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Locating the threat, rebordering the nation: Gender and Islamophobia in the Swiss Parliament, 2001–2015

Lucia Direnberger, Elisa Banfi, Vista Eskandari

Abstract

Since 2001, the ‘Islamic threat’ has become increasingly prominent in debates on migration policy, religious affairs and security at the federal level in Switzerland. Supported by the far right-wing parties, the paradigm of the Islamic threat reveals how Islamophobia is gendered and affects Muslim women and men differently. By analysing debates between the Federal Council and Swiss Parliament, this article shows how the Islamic threat shaped the border politics of the Swiss Nation between 2001 and 2015. It reveals how the ruling elite justified the socio-spatial exclusion of Muslims living in a Muslim-minority context. As consequence of the success of the far right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP), legal measures have increased with regard to security, protection of Swiss culture and women’s rights, and exclusion of Muslims from the boundaries of the Swiss nation.

Key words: Gender, Islamophobia, nation, Switzerland, politics of bordering

Introduction

For the past twenty years, the far right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP) has contributed to the rise of Islamophobia in Europe. National campaigns against minarets and the burqa have become rallying points for the building of a pan-European right-wing unity around Islamophobia and anti-immigration campaigns (Hafez 2014). In 1999, the SVP became the largest party in the National Council, and since then it has effected deep change to state institutions and policy regarding Islam in Switzerland. Walter Wobmann, representative of the SVP and member of the National Council since 2003 – and one of the most influential figures in the Swiss anti-minaret referendum – advocated in 2015 that the activism of the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West, or PEGIDA) was unnecessary in Switzerland because the SVP

had the means to transform PEGIDA's political objectives into action and direct democracy initiatives through the use of ordinary parliamentary mechanisms.¹ Under the Swiss Federal Constitution, the relationship between the state and religious groups is officially regulated by the cantons. However, the SVP has promoted debates and policy-making on Islam and Muslims to the federal level. This process of the 'de-cantonalisation' and federalisation of Islamic issues has contributed to the rebordering of the nation (Eskandari and Banfi 2018; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

The contemporary Swiss migratory regime is one of the most ethnic-assimilationist models in Europe (Gafner and Schmidlin 2007; Giugni and Passy 2004; Michel 2014, 2015). From the late 1990s, Swiss migratory policies were explicitly based on the 'three circles' model, which focused on the economic needs of the country, the defence of national identity and cultural integrity. It divides the world into three zones² by creating a hierarchy based on the cultural proximity of population groups to Swiss values (Mahnig 2005; Piguet 2004; Studer et al. 2013) and 'it also reiterates post-colonial distinctions between various degrees of difference between "genuine" Swiss and foreign others of western or non-western origin' (Fischer and Dahinden 2017: 457). This model was then replaced in 2002 by a dual system of migration, by which citizens from EU and EFTA countries benefited from freedom of movement into and out of Switzerland, and immigration from outside EU/EFTA countries was possible only in special circumstances. If the dual system made the argument of 'cultural proximity' to Swiss values more remote, the 'othering' process has not disappeared from the arguments of the ruling elite. Islam has become one of the main drivers of otherness, and the politics of bordering exclude Muslim living in Switzerland from the Swiss national community whether or not they have Swiss citizenship.

This article analyses the definition of Islamic beliefs and practices by political actors at the federal level. It investigates how political parties and the Swiss Federal Council, acting within the Federal Parliament, frame Islam and Muslim people primarily as an 'Islamic threat'. This paradigm of threat is based on different scales outside the borders of Switzerland Swiss and within the national territory. It reveals how the ruling elite have produced a socio-spatial exclusion of Muslims living in a Muslim-minority context, effectively rebordering the

¹ <https://www.rsi.ch/news/svizzera/Pegida-si-attiva-in-Svizzera-3507187.html>.

² The first geographical zone included European Union (EU) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, which benefited from freedom of movement into and out of Switzerland. The second zone included countries outside the EU and EFTA that were deemed attractive for labour recruitment on the basis of respect for human rights and belonging to the same cultural sphere as Switzerland – for example, the United States, Canada and Australia. The third zone was made up of the rest of the world. Immigration from countries in the third circle was not allowed except for highly qualified specialists.

nation. It also shows Islamophobia intersects with boundaries of national community and the production of social hierarchies.

Literature review and methodology

The analysis is grounded in three areas of study: first, race, nation and bordering; second, Islamophobia in Switzerland; and third, intersections of power relations.

Regarding the first of these, researchers have shown how ethnic and racial hierarchies (re)frame citizenship and national community in European post-colonial societies (Amiriaux 2014; Scott 2007; Yuval-Davis 1997, El-Tayeb 2011). Some of them have specifically investigated bordering processes that are specific to a political, economic and social context (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Based on racial hierarchies and the othering process, bordering ‘includes determining not only who is and who is not entitled to enter the country, but also whether those who do would be allowed to stay, work, and acquire civil, political, and social rights’ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019: 5). Bordering claims to secure the nation by maintaining the social and political order (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). It implies that the ‘others’ are considered a threat to this order and to the security of the ‘national community’. Politics of bordering in Switzerland have been analysed by postcolonial scholars. Researchers have shown how ‘colonialism without colonies’ and ‘colonialism at the margin’ (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015) impact the making of Swiss social, political and economic order, which is ‘firmly tied the idea of nation as homogenous entities and natural containers of belonging’ (Fischer and Dahiden 2017: 460), excluding racialised groups (Boulila 2013; Michel 2015). Analyzing a poster of the SVP’s ‘For More Security’ campaign and its associated controversy in 2007, Noémi Michel shows how the SVP and the Geneva’s counter-campaign ‘re-solidify and naturalise a chain of affective and visual codes that connect Swissness with purity and foreignness with racialised difference and threat’ (Michel 2015: 419). In the literature on race and racialisation, many scholars have investigated the analytical relationship between Islamophobia and the racialisation of Muslims (Asal 2014; Hajjat and Mohammed 2013; Meer 2013, 2014). Islamophobia is crucial to the politics of bordering, which divides citizens between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in different European contexts and allows the creators of bordering to (re)frame values assigned to European national ideologies such as republic, secularism and democracy (Amiriaux 2014).

Most recent scholarship on Islamophobia in Switzerland has been developed since the November 2009 referendum on the banning of new minarets. This literature suggests a shift from xenophobic to Islamophobic discourses. Lindemann (2012) and Lindemann and Stolz (2014) have analysed the overlapping definitions of Muslims and immigrants in newspapers

from the French-speaking areas of Switzerland over the period 1970–2004. During this time, the religious category of ‘Muslim’ was increasingly used to define immigrants, thus concealing the existence of Swiss citizens who practised Islam. At the national level, Helbling (2010) has analysed individual attitudes by showing how ethnic and national self-understandings among Swiss citizens have had a significant impact on the interaction between xenophobia and Islamophobia. A recent article on media and Islam over the period 2009–2017 found that Muslims living in the country are almost voiceless, and their representation in the media has served to create distance between Swiss citizens and Muslims based on three recurrent issues: terrorism, radicalisation and external markers such as the burqa or headscarf.³ Considering gendered Islamophobia, Parini et al. (2012) have shown that in the Swiss French-language media, gender issues function as a means to consolidate the alleged incompatibility between Islam and Western culture. Dahinden et al. (2014) have studied how young people in the French-speaking canton of Neuchâtel frame the assumption of ‘non-egalitarian Muslims’ by intertwining gender, ethnicity and religious elements to define the boundaries of citizenship.

Scholars have also analysed the relationship between Islamophobia and political actors. Mayer (2011) discusses the interaction between different levels of government and the production of threatening, ideological representations of local Muslims during the campaigns in the November 2009 anti-minaret referendum. Cheng (2015) has analysed the relationship between Muslimophobia, Islamophobia and racism by investigating parliamentary debates, also during the referendum, and shown how politicians use ‘Islam’ as a ‘metonymy for Muslims’ to avoid accusations of racism. Boulila (2013) has examined the position of anti-Muslim Swiss feminists during the referendum campaigns, and described how their stance simultaneously integrated three elements of gendered Orientalist representations: the objectification of Muslim women; the fear of racial contamination of the nation; and the construction of a dichotomy between civilised Western societies and uncivilised ‘others’.

However, as a site for the production of racism and the construction of the ‘other’, parliamentary debates have largely been neglected in this scholarship (Hafez 2018: 394). Eskandari and Banfi (2018) have analyzed parliamentary debates in Switzerland, and have shown that the institutionalisation of Islamophobia in Switzerland intersects with race, nation and gender, and is influenced by the relationships between federal and cantonal authorities.

³ *‘La qualité de la couverture médiatique des musulmans de Suisse’* by Patrik Ettinger (2018) for the Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft (FÖG), University of Zürich, commissioned by the Swiss Federal Commission Against Racism.

Islamophobia is ‘total social fact’ that involve the whole society and its political, administrative, juridical, economic, media and intellectual institutions (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013: 18). Islamophobia occurs at different levels of governance, which aim to domesticate the bodies and souls of citizens assigned to social, economic and political minorities (Mazouz 2017).

This article focuses on one state institution neglected by research on Islamophobia in Switzerland: the federal level. It contributes to the historicisation of discourse of Islamic threat used by political parties and the Federal Council since 2001 to border the Swiss national identity. In the contemporary politics of bordering, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) note that ‘any place has become a borderland; and borderlands can no longer be determined exclusively in relation to specific territories and states’. Yet their effective locations in specific contexts remain crucial to the analysis of the inequalities and violence they produce for racialised minorities. In this article, we will show how bordering targets different scales: national borders, public space and specific locations such as mosques. We will focus on bordering as a particular political project of governance at the Swiss federal level.

The literature on the intersection of gender, race and social class provides the theoretical framework for an increasing volume of research on Islamophobia. We will focus mainly on three arguments of this literature. First, Islamophobic arguments often refer to Muslim women as victims of patriarchy, who are deprived of agency and need to be saved by non-Muslim men and women (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2008). Muslim societies are depicted as the worst place for women, where they suffer because of Islamic practices and the Islamic faith (Mahmood 2008: 83). Muslim women can only be saved by the promotion of western values of ‘freedom and liberty’ (Mahmood 2008). This narrative justifies the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 but also restrictive migration policy in Europe. In Switzerland, it structured the shift from ‘a policy of explicit non-integration’ towards an integration policy in the mid-2010s: ‘A key attribute of this new gendered boundary in admission and integration politics is the ethnicisation and racialisation of female subordination and male chauvinism’ (Fischer and Dahinden 2017: 459).

Second, gendered Islamophobia involves the economic realm (Farris 2017: 116; Karimi 2018). Farris’s work shows how the implementation of Islamophobic politics ‘has functioned through directing migrant women undergoing civic integration programs toward the care and domestic sector, or social reproduction’, and how it has therefore ‘de facto contributed to locating these women in the private sphere’ (Farris 2017: 117). Hanane Karimi reveals how a conservative interpretation of state secularism leads women to become

involved in entrepreneurial networks in France in order to overcome discrimination and exclusion (Karimi 2018).

Third, gendered Islamophobia is a spatial process. Researchers have analysed how Muslim women have restricted access to public space in the name of alleged Western values. For example, Carmen Teeple Hopkins (2015) has analysed the unequal access of Muslim women living in France to the public sphere – in particular, schools, universities and the majority of workplaces. Carina Listerborn (2015) has investigated the intersection between geographies of pain and the geography of headscarves among Muslim women in Malmö, Sweden. And Kawtar Najib (2016) has analysed the locations of anti-Muslim acts by showing the restriction of Muslim mobility – especially that of women – through the use of an intersectional approach. Researchers have highlighted the diversity of women’s veiling practices and how they cope with spatial restrictions (Almila 2017; Najib 2016).

Methodology

This article analyses the interpellations, motions, questions, postulates and parliamentary initiatives⁴ of deputies, and the statements and answers that the Federal Council gave to those deputies. The dataset was built using an exhaustive collection of parliamentary discussions and Federal Council answers retrieved from the official website CURIA VISTA (in the French version). Parliamentary documents were analysed for the period from 11 September 2001 to 1 January 2016. The documents were sampled using the Boolean keyword search (*Islam* OR Musulman**), or (*Islam* OR Muslim**). A total of 240 documents were sampled. In our analysis, we focused specifically (but not exclusively) on two sub-groups of objects: the first sampled using the keywords (*Islam* OR Musulman**) AND (*femme OR femmes*), or (*Islam* OR Muslim**) AND (*Women OR Woman*), and the second with the keywords (*Islam* OR Musulman**) AND (*Voile OR Foulard OR Burqa/Burqa*), or (*Islam* OR Muslim**) AND (*Veil OR Headscarf OR Burqa/Burqa*). In the first sub-group there were 28 objects, and in the second there were 12. Documents concerning tax agreements between

⁴ By an interpellation, Council members, a majority of the members of a committee, or a parliamentary group ask the Federal Council to give information on domestic or foreign affairs. By a motion, the majority of a committee, a parliamentary group, or an Assembly member will ask the Federal Council to submit a Bill to the Federal Assembly or to implement some measures. By a question, a member of parliament asks the Federal Council to provide information about important domestic or foreign affairs. By a postulate, the majority of the members of a committee, or a parliamentary group, will mandate the Federal Council to submit a Bill to the Federal Assembly or to take a measure. See <https://www.parlament.ch/en/über-das-parlament/parlamentswörterbuch>.

states were not included. Interpellations, motions, questions, postulates and parliamentary initiatives made up the final dataset.

Between 2001 and 2015, the equilibrium between the historical right-wing parties in the Swiss parliament has experienced profound changes. From 2001 to 2015, the SVP became the most relevant party at the National Council. In fact, in the election of 1999, the SVP, the Swiss Socialist Party and the Liberal Party had almost the same percentage of the vote (around 22 per cent), but in the 2015 election, SVP won almost 30 per cent of the vote, leaving both the Swiss Socialist Party and the Liberal Party with below 20 per cent of voters. Furthermore, starting from 2007, new centre-right political parties have emerged, such as the Swiss Democratic Bourgeois Party and the Green Liberal Party of Switzerland (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Mazzoleni and Rossini 2016).

Analysing 15 years of debates, we focus on the transformations of the discourses regarding Islam, Muslims and the veil in order to understand the historical shifts that have occurred in the political treatment of these issues by deputies and members of the Federal Council.

From national borders to boundaries of the nation

From 2001 to 2015, the treatment of ‘Muslim woman’ issue and its relationship with the making of Islamic threat at the federal level changed (Banfi 2021). Between 2001 and 2003, left-wing parties such as the Green Party of Switzerland and the Swiss Socialist Party raised issues relating to Muslim women before the Federal Council. In December 2001, two Green Party deputies, Anne-Marie Menétrey-Savary and Patrice Mugny, brought forward the situation of Safia Tudu’s sentence to death by stoning by the Islamic court of Gwadabawa, Nigeria. The deputies expressed their disapproval of the sentencing decision and requested that the Swiss government intervene. Anne-Marie Menétrey-Savary referred to an international campaign launched by Italian female deputies.

In its answer, the Federal Council reminded them that Nigeria had already stated that the sentence was unacceptable and that it may intervene. The Swiss Federal Council also referred to the activism of the civil society in Nigeria, especially women’s associations, which demanded action from the Nigerian authorities. The Swiss Federal Council reported that the Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria had both condemned the decision.⁵

⁵ Question 01.5254, Question 01.5261.

Then, in May 2003, the Socialist deputy Christian Grobet informed the Federal Council that the Supreme Court of Nigeria had upheld Amina Lawal's sentence to death by stoning for adultery and for conceiving a child out of wedlock.⁶ Grobet asked what the Federal Council would do to save the mother of a newborn child. The Federal Council replied that the Nigerian government has always condemned sentences of this kind, which were described as a very conservative application of Islamic Law in the context of Northern Nigeria. The Federal Council also reported that the earlier case of Safiya Husseini had led the Nigerian government to declare the application of Islamic Law unconstitutional whenever it would have the effect of discriminating against Muslim Nigerians.

In their questions, the Swiss deputies identified two types of actors who react or should react against the death sentences: 'female Italian deputies' and the Swiss Federal Council. The Federal Council provided evidence of support from Swiss institutions and 'other Western States', but also of the mobilisation of civil society, particularly women's movements in Nigeria, and of the reactions of the Nigerian government and Nigerian lawyers. The 'West' is produced as a strong liberating agent for Muslim women in both questions and answers revealing a shared assumption in the Swiss institutions. However, the Federal Council discloses the diversity of positions within the Nigerian context, and circumvents the Orientalist approach of leftist deputies who deprive non-western Muslim women of agency, and position the West as their only saviour (Abu Lughod 2013).

We observe a shift in the treatment of Muslim woman issue at the federal level related to the reshaping of political agenda on migration policy. Since 2004, Swiss institutions and political parties have been especially concerned with immigration. In 2004, the Federal Council proposed mechanisms to facilitate the naturalisation of second-generation 'immigrants' and the granting of *jus soli* (the right of citizenship by place of birth) to the third generation. The majority of the Swiss electorate (56.8 per cent) voted against this proposal. The SVP has been particularly active in anti-immigration campaigns. Between 2003 and 2007, Christoph Blocher, leader of the SVP at the time, was also the chancellor leading the federal Department of Justice and Police, which manages the Federal Office of Migration (Akin and Banfi, 2019). During his mandate, Blocher created the institutional conditions that paved the way for the development of both the Aliens Law and the Immigrant Integration Report of 2007 (Efionayi-Mäder et al. 2003; Wanner & D'Amato 2003). In both documents, a political shift can be observed concerning the meaning of the term 'integration', which

⁶ Question 03.1053.

became associated with ‘coercion’ and ‘repression’. Within the context of the SVP’s political agenda on immigration, the issue of Muslim women supplies arguments to define Muslim men as dangerous. In this context, the far right-wing parties exercised a monopoly on ‘Islamic issues’ that contributed to reshaping the Swiss political landscape, but also to promoting a relocation of the Islamic threat at the federal level. In their four interventions, far-right parties focused on Muslims living in Europe.

The first action was a motion tabled in March 2006 by Stamm Luzi to prevent ‘political unrest’ with a restriction for foreigners of freedom of expression in the public space. He states that the previous year’s Swiss State and rule of law have experienced increased threats because of the immigration of Muslim people and conflicts in neighbouring countries, such as riots in French *banlieues*. He justifies that the existence of this threat in Switzerland by two arguments: tolerance for organisations such as the Kosovo Liberation Army; and people who support adulterous women’s lapidation.⁷ In December 2006, Christophe Darbellay reported to the Federal Council that some German schools, the Dutch Government and Belgian cities had taken action against women wearing the burqa. He asked the Federal Council whether it had considered following this policy in Switzerland.⁸

In 2007, Ulrich Schlüer claimed in a question addressed to the Federal Council that the Federal Commission against racism stated that physical injuries had to be accepted as a cultural behaviour and asked for the Federal Council’s position on this issue.⁹

In 2008, Lukas Reimann, a well-known SVP politician who launched a campaign against the ‘Islamisation of Swiss culture’,¹⁰ requested that the Federal Council protect Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who is described in the motion as a Dutch citizen with Somalian origins, a women’s rights activist against Islamists and threatened by death because of her books and her political activities at the European Council. Because of the very high level of threats, Lukas Reimann claimed that Switzerland should welcome Ayaan Hirsi Ali and guarantee her security in the Swiss territory. He also asked whether the Federal Council would guarantee support and protection to any activists with an anti-Islam position who received death threats.¹¹

⁷ Motion 06.3155.

⁸ Interpellation 06.3675.

⁹ Question 07.5164.

¹⁰ Among Lukas Reimann’s political activities, in December 2006 he launched a petition in Saint-Gallen to promote the celebration of Christmas in public schools as a ‘strong message to the Islamic community’.

¹¹ Interpellation 08.3067.

In these four debates raised by the SVP, this party created a nexus between the protection of Muslim women's rights and the moral duty of Swiss institutions to condemn Islam as antithetical to human rights.

In 2009, the debates at the federal level regarding Muslim woman increased in the context of the anti-minaret referendum launched by the Egerkingen Committee and supported by the SVP. The Federal Council recommended rejection of this popular initiative 'against the construction of minarets', with 57.7 per cent of Swiss citizens approving the constitutional ban on minarets and the Federal Council announcing that the ban would come into effect in November 2009. During this campaign, the SVP also requested more control over the imams in Switzerland. It justified this policy by stating that imams had a deep influence on Muslim migrants and Swiss state had to 'establish a strict control and deport the preachers of hate', as we can read in Lukas Reimann's motion of March 2009, which states that a terrorist group belonging to Al-Qaeda network has recruited fighters around a mosque in Bienne, a city in Switzerland.¹² He also refers to the Quilliam Foundation in the United Kingdom, described as an 'Islamic foundation against extremism', which states that imams contribute to the radicalisation of youth and ban women from the mosques. When the anti-minaret initiative was approved, the SVP again defended strict control over imams in its address in December 2009 concerning the implementation of this ban.¹³ In the same address, the party also asked what action the Federal Council was taking in favour of the ban on forced marriage in Switzerland.

Until 2015, Muslims living both outside and inside Switzerland were mentioned in parliamentary debates, as Muslims became the 'internal and external enemies' (Cesari 2013). Parliamentary debates on 'Muslim woman' concerned the absence of democracy in Arab countries and persecutions against Christians in Middle-East. The SVP focused on the situation of Christian women and Muslim wives, mothers and daughters killed by husbands and fathers in Muslim majority countries. All the political parties (except the Green Party) focused on refugee selection criteria and their conditions of integration. In European countries, anti-terror securitisation policies were translated into the deprivation of immigrants' rights and the restriction of religious freedoms for Muslims (Cesari 2013: 83).

So we observe a shift in the treatment of the Islamic threat and the suffering of Muslim women: the Green Party and the Socialist Party first constructed the West as a progressive space for women, while Muslim-majority countries – such as Nigeria – were

¹² Motion 09.3270.

¹³ Interpellation 09.4315.

assigned the role of barbaric places where women were isolated and threatened by death by stoning. Then the conservative SVP and CDPP relocated the ‘Islamic issue’ and, more particularly, the suffering of Muslim women, to the Swiss territory.

Historically, the SVP has been opposed to women’s rights and gender equality. In 1958, the BGB (forerunner to the current SVP) recommended voting against the right of women to vote and to be elected in the first national referendum on the matter. The most prominent former leader of the SVP, Christoph Blocher, was very active in combatting the reform of matrimonial law. Between 1981 and 1984, he founded and led the Committee Against the ‘Failed’ Matrimonial Law to spearhead the legislative and political fight (Frischknecht et al. 1984: 508–509), arguing that the individual rights of women should not be allowed to prevail over collective ‘family rights’. During recent decades, the SVP has continued to play a significant role in restricting women’s rights – even fighting against the introduction of the concept of gender equality into the constitutional text. In 2004, the SVP launched a referendum against the revision of the law concerning earnings-loss benefits, gathering 72,000 signatures to petition against the extension of the benefit to working mothers. In 2009, the national councillor of the SVP, Peter Föhn, demanded the abolition of refunds for abortion expenses paid by health insurance companies except in cases of rape or danger to the mother’s health. More recently, the SVP has demanded (unsuccessfully) the suppression of the Gender Equality Office at the cantonal level (for instance, in the cantons of Valais and Basel-Landschaft), and the obligatory quota of women on the Administrative Council of the canton of Basel-Landschaft (Belser 2015 a and b). Protection of ‘Muslim women’, paradoxically, has become an issue for the SVP because it has allowed the party to condemn Islam and Muslims. Reimann’s intervention conditioned the ‘rescue’ of Muslim women by Swiss political institutions: they must renounce any belonging to an Islamic community and adopt a discourse that fits with conservative migration policies.

Here the suffering of Muslim women is used by both left- and right-wing parties as a boundary dividing the Swiss national community from the Muslim others. Going further, the nationalisation of the Islamic threat by the SVP and its connection with anti-immigration campaigns justify a more restrictive control of the Swiss borders and claim the rebordering of the Swiss community.

Muslim women’s bodies as a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’

The veil, Islamic headscarf or burqa is the most frequent topic relating to Muslim women that has been raised in the Swiss Federal Parliament. Veils were mentioned in twelve

parliamentary items between 2001 and 2015: three objects were tabled by the CDPP, six by the SVP, two by the Swiss Socialist Party, and one by the Liberal Party (FDP), indicating that the veil was raised most often by far-right and right-wing parties. Other topics relating to Muslim women living in Switzerland – including polygamy, female genital mutilation and forced marriage – were also taken up by the SVP and CDPP in parliamentary debates.

Three different assumptions about Muslim women's bodies emerge from these documents. First, scarves indicate Islamism. For instance, in 2004, Maurice Chevrier, deputy of the CDPP, referred to an increased number of Muslim women wearing veil in Germany, interpreting this as a sign of the infiltration of radical Islamism into German civil society. The deputy quotes François Modoux's article published in the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* saying that radical Islamism leads to 'crusade against Western values'.¹⁴ In 2014, André Bugnon, deputy of the SVP, stated that a form of Sharia Law 'police' were operating in the City of Wuppertal (in Germany), and enforcing the principles of Sharia, such as the wearing of the veil and the prohibition of music, alcohol and tobacco.¹⁵

Second, far right-wing parties often evoke the suffering of Muslim women, who are depicted as oppressed by Muslim men. In 2006, Christophe Darbellay, deputy of the CDPP, stated that the growing Muslim population had caused an increase in forced marriages and the wearing of the veil in Switzerland.¹⁶ In 2009, Kathrin Amacker-Amann, again a deputy of the CDPP, requested that a map be drawn up that would provide quantitative data on 'Preachers of Hate', the implementation of Sharia, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and the obligation of Muslim women to wear a veil.¹⁷ In 2011, Natalie Rickli, from SVP, reported in its question to the Federal Council that a Macedonian man living in Switzerland had killed his wife and daughter because the daughter wanted to lead a free life, and also reported that a Pakistani man (also living in Switzerland) killed his daughter with an axe.¹⁸ Based on these two cases, the SVP alleged that other non-reported honour crimes were happening within Muslim families in Switzerland. Natalie Rickli states that 'such acts are generally linked to Islamic religion'. As consequence, it portrays a specific treatment of Muslim women's oppression, whereby Muslim women suffer from specific violence (e.g. they are obliged to wear a veil, endure forced marriages, are the victims of honor crimes) perpetrated by men (who belong to the so-called Muslim community).

¹⁴ Interpellation 04.3477.

¹⁵ Question 14.5353.

¹⁶ Interpellation 06.3675.

¹⁷ Postulat 09.4027.

¹⁸ Question 11.5193.

Violence against women is considered to be a ‘Muslim issue’, creating a culturalist and Islamophobic approach to the topic. This characterisation of the causes of gendered violence is linked to the ‘deployment of gender equality within xenophobic campaigns’ (Farris 2017: 5), in which ‘Muslim women personify the homogenising figure of the non-Western woman as the victim *par excellence* of non-Western male violence’ (Farris 2017: 10). However the use of the rhetoric of ‘women’s rights’ as a racist tool is intertwined with political engagement against gender equality (Belser 2015a, 2015b).

Third, the bodies of Muslim women – especially when veiled – are described as a threat to security. In 2006, the SVP stated that several European countries faced problems with women wearing burqas in public spaces, and described the initiatives being proposed in these countries to ban burqas before asking whether the Federal Council would consider such sanctions. In 2010, Oskar Freysinger,¹⁹ SVP deputy, stated that in a context of growing insecurity, increasing numbers of people were hiding their faces with hoods, masks or veils, and argued that this was leading to problems in verifying identities in cases of violence. Both within and outside parliament, Oskar Freysinger promoted a representation of Islam as backward, violent, monolithic and totalitarian, and alleged that Islam and Muslims posed a threat to democratic, liberal societies.²⁰ Muslim women wearing a burqa are here considered dangerous and need to be sanctioned.

The campaign against the veil, the Islamic headscarf and the burqa represents a ‘moral crusade’ (Becker 1963), started and shaped by the far-right wing parties of Switzerland to create a boundary between Swiss non-Muslim citizens and Muslim migrants in Switzerland. This politics of bordering reshapes the politics of governance. The SVP makes national identity and security the most important prerogative of the state that should be translated into new legislative measures. Contrary to France, where parties from both the far right, right and left were deeply involved in anti-burqa and anti-veil campaigning, the left-wing parties in Switzerland remained virtually silent on these issues between 2001 and 2015. The Socialist Party intervened once in 2010²¹ by highlighting the inequalities that would emerge between Swiss citizens and non-Swiss citizens if the use of the burqa were authorised for non-Swiss citizens, but the issue was raised late in the debates, which had already been shaped mainly by the far-right wing parties. Again, this is markedly different from the situation in other countries, such as the Netherlands, where left-wing parties played a crucial role in bringing

¹⁹ Motion 10.3173.

²⁰ For instance in this interview, conducted in 2009: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58pngsJKmtQ>.

²¹ Question 10.1051.

the issue of discrimination faced by veiled Muslim women before the Dutch Parliament (Lettinga and Saharso 2012).

In Switzerland, the ‘suffering of Muslim women’ is a political issue raised by far right-wing parties. In these Islamophobic narratives, these women have become ‘impossible victims’ (Billaud and Castro 2018) for two reasons: first, they are considered responsible for their own oppression until they agree to forego any association with Islam (otherwise they are viewed as deserving of and participating in the oppression). And because they are ‘impossible victims’, they must be sanctioned by exclusion from public spaces and the workplace. Second, they are only oppressed by Muslim men, and in this narrative they cannot be victims of other forms of discrimination (for example, by white Swiss individuals and state institutions at work, school and university, in public spaces, health services, associations and political parties, in the media and elsewhere).²² In consequence of these assumptions, sanctions are considered good practice – for example, the banning of the veil in public spaces, which can lead to women’s seclusion to the private sphere or, as Christophe Darbellay, deputy of the CDPP, advocated in December 2006, the removal of unemployment benefits from Muslim women who refuse to remove their veils.²³

The SVP’s and CDPP’s arguments regarding the veil or the suffering of Muslim women very often refer to other Western European contexts such as France, Belgium and Germany, which would face the same ‘problems’. These Swiss parties also argued for application of the most conservative ‘solutions’ (veil bans) by these countries. Europe is here reframed as a cultural and political entity destabilised by the presence of Muslim ‘others’. European countries need to be protected from this threat by imposing the regime of visibility in the public space, which becomes the main space for performing citizenship (Amiriaux 2014). This moral crusade doesn’t say anything about Muslim women’s experiences, but it tells us a lot about the politics of bordering shaped by these political parties, which claim visibility as a fundamental Swiss value, shared by its Western European neighbours.

The redefinition of the political agenda by the SVP finally achieved success in the federal governance of Switzerland in 2014, when there was a shift in ‘veil politics’ (Scott 2007) at the federal level. Before that, the Federal Council consistently rejected the requests of the SVP and CDPP, and asserted on several occasions that wearing a veil was a religious

²² According to research conducted in 2009 on Muslims living in Switzerland, 66 per cent reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of race, 63 per cent on the basis of nationality or origin and 58 per cent on the basis of religion. Although these statistics are not gender disaggregated, the authors assume women experienced more religious-based discrimination than men (Gianni et al. 2015: 52–56).

²³ Interpellation 06.3675.

practice (without linking it to radical Islam or extremism), and that the constitution guaranteed religious freedom for all citizens, whatever their religion. In 2007, based on the argument of freedom of religion as a fundamental right, a national ban on the wearing of burqas in public spaces was deemed unconstitutional. At the same time, in its statement the Federal Council restricted the application of freedom of religion. The Federal Council recalled that it had confirmed in 1997 a decision of the State Council of Geneva that forbade the veil to a teacher of a primary school based on the ‘confessional neutrality at school’. The Federal Council added that in 2006 the European Court of Human Rights had approved a ban on Islamic headscarves at universities in Turkey on the basis of the secular nature of state institutions for education.²⁴ The Federal Council bordered religious freedom by arguing confessional neutrality as a fundamental value of the state schooling system. By creating different regimes of non-private spaces (i.e. state institutions of education distinct from public spaces), the Federal Council justified specific boundaries for Muslim people – here, veiled women – living in Switzerland. As a consequence, it produced unequal access to work in state institutions.

The relationship between veil politics and the politics of bordering was strengthened in the 2010s. In 2010, under pressure from conservative parties pushing for a ban on face-covering veils in public spaces, the Federal Council stated that it opposed the motion because the number of cases was too small to justify a federal position. It also used the argument that the issue should be dealt with at the cantonal level, and recalled the values of tolerance and respect upon which Swiss society was based. The Council noted that a ban on wearing a burqa or niqab would be contrary to religious freedom. At the same time, the Council declared that ‘a face-covering veil for religious or cultural reasons affects our assumption that the face should be visible to freely communicate with people’.²⁵ It confirmed its position, expressed few months earlier in response to Motion 10.3173, stating that the visibility of faces in public space was ‘our conception of the human dignity’.

In 2013, a popular initiative to ban facial coverings was held in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino. More than 65 per cent of people voted in favour of the ban, thereby entrenching it in the Canton’s constitution. The prohibition extends to the wearing of face masks during demonstrations, and also affects women who wear burqas and niqabs that cover the entire face except for the eyes.

In November 2014, the Federal Council upheld Ticino’s burqa ban. The Council

²⁴ Answer from the Federal Council to the Interpellation 06.3675.

²⁵ Answer from the Federal Council to the Question 10.1051.

noted that the ban was not justified given the limited number of veiled women in Switzerland; however, it confirmed that the wording of the ban complied with federal law. Article 9a of the Ticino constitution prohibits the concealment of the face in public spaces, including on public roads, in state buildings and in public commercial spaces such as restaurants and shopping centres. The ban officially targets two specific practices: the wearing of a hood during demonstrations or sporting events by people who want to stay anonymous in order to perpetrate violent acts; and concealing the face (with a burqa or niqab) for religious purposes. It also states that the face-covering veil mostly concerns women, and reiterates that forcing a woman to cover herself is considered coercion, according to Article 181 of the penal code. In cases of violations of the ban, sanctions can be taken by the legislative structures. The Federal Council based its determination of the legality of the prohibition on decisions by the European Court of Human Rights and by the French government. It also asserts that this ban is flexible because it does not affect private spaces, places of worship and private vehicles.²⁶

In approving the position of conservative parties promoting nationalist ideologies, the Federal Council contributed to the legal extension of spaces to which women with face coverings were denied access, further stigmatising and discriminating against Muslim women. If the Federal Council regularly pushed back against the SVP's campaigns with the argument of religious freedom, its use of confessional neutrality and its regime of visibility contributed to excluding Muslim people from the national community. It confined face-covered women to the private sphere and produced inequalities for these women in their access to education and economic resources (Farris, 2017; Karimi, 2018).

Producing and locating dangerous Muslim men in Switzerland

In parliamentary debates in the early 2000s, the SVP claimed to be defending the territory of Switzerland against a growing threat by regularly asserting that asylum-seeking Muslim men with affiliations to Islamic terrorist groups should not be admitted. These threats and dangers were not, however, just associated with Muslim men close to terrorist groups. In 2002, SVP deputy Jean-Henri Dunant stated that a (male) Islamist received asylum and played an important role in a mosque in Basel. Based on this case, he claimed that 'more than 300,000 Muslims live in Switzerland and we don't know how many of them are fundamentalists or

²⁶ 14.084. Objet du conseil fédéral. Constitutions des cantons de Berne, d'Uri, de Soleure, de Bâle-Ville, de Bâle-Campagne, d'Appenzell Rhodes-Extérieures, d'Appenzell Rhodes-Intérieures, du Tessin, de Vaud et du Jura, 12.11.2014, pp. 8916–8919.

even terrorists'. As a result, he requested measures to increase surveillance of Islamist organisations.²⁷ In another motion in 2002, Christian Waber, also an SVP deputy, argued that 'Islam is not a peaceful religion and does not accept the cultures of others'. He further declared that the objective of the religion and of Islamist ideology was the 'Islamisation of our society' and its practices, which could only be violent and lead to the deaths of Jews and Christians.²⁸ For deputies from the SVP, all Muslim men living in Switzerland were potential members of Islamist groups and participants in the 'Islamisation' of society. Muslim men were viewed as threats to the integrity and safety of the Swiss territory.

Muslim men also are considered a threat by the SVP because they are purportedly producing spaces that are outside the reach of Swiss laws. In 2006, SVP deputy Walter Wobmann asked the Federal Council about the creation of 'parallel societies' in Switzerland and their impact on the security of the country. Using the term 'parallel societies' underscored the view that Muslims live separately from others and are disengaged from Swiss society. Muslim spaces are defined as insular and Muslims as actors of self-exclusion (Phillips 2004: 26–27). In their insularity, these Muslim spaces lead to the contestation of the legitimacy of the state, and the production of their own sovereignty while occupying Swiss territory. Mosques are considered by Wobmann to be support bases for Islamist attacks, and places of radicalisation and the 'Islamisation' of the society.²⁹

In 2009, with the anti-minaret campaign led by the SVP, Imams and male Muslim believers were deemed a threat to national security. Muslim men were depicted by the conservative parties as a threat to the security of the state, which reflects the broader literature that assigns violence, savagery and perversity to Muslim men (Guénif-Souilamas 2006), as well as their role of posing a threat to women's rights. The Federal Council urged the rejection of the initiative on the grounds that such a ban would not be compatible with the European Convention of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Swiss Constitution because it affected religious freedom and the principle of non-discrimination. The Federal Council also argued that the ban would not be an effective policy for the prevention of extremism and fundamentalism, and that it would affect the peaceful relationship between religious communities and create an obstacle to the integration of Muslims in Switzerland.³⁰ After the referendum, which approved the ban, the Federal

²⁷ Interpellation 02.3507.

²⁸ Interpellation 02.3504.

²⁹ Interpellation 06.3558.

³⁰ Media release, *'Le Conseil fédéral s'oppose à l'interdiction de construire des minarets; Adoption du message relatif à l'initiative populaire contre la construction de minarets'* ('The Federal Council opposes

Council stated that the votes for the ban on minarets could be interpreted as a fear of Islamist extremism. The Council further stated that it had always taken into consideration the risks of the Islamist threat, but maintained that the ban was not an appropriate policy for the prevention of Islamism.³¹

In the context of the minaret construction ban, as supported by the SVP, identified or self-identified Muslim men – Swiss and non-Swiss – were the real targets of this second ‘moral crusade’. Beyond the figure of the dangerous imams, the SVP developed a discourse around the incompatibility of Islam with Swiss values, and the necessity to control and remove religious representatives and believers. Contrary to its shift regarding the politics of the veil, the Federal Council maintained its distance from this SVP campaign, and continued to distinguish Islam and Islamism; however, it recognised that the fear of growing Islamist movements in Switzerland should be taken seriously.

In a 2015 interpellation to the Federal Council, SVP deputy Thomas Burgherr blamed refugees and migrants – who he identified as ‘mainly Muslim’ – for the backlash against women’s rights in Switzerland. According to the SVP, ‘women are prevented from performing certain tasks relating to their professional positions because they are neither respected nor accepted by men who are predominantly Muslim’.³² This revealed a new turn in the ideology of the far-right parties in Switzerland. If this article started with the analysis of suffering of Muslim women in Muslim-majority country and in Switzerland as a racist trope, here women – as a generic term, meaning Swiss and white women – are identified as victims of Muslim men. Women’s rights are reshaped by the SVP as a tool for anti-immigration and Islamophobic campaigns (Farris 2017).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that political actors at the federal level have different assumptions about Islam and how Muslim women and men should live in Switzerland. The SVP depicts Islam and Muslim people as a permanent and increased threat to the Swiss security, economics, values, territory and finally women’s rights. At the beginning of the 2000s, the left-wing parties depicted the ‘suffering of Muslim woman’ and concomitantly the West as her saviour. They remained quite silent on debates on the veil. The Federal Council maintained a nuanced and contextualised position on the ‘Muslim woman issue’. It pushed

the ban on building minarets; Adoption of the message relating to the popular initiative against the construction of minarets’), Berne, 27.08.2008.

³¹ Press release, ‘*Oui à l’initiative populaire contre la construction de minarets*’ (‘Yes to the popular initiative against the construction of minarets’), Berne, 29.11.2009.

³² Interpellation 15.4100.

back against the Orientalist approach taken by the Green and Socialist parties, and maintained a distance from the political proposals made by the SVP and CDPP. Between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, it pushed back against SVP campaigns for the ban on face-coverings and the ban on construction of minarets, claiming the importance of religious freedom, a distinction between Islamism and Islam, and non-discrimination. We observe a major shift in 2014, when the Federal Council concluded that the Canton of Ticino's burqa ban complied with the Swiss constitution, and aligned itself with increased measures of control and exclusion that targeted Muslim women.

If we observe these different assumptions about Islam, the Islamic issue remains crucial to the politics of bordering shaped by these different political actors. If its definition is not homogenous and has changed between 2001 and 2015, then Swiss nationhood has been opposed to 'their' practices and 'their' beliefs. In this context, the SVP succeeds in making the 'Islamic threat' a federal issue. As a consequence, Swiss migration policies have become increasingly restrictive and national legislative measures have been justified beyond the cantons that increase restrictions and inequalities for Muslim women and men living in Switzerland.

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