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MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE MIRROR: THE STIGMA OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN POLAND

The main objective of the paper is to recreate a strategy to deal with the stigma in the daily lives of Muslim women who decided to move permanently to Poland, and Polish women who decided to convert to Islam. The subject of the research is Muslim women who live in Poland and participated in biographical interviews. According to the interviews, an image of Muslim women based on what they themselves think was reconstructed. Their methods of dealing with everyday situations, which these women face in the country in which they live, and conflicts with their families of origin, are presented. In Poland, as shown by opinion polls, people originating from Muslim countries are perceived negatively. As a result, immigrants from these regions who stay in our country are stigmatised as the other, different, hostile and dangerous to the society. This is the result of commonly shared negative stereotypes. A very similar fate is experienced by Polish women who have converted to Islam. Living with stigma forces those stigmatised to adopt strategies that allow them to operate in a foreign country. This situation is particularly oppressive for Muslim women, who on the one hand must deal with the stigma they carry due to their otherness in the host country, while on the other hand must follow tradition and constraints imposed by the religion and culture in which they were raised. Muslim clothing allows fast and easy categorization. Women wearing hijabs are easily identified, and because of it possible stereotypes and prejudices are activated.

Keywords: stigma, Muslim women, stereotypes, prejudices

MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN POLAND

It is very difficult to estimate the number of Muslims living in Poland. They are a very diversified social category. They are comprised of Tatars living in Poland since the 14th century¹, and migrants from Muslim countries who came to Poland in various waves of migration from the 1970s to the 1990s. These people came to Poland most often to study, mainly from countries that were cooperating with Poland during the times of the Polish People's

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¹ The Tatars settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the end of the 14th century, mainly around Vilnius, Trakai, Grodno and Kaunas, and from the 17th century also in the Crown Lands, mainly in Volhynia and Podolia, and at the end of the century in the Suwałki Region.

Republic or from conflict areas, such as the Middle East and Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Africa. Refugees, mainly from Chechnya, came to Poland in the 1990s. Since 1992, over 70,000 foreigners from 120 countries have applied for refugee status. Since there are no effective ways to collect data concerning their actual residence in Poland, it is impossible to estimate the number of refugees who have indeed remained in Poland. Estimates from non-governmental organisations mention several thousand protected foreigners (Marek 2004: 72; Switat 2017b: 213–247). Contemporary migrants are mainly economic migrants and people who decided to move due to personal issues like their relationship with Poles. They come from different countries, from different religious factions (Shiites and Sunni) and traditions associated with Islam, and they live by different Islamic schools. The last but not least category in this puzzle is that of converts, who also do not constitute a homogeneous category. Conversion patterns are quite varied, but the most common are those who convert due to or under the influence of their spouse, often adopting the tradition and practices of Islam from the region of origin of the spouse. The second pattern of conversion is the individual study of Islam, and the subsequent choice depends on other factors. Since there are no statistics, it is very difficult to determine the number of Muslims living in Poland. This is caused by many factors. First of all, the data from the Office for Foreigners refers to the citizens of a particular state rather than to a denomination. Hence, we can only estimate the number of Muslims living in our country, and these estimates vary widely, ranging from 11,000 to about 40,000 (Switat 2017b: 238–243). Due to the small number and, simultaneously, the rather considerable diversification of the Muslim community in Poland, it does not appear in scientific discourse concerning Islam and Muslims beyond the borders of Poland. The community living in Poland shares few similarities with the communities living in the countries of the ‘old’ European Union (Górak-Sosnowska 2011: 13).

THE HIJAB AND THE STIGMA OF BEING MUSLIM IN NON-MUSLIM COUNTRY

According to Erving Goffman (1963: 3), a stigma is an attribute that extensively discredits an individual, reducing a person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” Stigmatization occurs when a person possesses “some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker et al. 1998: 505). These definitions share the assumption that people who are stigmatized have an attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others. Stigmatizing marks may be visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable, and linked to appearance, behavior, or group membership. Stigma depends on its relationships and context (Major, O’Brien 2005: 395). As Goffman (1963) noted, individuals who are subject to a concealable social stigma – one that is not immediately apparent in most social interactions – tend to control information about the stigmatized aspect of their identities differently in different social settings. A key challenge for these individuals is to avoid inadvertent revelation of their stigmatized status in potentially hostile settings, while selectively disclosing their status in other social situations (Knight et al. 2016: 2).

Only few studies show the experiences of the stigma of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim country. Some of the studies show that responses to self-consciousness and feelings of being threatened reflect a collective awareness of how the group is seen by others. One example is a study about people changing their routines as a result of fear of violence and discrimination in the US (Khan 2014). Participants reported some degree of needing to prove their “Americanness” to others. Although they did not see their group as disloyal to the United States, they were mindful of how their stigmatized group is perceived. Altogether, most participants did not internalize the outside view of their group nor did they attempt to disengage from the stigmatized group. Still, there is a fear of how the prejudiced views of others might taint their perception of individual Muslims.

The study has shown how it is personally costly to have a heightened awareness of stigma associated with their group, with being a Muslim in a non-Muslim country (Khan 2014: 581). Not all Muslims experience mistreatment as a result of their minority group status. Research shows that “a major determinant of who is most vulnerable to anti-Islamic abuse may be the degree to which the individual is visibly identified as Muslim” (King and Ahmad 2010: 886). It is especially important in the case of women, because one such identifier is a veil. A veil can refer specifically to the hijab or headscarf. It should be stated that we are dealing today with the diversity in interpretations of veiling as religious obligation. As emphasized by Nilüfer Göle in Europe, the importance of the hijab is slightly different than in countries where Islam prevails. It is rather an expression of personal piety, a conscious manifestation of one’s faith, than a social imperative or a cultural gesture passed down from generation to generation. For converts, the hijab is a sign of closeness with the Muslim community (Göle 2016: 152–159). The new veiling movement that appeared two decades ago uses the hijab as an element of politics of recognition as well. As Christian Unkelbach, Hella Schneider, Kai Gode and Miriam Senft (2010) point out, Muslim “clothing allows fast and easy categorization. Women wearing hijabs are easily identified, thereby activating possible stereotypes and prejudices” in non-Muslim observers (p. 378). A recent report on the impact of Islamophobic attacks on Muslim women in Great Britain has reported that women are more likely to be subjected to such attacks than men, and that this likelihood is increased if they are wearing the full-face veil or other clothing associated with Islam (Allen 2013).

Muslim veils – in particular the hijab and full-face veil – in public discourse concerns the place of Muslims in Western society (Everett et al. 2014). Responses and attitudes were more negative toward any veil when compared with no veil, and more negative toward the full-face veil relative to the hijab. The attitude towards covered women depends on the reasons for wearing a veil – positive reasons for wearing a veil showed in an experiment “as a personal choice, independently of any family pressure” or “an outward and conscious expression of their freely chosen beliefs and values” or because “is a symbol of expression, not oppression”, led to better predicted and imagined contact.

Islamophobic sentiments in the Western world have attracted scientific attention, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The term ‘Islamophobia’, which was reportedly introduced at the end of the 1980s (Kunst 2012), has increasingly been used to describe the fear of Islam and of Muslims as a social group. Furthermore, various studies

and reports have reported a rise of Islamophobia in many Western-majority populations and in Western media (Saeed 2007). Muslims may experience stigma based on their religious group membership, which, in turn, may affect their affiliation with the dominant society and with their religious group. A study by Kunst et al. examined the influence of religious identity and religious stigma to Muslims' national identification and engagement. When discussing religious stigma, one has to distinguish between religious meta-stereotypes, specifically perceived Islamophobia, religious discrimination, and negative collective representations of Muslims in media (Kunst 2012: 520). Although the identity-formation of ethnic minorities in general has been a frequent topic of research, the effects of religious stigma on the identity-formation of Muslims living in Western countries has been a neglected topic. The presence of Islamophobia in contemporary society, experiences of religious discrimination, and negative representations of Muslims in the media may influence Muslims' religious identity, national identity and national engagement (Kunst 2012).

Prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in western countries has increased dramatically in the last decade. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that Muslims are being subjected to various forms of mistreatment and hostility, and that this trend has risen sharply in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and others in England, Spain, and Germany (Sirin and Balsano: 2007). Zan Strabac and Ola Listhaug (2008) compared anti-minority prejudice in 30 European nations, and found a higher degree of prejudice toward Muslims than against other immigrant groups. Similarly, a report by Pew suggests that Muslims suffer more discrimination than any other religious group (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009). A similar situation can be observed in Poland. Notable is a study conducted by the Centre for Research on Prejudice (an interdisciplinary research unit at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw), which in its analyses focused on presenting social attitudes of Poles towards Muslims (Stefaniak 2015). However, these studies did not only concern immigrants, but were generally related to the Muslim minority. Although Muslims living in European countries nowhere constitute a homogeneous group, they are considered by the public to be the most homogeneous group (Khan 2000: 31). According to the researcher of the Muslim community in England, this assumption of homogeneity strengthens mutual distrust, arousing discussion about Muslim values and culture. Researchers emphasise that the Muslim community is considered a foreign minority with values that are contrary to the values dominant in the West (Khan 31). The research clearly shows the negative attitude of Poles toward followers of Islam. The dynamics of this reluctance is quite easy to trace. Among all religions, Poles have the most negative attitude toward Muslims. According to a survey of the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), 44% of respondents have such an attitude toward Muslims, 33% have a neutral attitude, and 23% have a positive attitude.

The majority of the respondents in Poland also stated that Muslims are hardly tolerant. 64% of the respondents agree with this opinion. 63% said that Muslims living in the West do not adopt its values, and 57% believed that Islam encourages violence to a greater extent than other religions. The image of Muslims is mediated. The respondents obtain information only from the media, as they do not personally know the representatives of this religion. 43% of the respondents believe that it is possible to find a compromise between the Western

world and the Islamic world. 34% of the respondents, however, think that conflict between these two worlds is inevitable. It is surprising, however, that this percentage has grown significantly in recent years – by as much as 15 percentage points (http://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_037_15.PDF).

For 40% of the respondents in Poland, the conflict between the world of Islam and the West concerns fundamental issues resulting from different value systems, while for 38% it is the result of a fight for political influence. Accepting a selected perspective affects how the respondents see the chances for an agreement. Those who base the conflict on cultural and religious differences are prone to a pessimistic vision of dialogue between these worlds and chances for an agreement. Over 60% of the respondents believe that Muslims are intolerant of customs other than their own; a similar percentage believes that Muslims living in Western European countries do not adopt the customs of the societies in which they live. Most of the respondents identify Islam with violence. 57% believe that Islam encourages its use, and 51% recognise that Muslims use violence against followers of other religions, while 31% believe that Muslims are negative toward other religions. 21% of the respondents believe that the majority of Muslims do not condemn the terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic fundamentalists. These studies indicate the existence of stereotypical and biased perceptions of Muslim immigrants in Poland, which is conducive to discrimination in this social category and constitutes a barrier to integration by building a picture of a Muslim as an “alien” (Switat 2017a). As a result of the society’s lack of acceptance for their traditions, culture and religion, Muslim women feel isolated and have a sense of “cultural homelessness” (Garcia 1994).

According to Górak-Sosnowska, the change in attitude toward Muslims results mainly from the change in the geopolitical situation. In 2006/2007, it seemed that the conflict between Islam and the West had lost its importance. The situation changed with the appearance of the so-called Islamic State and its state-forming aspirations. At that time, the rhetoric of a clash of civilisations returned to public discourse. The respondents have a problem with estimating the number of Muslims living in Poland. Research shows that Poles estimate the number of Muslims living in Poland at 7%, with a tendency to increase to 13% by 2020, while, as shown earlier, this actual percentage is less than or equal to 0.1%. Similarly, studies on media discourse regarding Muslims in Poland indicate the existence of *platonic Islamophobia* – a phenomenon explained by Górak-Sosnowska as aversion to non-existent Muslims in Poland, because the majority of the society has never encountered or heard about local problems related to the presence of Muslim migrants in Poland (Górak-Sosnowska 2003). In the CBOS survey from 2015, it is clearly visible that the non-antagonistic perception of Muslims depends on their interactions with the environment. People who have or have had contact with Muslims do not identify Islam with violence or terrorism (CBOS 2015). Similar conclusions can be drawn from the discourse analysis of Islam and Muslims. The image of Islam in the Polish opinion-forming press is full of stereotypes, but also neglect, and abounds in images that cause fear of Islam, equating the notion of fundamentalists with the entire Muslim community (Górak-Sosnowska 2003). Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska, focusing on the anti-Muslim discourse, draws attention to the orientalised alien (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2007).

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The reconstruction of the way in which Muslim women assess the attitudes towards themselves was based on interviews conducted with Muslim women living in Poland in large cities, as well as on the analysis of the content of posts on profiles and in closed groups – addressed to Muslim women – in social media. The first stage of the study, in-depth interviews with sixteen Muslim women living in Poland, was conducted from July 2016 to March 2017. Interviews were selected on the snowball sampling principle, so that the sample would include people of different origins, with different levels of education and wealth living in Poland for a minimum of 5 years. Initially, women were encountered in Muslim centres. They were either women from the first generation of migrants, who came to Poland in one of the three waves of migration starting in the 1970s, or from the second generation of migrants living in Poland, or they were converts (4 interviews). Interviews with 12 women were conducted. The interviewed Muslim women lived in and around Kraków, Katowice, Kielce, Warsaw, Gdańsk, Gorzów Wielkopolski, and Poznań. The respondents were from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Bangladesh, India, and Uzbekistan.

The second stage of the study is an analysis of the content of posts appearing in social media, mainly on Facebook, where there are very few groups and profiles aimed at Muslim women. Only Polish-speaking groups were taken into account (English-speaking groups and profiles unite women living all around the world, and finding posts about Poland was difficult) – posts appearing on these were often also in English or other languages, but only those profiles or groups where Polish also appeared were analysed. Posts in all languages have been analysed. The category of analysed profiles and groups on Facebook includes sections for women in various Muslim Centres, *Siski w islamie* [Sisters in Islam], *Odkryj islam* [Discover Islam], *Arabs in Poland*, and *Sympatyczne wiadomości muzułmańskie* [Friendly Muslim News]. The analysis of the content in social media concerned both posts and the comments under them. Participants, recipients, and post creators are women from Muslim countries writing in Polish and English, very rarely in Arabic or French, and Polish converts. In the texts analysed, no comments or posts from or relating to Tatar women were identified.

In the Internet space it is quite difficult to separate those fanpage profiles or groups whose participants are exclusively Muslims living in Poland. Often the participants include, for example, converts who live abroad. The analysis took into account only posts regarding the community in Poland. Separating the content from this angle was not a problem during the study. Women, both during the interviews and in the posts they publish, when talking about their situation or the situation of Muslim women, often recall examples of their Muslim female friends who are only temporarily in Poland or do not feel Polish, which is why both ‘Polish Muslim women’ and ‘Muslim women living in Poland’ appear in the text.

The comments that are interesting in terms of the study appear not only surrounding specific issues, such as a specific stereotype concerning Muslim women, but also when a new woman appears who says she has converted or has a Muslim husband and would like to get to know Islam; then many comments appear about the attitude of Poles towards Islam

and Muslim women, and what a particular convert might face in the future, what problems in social perception she may come across, and what kind of troubles from the society she might encounter.

The subject of profiles and groups where Muslim women can meet in the network is very diverse. On each profile or in each group, a lot of space is devoted to the image of a Muslim man or a Muslim woman in the Polish and Western society, although, naturally, the attitude toward Polish Muslim women prevails. The most common are issues related to conversion to Islam and very detailed information about religion – from basic issues, such as how to properly ablute, to more detailed issues, regarding what according to Islam a woman is allowed and what she is forbidden, for example, whether she is allowed to paint her nails and what requirements nail varnish must meet to be considered halal, or whether is it allowed to apply make-up to her eyelashes before praying, etc.

The groups are usually closed (when joining such groups, I have always openly stated that I am a researcher of Muslims and Islam in Poland). In the characteristics of groups and in the comments of the women writing, there is a clear need to separate themselves for safety reasons. Over the perspective of time, a difference can be noticed: groups are becoming more and more closed; it is more difficult to access them, as some require a recommendation from another group participant, and information about changes to the group admission rules are published in posts. In some groups, women who are only members and not active participants are indicated and stigmatised as ‘lurkers’.

The image of Muslim women or Muslims in general or Arabs in the eyes of Poles can be recreated on the basis of opinion polls. What image do women face, however? What do they think is the image of a Polish Muslim woman – a Muslim living in Poland? What situations are they exposed to, and what do they encounter? Very often in interviews, Muslim women emphasised that the Poles “lump them together” (Interviews 5, 6, 8) assuming that “all Muslims are the same.” Women emphasised that Poles were completely unaware of the diversity of Islam and attributed all negative elements that occur somewhere locally to Islam. In addition, as Muslim women from different regions of the world recalled, Poles do not distinguish Muslims from Arabs and all Muslims are perceived as Arabs and judged as Arabs, which is harmful to both parties (Interview 6). On the other hand, some of the respondents explicitly spoke about the lack of a real debate about Islam, also within Islam itself, and pointed out that many situations were wrongly and unnecessarily emotionally commented on by Muslims themselves: “Muslims are not some special needs group and do not need so much attention,” “not all information should be seen so negatively.” In interviews, women often emphasised that although they had lived here for many years, they still did not feel at home. Very often, someone around them gives them a feeling that they are strangers. One of the respondents put it in the following way: “They never look at you as one of their own, or look from above or from below, but never as one of their own” (Interview 1). However, as the women see, they come across a negative image that evokes extremely negative emotional reactions, and in addition often leading to violence, both physical and verbal.

The issue related to how a Muslim woman dresses is an important element of Muslim women’s discourse. Above all, it is an important element pointing to religion, but it is also the object of many controversies among those who are hostile toward Islam, and is also the

subject of discussion about the most appropriate veil for women within Islam itself. Women pointed out during interviews that they often felt pressured to disassociate themselves from Islam in their appearance and behaviour. On one of the profiles on Facebook, a participant wrote: “I knew that if I put on a handkerchief it would be a great responsibility for what I represent, because people will only see me as a Muslim and thus judge Islam” (Profile 7). For some women, wearing a hijab was associated with fear for their own or their children’s safety: some of the women living in Poland – both converts and Muslim women by birth – indicated that they did not wear head scarves in Poland, but when staying longer in other countries where the society was accustomed to the sight of scarves, for example, France or Germany, they would wear such a veil covering their hair (Interviews 1, 5, 4). The fact of giving up the hijab involves different reactions and rationalisations. One of the women stated the following: “Now, I am sorry to say, I am alone with a small child and I do not wear the hijab, no one who does not know me does not interpret me as a Muslim, and that is to me, I will be honest, a complete degradation...” (Profile 5), while another adds, “I have not been wearing the hijab for 3 years, because I do not feel safe enough in my own country to wear it” (Profile 5). Similar comments appear under many posts and on many profiles regarding the issue of Muslim women’s dress or only mentioning the issue. One Muslim woman wrote: “It is damn unfortunate that in your country you cannot feel safe wearing a hijab. In a country which is supposedly so tolerant. In a country that has more in common with Islam than it would have liked to” (Profile 2), or “Because, I would honestly say, these 3–4 years ago, I would also be of the opinion that there are no major problems in Poland [...] How did this happen?” (Profile 4). One of the respondents, an Egyptian woman living in Poland, admitted that she did not wear the hijab because she was afraid, so in the summer she would wear a turban and during the winter, a big hat (Interview 12). Negative attitudes towards Muslims and Muslim women are also testified by women’s posts: “In Poland, nothing related to Islam is unrealistic. Already it is a fear to go to the mosque, if you wear a scarf they will beat you...” (Profile 2) whether “It’s my own choice, but I’m sorry when people say: take it off. I want and will carry my scarf despite tolerance in Poland. I am ashamed for our countrymen. After all, everyone can wear what he wants on his head. It is only important that others not be hurt” (Profile 3). This type of post is very frequent. Similar words also came up during the interviews. These issues are important and relate not only to the reluctance towards Islam, but also clearly indicate aversion to women professing Islam.

Women, speaking about the attitude of their families toward the fact that they are Muslims, often indicate the reluctance of their families towards the fact that they are converts. In interviews, the respondents would rarely report that the family had accepted this fact with calmness or understanding. For a long time following the conversion (several months, years), a large share of the respondents indicated that families would gradually accept the situation or at least pretend that they could not see a problem. The scale of the initial dislike was varied – from disapproval either spoken or suggested with facial expressions, through arguments, to breaking off all contact with the family. It was not affected by the conversion process or the element that had initiated it. Converts admitted to two conversion models: under the influence of their husbands or their families, or they learned about Islam by themselves

in complete isolation from the romantic sphere. Both of these conversion patterns were more or less rejected by the family. Women would often mention that they felt that their families were ashamed of them or were ashamed at first (Interviews 3, 7, 9). On one Facebook profile one of the participants wrote: “My mommy is a dear and she wants the best for me, but she is ashamed and scared” (Profile 7). What are the families afraid of? The respondents would often indicate that “people are afraid of the unknown and changes, especially the elders, I was afraid too” (Profile 7). Another wrote: “I remember my conversation with my son right after I converted to Islam. Momma, are you gonna wear a scarf?, he asked terrified” (Interview 2). Similarly, another women wrote: “As Salamiallaykum rahmatullahi wa barakathuhu. How did you deal with the racist approach of your family and friends to everything related to Islam? Conversations did not help and I have no more strength to argue, to ask [...] half of my friends turned away, even the Syrian flag on the profile photo was a reason to offend me” (Profile 1). For converts, it is the defence of Islam and the courage to “think independently” that they emphasise are important issues (Interviews 3, 7, 9), which is also reflected in the posts published on profiles and in closed groups. One example is this statement of a participant in one group: “But who is not afraid to think these days? I am afraid that an increasing part of the society is so manipulated by the media that, unfortunately, they are afraid to think independently and have their own opinion. Because nowadays you have to have the courage to think independently and have your own opinion. [...] But it is good, not evil, for which Allah rewards us” (Profile 4).

A SENSE OF DANGER

The vast majority of women emphasised that they felt threatened to a greater or lesser extent (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12). The sense of danger was related both to the issues of their outfits and to the different skin colour. Women would often emphasise that they were accosted, and asked “what are you doing here?” (Interviews 1, 2, 3). One of the respondents said: “I have lived here for 35 years and only now people ask me what I am doing here, why I came here” (Interview 1). Some of the women surveyed were victims of both verbal and physical violence. Often, words directed at them are clearly offensive and vulgar, e.g. ‘pigs’ (Interviews 2, 3, 5). Muslim women mention moments when someone had tried to discredit them, by saying for example, “I am disgusted to sit in your place” (Interview 5). During the interviews, several women admitted that they were prodded by passers-by on the street, public transport or in the supermarket, two women indicated that men in the street tried to rip their hijabs off; some said people would spit on them; and one said that she was hit in the face by a man passing by. This study shows that the scale of violence against Muslim women living in Poland is significant. Muslim women experience it regardless of their age or background. In interviews, they often emphasise that there is nobody who would try to deal with this problem. Other passers-by do not react, and neither do state institutions. On profiles and in groups, articles are often linked or shared about the Muslims’ sense of danger and the changing atmosphere that surrounds them. Below them, there is a relatively large number of comments suggesting that this is how it really is.

TERRORISM

Very often, both during interviews and in the Internet space, Muslim women often emphasise that Islam is not a religion that promotes terrorism. An example may be the popularity on Muslim profiles of a photo depicting a young Tajik girl who said during the march against racism: “I am not a terrorist, I am a regular teenager,” initially shared by the Open House, and then shared and passed on by many Muslim women on different profiles and in different groups. Many women, both in interviews and in the Internet space, share examples when they were accused of terrorism or sympathy for the so-called Islamic State, such as “You want to turn this place into a f***** Caliphate,” “Are you carrying a bomb underneath that dress?” Women wearing hijabs are often called fundamentalists. Women emphasise that they are often the subject of racist jokes. They refer to experiences of their own and their friends (Interviews 1, 5, 7). It is clearly visible that some are well-worn jokes, as similar wordings appear in the experience of more than one surveyed woman. The surveyed Muslim women quoted the most common jokes addressed at them: “explosive girl, a bombshell – just do not go postal, do not go off” (Interviews 3, 4).

SUMMARY

The studies on the stigma phenomenon point to the fact that Muslims living in Western societies more and more often have to bear the stigma and must prove their belonging and loyalty to the Western society in which they live – for generations or for a while. Sometimes they are forced to change their habits out of fear for their safety or in fear of manifestations of aggression. This trend is shown by research on many Western societies. This study shows the analogous situation of Muslim women living in Poland who face misunderstanding and non-acceptance, as well as aggression and often they are victims of unpleasant situations. Opinion polls in Poland indicate the existence of stereotypical and biased perceptions of Muslim immigrants in Poland, which conduces discrimination in this social category and constitutes a barrier to integration by building a picture of a Muslim as an “alien” or other. As a result of the society’s lack of acceptance for their traditions, culture and religion, Muslim women feel isolated and have a sense of “cultural homelessness” (Garcia 1994). Muslim women living in Poland, regardless of whether they are converts or migrants from Muslim countries, are constantly facing the stigma and the feeling of being different. In the era of growing Islamophobia in Polish society, their situation seems to be extremely difficult. Muslim women, and more broadly Muslims, are perceived as a homogeneous category; in reality, being a small percentage of Polish society, they are very diverse.

One of the basic issues emerging in the context of Muslim women is their clothing. Very strong emotions in society are aroused by an outfit that fully covers the woman wearing it, even though such outfits are virtually absent in Poland. The hijab is an extremely important category for Muslim women themselves, but it is very difficult to estimate what percentage of them wear the hijab, because it depends on many factors. First of all, it depends on the beliefs of the individual Muslim woman, whether she perceives it as important, desirable,

obligatory, or quite the opposite. External factors such as personal experience of being a victim or a witness to violence, the opinions of those in their environment, and family pressure also play a role. In addition, the Muslim community in Poland is not strong enough, so Muslim women may also feel a lack of support from other Muslims and their organizations. Social media play a vital role. On the one hand, they are a space for exchanging information about Islam and its interpretations, how to perform particular duties of a Muslim, etc. They are also a space for exchanging thoughts about the situation and problems the Muslims encounter while living in the society, which – as studies show – tends to be rather unfriendly towards Muslims.

Both during the interviews and on social media posts the struggle with the stigma is clearly evident. The participants in groups and profiles on Facebook are not only Muslim women, but also women interested in or somehow related to Islam in their lives – for example through marriage with a Muslim man – hence an important number of posts focus on explaining to non-Muslims the principles of Islam, Muslim culture and certain activities undertaken by Muslims. There are often voices stating that non-Muslims do not understand Muslims and their specific situation in the Polish society. They are often the object of attacks, both physical and verbal. Muslims women in Poland feel discriminated against and misunderstood, and those who are converts often gain the faith while losing their families and friends. Women are also the object of jokes, sometimes very humiliating or aggressive. The picture of themselves that they see in the eyes of society is thus highly unfavorable. They face contempt and accusations every day.

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MUZUŁMANKI W ZWIERCIADLE SPOŁECZNYM:
STYGMAT BYCIA MUZUŁMANKĄ W POLSCE

Głównym celem artykułu jest odtworzenie strategii radzenia sobie ze stygmatyzacją w codziennym życiu muzułmank, które zdecydowały się na stałe przenieść do Polski, oraz kobiet mieszkających na stałe w Polsce, które zdecydowały się przejść na islam. W artykule oparto się na wywiadach biograficznych przeprowadzonych z muzułmankami mieszkającymi w Polsce, tak by zobrazować ich sytuację społeczną. W Polsce, jak pokazują badania opinii publicznej, ludzie pochodzący z krajów muzułmańskich są postrzegani negatywnie. W rezultacie imigranci z tych regionów, którzy przebywają w naszym kraju, są napiętnowani jako inni, różni, wrodzy i niebezpieczni dla społeczeństwa. Jest to wynikiem powszechnych negatywnych stereotypów. Bardzo podobny los spotkał Polki, które przeszły na islam. Życie z piętnem zmusza do przyjmowania strategii, które pozwalają działać w obcym kraju. Sytuacja ta jest szczególnie uciążliwa dla muzułmańskich kobiet, które z jednej strony muszą uporać się z piętnem, które niosą ze względu na swoją odmiennosc w kraju przyjmującym, a z drugiej strony muszą przestrzegać tradycji i ograniczeń narzuconych przez religię i kulturę, w której były wychowane. Istotny jest również fakt, iż damski strój muzułmański umożliwia szybką i łatwą kategoryzację. Kobiety noszące hidżaby czy nikaby są łatwe do zidentyfikowania i dlatego narażone są na stereotypowe traktowanie i uprzedzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: stygmatyzacja, muzułmanki w Polsce, stereotypy, uprzedzenia