capacity to mobilise different patterns of belonging, thus allowing agency and empowerment.

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Description of the sample

Profession	Age	Citizenship	Family Status
Prostitute	32	Tunisia	Divorced – one child
Concierge	49	Tunisia	Recently married – no children
Prostitute	46	Morocco	Single – no children
Domestic Worker	32	Tunisia	Widow – no children
Secretary	30	Tunisia	Divorced – no children
Domestic work	47	Tunisia	Married – two children
Waitress		Morocco	Single – no children
Entertainer	32	Tunisia	Divorced – no children
Cultural Mediator	35	Morocco	Single – no children
Trader	34	Morocco	Single – one child
Domestic Worker	47	Tunisia	Single – no children
Transnational suitcase trader	42	Tunisia	Single – no children
Transnational suitcase trader	37	Tunisia	Widow – no children
Transnational suitcase trader	38	Tunisia	Single – no children
Transnational suitcase trader	40	Algeria	Separated –two children
Entrepreneur	42	Algeria	Single- one child
Entrepreneur	34	Algeria	Married – no children
Secretary	38	Algeria	Divorced – one child
Secretary	29	Morocco	Single – no children

Prostitute	41	Tunisia	Single – no children
Worker in third sector	30	Morocco	Single – no children
Domestic worker	37	Algeria	Single – no children
Domestic worker	39	Algeria	Single – no children
Domestic worker	45	Morocco	Divorced- no children
Transnational suitcase trader	48	Morocco	Married- three children