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Master's Thesis

**Approaching the lesbian-Muslim intersection:  
experiences of queer women from Muslim  
backgrounds in Catalonia**

Autora: Marina Garcia Castillo

Tutor: Gerard Coll Planas

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## Summary

This master's thesis approaches the intersection of 'lesbian' and 'Muslim' through the lived experiences of four queer women from Muslim backgrounds in the Global North, specifically in Catalonia. By exploring their discourses, we can identify the negotiations and navigations of their social locations in a queer intersection, acknowledging that the concept of 'lesbian/queer Muslim' is an oxymoron in Islamic and Western hegemonic discourses. This interdisciplinary study is based on four in-depth semi-structured interviews that revealed common sites of tension in their experiences. These were approached in a variety of ways that overcome the dichotomy of resistance and subordination. Ultimately, by focusing on their lived experiences, we can grasp the nuances and render visible how they bind and unbind these different dimensions of their lives.

Keywords: intersectionality, queer, lesbian, Muslim, lived experiences

## Resum

Aquest treball de fi de màster s'aproxima a la intersecció 'lesbiana' i 'musulmana' a través de les 'experiències viscudes' de quatre dones queer d'orígens i/o contextos musulmans al Nord Global, concretament a Catalunya. Explorant els seus discursos, podem identificar les negociacions i navegacions de la seva intersecció queer, partint del fet que el concepte de 'musulmana lesbiana/queer' és un oxímoron en els discursos hegemònics occidentals i islàmics. Aquest estudi interdisciplinari està basat en quatre entrevistes en profunditat semiestructurades que revelen espais de tensió comuns a les seves experiències. Alhora, mostra que les maneres en què s'hi aproximen són molt variades i superen la dicotomia de resistència i subordinació. Posant el focus en les 'experiències viscudes' podem captar els matisos i fer visible les maneres com articulen aquestes diferents dimensions de les seves vides.

Paraules clau: interseccionalitat, queer, lesbiana, musulmana, 'experiències viscudes'

## Resumen

Este trabajo de fin de máster es una aproximación a la intersección 'lesbiana' y 'musulmana' a través de las 'experiencias vividas' de cuatro mujeres queer de orígenes y/o contextos musulmanes del Norte Global, concretamente en Catalunya. Explorando sus discursos podemos identificar las negociaciones y navegaciones de su intersección queer partiendo del hecho que el mero concepto de 'musulmana lesbiana/queer' es un

oxímoron en los discursos hegemónicos occidentales e islámicos. Este estudio interdisciplinario está basado en cuatro entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas que revelan espacios de tensión comunes en sus experiencias. A su vez, las maneras en que se aproximan son muy variadas y superan la dicotomía de resistencia y subordinación. Poniendo el foco en las ‘experiencias vividas’ podemos captar los matices y hacer visibles las maneras en que articulan estas diferentes dimensiones de sus vidas.

Palabras clave: interseccionalidad, queer, lesbiana, musulmana, ‘experiencias vividas’

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## 1. Introduction

Attempting to approach the lived experiences of queer Muslim women in the Global North involves approaching a site where the multiple and imbricated forces that constitute them as subjects clash, diverging and converging among them and revealing an intersectional location in which these queer Muslim women conduct their lives in contestation to the ontological incoherence they embody.

The Western discursive construction of the Muslim is a story of othering and marginalisation. Through a renewal of colonial tactics, islamophobia in the Global North is now partly sustained with an active estrangement of Muslims from the sphere of the LGBT+, constructed as inherently Western and in opposition to Muslims. In Muslim communities, compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity prevail in accordance with hegemonic Islamic discourses (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Murchid, 2010), which result in homonegativity. Consequently, the homosexual is not deemed as a legitimate social, personal, or religious identity (Siraj, 2009) and homosexuals are denied a Muslim identity and vice versa.

In this polarised context, lesbian Muslims or Muslim lesbians are an “oxymoron” (El-Tayeb, 2012) since both identities seem to be mutually exclusive as a result of two distinct historical contingencies. Beyond or through these categories (sexual orientation and religion), we can recognise an intersectional location where religious and sexual orientations are intermeshed with other registers of inequality, like gender, class, or ethnicity. Queer Muslims need to navigate vitriolic terrain that is “constantly confronted with silencing, appropriation [and] exclusion” (El-Tayeb, 2012, p. 89).

The utility of this research becomes self-explanatory as does the potential for originality when we realise that the social ostracism translates to a lack of attention even though the past twenty years have provided fruitful research in the juncture of homosexuality and Islam. Still, researchers keep pointing to blatant gaps that remain under-researched especially in relation to the lived experiences<sup>1</sup> of queer women from Muslim backgrounds

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Lived experiences’ has been preferred to ‘experiences’ following the example of other qualitative research on the lives of queer Muslims (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2012; Rahman, 2010; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Siraj, 2009), in an attempt to convey the interpretive approach to the participants’ experiences of their social identities as sources of knowledge while underscoring the meanings they attach to different aspects of their lives. Boylorn’s take is useful: “[lived experiences] respond not only to people’s experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences [...] seeks to understand the distinctions between lives and experiences and tries to understand why some experiences are privileged over others” (2008, pp. 489-490). The meanings and boundaries between the two concepts are heavily contested.

in the Global North. This omission or gap is not random but rather an effect of the intersectional discrimination this group endures and that renders invisible their struggles, strategies and discourses, which in turn, fosters further invisibilisation and ostracism.

Subsequently, the theme of this thesis is an exploration of the discourses of queer women from Muslim backgrounds through their lived experiences regarding the negotiations and navigation of their social locations in a queer intersection. I will trace the lines that the protagonists and previous research have pointed out to locate the tensions and harmonies, the complementarities and contradictions, the accuracies and inconsistencies, the compromises and disputes that arise at the intersection of sexuality and religion through the lived experiences of the participants.

The general objective is to explore the lesbian-Muslim intersection through the lived experiences of queer women from Muslim backgrounds. This is broken down into two specific objectives. Firstly, to identify significant, common “knots” in their discourses and the sites of tension produced by their intersectional location; secondly, to identify their approaches in negotiating this intersectional location. Subsequently, we will address how Western, LGBT+ and Islamic hegemonic discourses shape the experiences of lesbians or queer women from Muslim backgrounds and show how they reproduce or subvert these discourses and deal with expectations. We will focus on the ways they relate to their religious community, other queers and the majority population. Moreover, we will frame the potential conflict between faith and sexuality and reveal the strategies and coping mechanisms they deploy so to understand how they (re)configure the meanings of their identities and practices and in order to reveal the most pressing issues for them in terms of the experience of their sexual and religious orientation. Ultimately, we will see how they bind and unbind apparently or previously contradictory dimensions of their life and make sense of their sexual and religious orientations.

The purpose is to contribute to the field of social studies on the lived experiences of queer women from Muslim backgrounds in the Global North, upholding their situated knowledge and directing more attention to the intersectional discrimination they face and their strategies as well as the necessary conditions for social justice. This study is also defined by an intersectional effort that seeks to make visible the social and material effects of power dynamics concerning sexual and religious orientations, as well as a queer effort that pursues to question categories and explore the dynamic, but also contradictory, workings of power (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

Approaching the lesbian and Muslim intersection can be attempted from several perspectives and disciplines. Due to the length limit of this thesis, I could not dialogue sufficiently with the vast scholarship produced by Arab and Muslim women scholars, some of which fall under the category of Islamic feminisms; the same applies to studies on migration, and queer diasporic studies in particular; and finally, to lesbian feminist scholarship. Despite some of their contributions are present in the study, a deeper analysis of this influential literature could bring about many enriching perspectives on the theme of this research. Apart from this, this research has followed an interdisciplinary approach by conjugating disparate sources and theoretical frameworks in order to produce encompassing insights on the variety of issues that the respondents covered and underscored. Interdisciplinarity also seems to bind closer intersectional and queer approaches.

The research is organised in four sections apart from this. Firstly, in the literature review, we will develop the previous scholarly contributions that constitute the analytical framework of the research. Then, we will focus on the methodology of the research by expanding on the procedures undertaken to collect and process the information. In the third section, we will discuss the results focusing on the most common or relevant “knots” that arose during the interviews. Finally, we will conclude with some final remarks.

### **Some terminological clarifications**

Before starting off with the theoretical framework, I will briefly clarify the terminology employed. Notably, ‘lesbian’ and ‘Muslim’ will not be considered fixed identities and neither stable and bounded dimensions of the ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘religion’ categories. In this thesis, ‘lesbianism’ and ‘lesbian’ will be used to name the experience of attraction, love, or romantic desire among women. Even though I believe ‘lesbian’ is not necessarily a fixed immutable identity or strategy, I do not wish to put the respondents in boxes or name them in ways they do not identify with. I reckon that the differentiation between naming the respondents and their experiences can be tricky at a theoretical level, however, it has proven useful in practice.

Concurring with previous studies, I will favour the use of ‘queer’ to refer to the participants (Abraham, 2009; Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021; Rahman, 2010; Mohammedali, Sudarto, & Zaharin, 2022). Despite its origin in the West, ‘queer’ straightforwardly addresses the intention to deconstruct, question and destabilise

categories and phenomena concerning sexuality and gender and overall signals a displacement from the normative and the sex-gender system. Using other concepts has been disregarded, as it is the case with ‘sapphic’, due to the lesser explanatory potential and political weight, or ‘non-heterosexual’ because of its unescapable heteronormativity. However, by choosing ‘queer’ in front of ‘lesbian’ I do not mean to imply that lesbians are, as Sara Ahmed has claimed, a step on a path that leads in a queer direction: “a willful lesbian stone is not a stepping stone” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 223). Moreover, the acts of contestation and strategies that respondents exposed cannot be disconnected from those of previous queer women and self-identified lesbians and are undoubtedly connected to a lesbian continuum.

On the other hand, I will refer to ‘Muslim backgrounds’ to convey the different identifications of the respondents. ‘Muslim’ will account for a shorter version of ‘identified as Muslim’, following El-Tayeb’s arguments (2012, p. 92). While I acknowledge the existence of the term ‘cultural Muslim’ to identify those whose backgrounds is Muslim but who are non-practicing, I also reckon the intrinsic contradiction that this concept might rise and the potential contestations to it, so I prefer not to use it given that none of the respondents identified like this.

Finally, I will refer to ‘religious orientation’ in both its senses of “the way an individual approaches (or avoids) religion”, and regarding the religious people, “the way an individual is religious” (Krauss & Hood Jr., 2013, p. 24). In any case, the multidimensionality of the sub-dimensions of religion will be regarded and when referring to religion we will convey the multiple forms of piety (Krauss & Hood Jr., 2013). Also, I particularly like its link to the concept of ‘sexual orientation’, the other main axis addressed in the thesis, and to the wider concept of ‘orientation’, understood in Ahmed’s terms as the way spaces guide bodies into aligning along certain lines in a ‘field of action’ where these bodily encounters occur (Vitry, 2020).

### **Positionality**

The thesis is born from an intersectional feminist approach and thus is committed to avoid the reproduction of biases and tendencies that have been long criticised in social sciences such as universalist and generalist aspirations or intrinsic racism. This has been kept in mind throughout the methodological design.



Reflecting on my own positionality is essential to this research and to foresee some of its shortcomings. Committing to “the cultural, local and historical production of knowledge” (Fotopoulou, 2012, p. 24), i.e., Haraway’s ‘situated knowledges’, made for a self-critical approach. I am aware that despite the commonalities, my social location differs from that of respondents in different ways in terms of my sexual orientation, religious identification, age, ethnicity, and education, among other factors that influenced the research, such as the power relations between me as a researcher and the research participants. Being non-Muslim and white were two central elements that distanced myself as a researcher from the respondents and that make me enjoy certain social privileges that my respondents did not.

Consequently, I will briefly refer to Alcoff’s critique on ‘speaking for others’, a practice that can result in the reinforcement of the oppression of the group spoken for. Fundamentally, it is not my intention to speak for a specific group or ‘speak for others’, but rather to amplify the respondents’ voices by bringing attention to the challenges of their intersectional positionalities. Still, I do not believe that I can perform this task objectively because “representation is in every case mediated and the product of interpretation” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 6). Notwithstanding, I concur with Alcoff in her claim that “no easy solution to this problem can be found by simply restricting the practice of speaking for others to speaking for groups of which one is a member” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 5), which would lead us to the crisis of representativity, in which we will not deepen. What is made evident is that this awareness should not result in relativism or lead to immobilism, passivity, or silence: especially in the face of rights violations. I attempt to navigate this tension while framing my thesis in a broader quest to contribute to a common horizon towards social justice where every life is worth being lived.

## 2. Literature review

In what follows, I will present the theoretical framework for this thesis. It will start with a geopolitical approach centred in the Global North to tackle the discursive elements that shape the realities of these queer women of Muslim backgrounds and that will provide some context. Then, we will continue with some notes on women and lesbianism in Islam to provide an overview of how this issue is approached. To begin focusing the discussion on the lived experiences of this intersection, we will develop its queer and intersectional framework. After, we will introduce some notes on strategies and coping mechanisms to then focus on the main sites in which the lesbian-Muslim intersection is relevant due to the tensions identified.

### 2.1. Context: Muslims in the Global North

The Global North has been constructed dialectically against the Global South. Even if the last globalisation process has apparently blurred geopolitical boundaries, it has not erased the meanings attributed to each space. Understanding space “as a simultaneity of stories so-far” (Massey, 2005, p. 130) gives us a chance to trace back and locate these stories in the present and thus contribute to the possibilities that the “so-far” presents.

One of the foundational stories of the Global North in the aftermath of the Cold War has undoubtedly been Huntington’s orientalist tale about the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ that has shaped “much of the negative view of cultural and religious diversity and dialogue” (Turner, 2007, p. 130), in a moment when the development of diasporic communities is greater than ever. Especially, after the 9/11 and other terrorists’ attacks in the Global North in the wake of the century, the clash of civilisations logic fuelled Western interventionist policies in West Asia and North Africa regions as well as ‘war on terror’ discourses against Muslims and racialised people in the Global North. Moreover, it entailed a new form of governmentality that involves the direct supervision of religions, especially Islam, which has been called the ‘management of Muslims’ (Turner, 2007, p. 136). The clash of civilisations discourse builds on fantasies of conflict between the liberal democratic secular West and the conservative, autocratic and theocratic Islam. Even if the choice of these two reductive abstractions turned into categories has been denounced as inaccurate, they clearly convey much of the current war on terror and orientalist discourses and the ideology behind the ‘management of Muslims’. Additionally, these ideas are very present in the re-emergence of right-wing politics, heavily reliant on anti-Muslim and anti-immigration arguments.

Thus, Huntington's categories of Islam and the West are operative to understand the guiding principles and implications of dominant discourses on religious diversity and, more importantly, on Islam and Muslims.

One of the core beliefs behind these arguments is the immutability of cultures, the homogeneity of civilisations and the unchanging character between 'us' and 'them'. The One and Other are dialectically constructed to a point where, as scholars on orientalism have expressed, anti-Westernism is considered a key aspect of Islam (Mutman, 1993). This immutable character of culture, which makes Muslims incapable to adhere to Western "values" -i.e., modernity, progressiveness, liberalism, secularism, equality, etc.- is paradoxically infused with movement when referring to the West and its relentless drive to advance in the linear path of modernity. All these elements help constitute a Western mythology forever thwarted by foreign elements, like Islam and Muslims.

As it is distilled from these preliminary paragraphs, it is the epistemic interest in power, as Benhabib would argue, that creates these "clearly delineable wholes" (2002, p. 4), flawed from the start. Contrary to this perspective, which permeates the dominant discourse on Muslims in the Global North, a 'narrative view' of cultures, understanding them as "polyvocal, multi-layered, decentred and fractured systems of action and signification" (Benhabib, 2002, pp. 25-26) allows to identify voices and experiences beyond the hegemonic ones.

#### 2.1.2. On citizenship and culture

Since religious identities tend to be transnational, they offer alternative matrices of self-definition that are not state based (Turner, 2007, p. 135). This collapses with classical theories on citizenship, buttressed on ideas of closed societies, nationalism and sovereignty, and further complicates Muslims' chances to fit into the welfare model of citizenship in Europe, which has been in crisis for a long time.

Moreover, the argument of 'protecting our culture' has become, according to Duyvendak and Tonkens (2016), a common code to deny migrants full citizenship, if we understand it as the access beyond legal rights to recognition in symbolic and emotional terms. In fact, "symbolic access to national belonging is often denied by native majorities to even second -or third- generation immigrants" (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016, p. 2) who are systemically disadvantaged despite being legal citizens.

An essentialised idea of culture as presented above constitutes the core of citizenship in a process that Duyvendak and Tonkens have called the ‘culturalization of citizenship’, by which being granted citizenship depends on adherence to norms, values, and cultural practices rather than civic, political or social rights (2016, p. 2).

In this scenario, issues of identity, belonging and citizenship “arise through membership and social interaction within specific (local) communities” (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016, p. 4). Many scholars have presented the tensions and paradoxes between the local and the global regarding these issues, to mostly conclude that local belonging plays a significant role in the ‘global conjuncture of belonging’ (Li, 2002). In this scenario, cultural and emotional elements come to the foreground and easily lead to violence, which is evident in relation to Muslims and racialised subjects in the Global North. The dangers of the culturalisation of citizenship seem self-evident since they further freeze differences among groups, heading towards greater conservatism.

Moreover, it promotes the so-called ‘mosaic multiculturalism’ that absolutises the defense of cultures above justice and complicates dialogue. Thus, rethinking belonging becomes key to detach it from the culture and citizenship status, more mutable in the context of porous borders and identity redefinitions (Benhabib, 2002). In this line, Benhabib considers that identity politics are affected by the paradox of preserving “the purity of the impure, the immutability of the historical and the fundamentalness of the contingent” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 11). This renders true in Shannahan’s example of the authority struggles regarding what Islam is: the “what it is not, what it was and what it will be”, which is occurring “across and beyond the global(ised) ummah, involving multiple actors and sites of production, and shaking up Islamic identity” (Shannahan, 2009, p. 59).

A shift towards a polyvocal notion of culture should entail citizenship being regarded as a practice rather than a marker of membership acquired by birth (Benhabib, 2002). In the context of this research, this polyvocal notion leads us to considering culture as a “never ending genesis” (Geschiere & Guadeloupe, 2016, p. 216). This allows to show conflict and complexity between and within cultures and gives agency to the actors involved to negotiate their own identity narratives. Moreover, it has the potential to promote that those denied full citizenship speak up, overthrowing the idea that criticising one’s culture or

religion is a form of betrayal (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016, p. 14). It may also help overcome or bring nuances to the binary oppositions by which we inevitably operate.

The above contextual arguments concerned on issues of culture, belonging and citizenship have become entangled with issues of sexuality and religion in unexpected ways, as we will see below.

## **2.2. Queer Muslims in homonationalist times**

Issues of sexuality and gender have a significant public and political dimension and are intrinsically related to citizenship rights<sup>2</sup> and status, which are in turn connected to other aspects of social life. Consequently, gender and sexuality are inevitably inscribed in current essentialist notions of culture and citizenship, which intersect with other markers of citizenship like race or religion. For instance, research on the Netherlands shows how homophobia attributed to Muslim immigrants has been considered a crucial trait showing their no-belonging in the country (Duyvendak, Mepschen, & Uitermark, 2013). This example portrays a trend in the Global North following the ‘clash of civilisations’ rationale to a point where “war on terror discourses have been construed, waged and legitimised on gendered and sexual terrain” (Hunt & Rygiel, 2006, as cited in Bracke, 2012, p. 244).

A consequence of this situation is that Muslim communities are policed in the name of gender equality: “three allegorical figures have come to dominate the social landscape of the ‘war on terror’ and its ideological underpinning of a clash of civilizations: the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman, and the civilized European” (Rahman, 2010, p. 947). This epistemic matrix is not new to war on terror discourses but rather an update of colonial efforts that mobilised these monolithic characters in rescue narratives. In fact, the figure of the imperilled Muslim woman still corresponds to the ‘Third World Woman’ that Mohanty (1991) conceptualised decades ago and that has been largely discussed in critical and decolonial feminism. The discourse produced by colonisers -the civilised Europeans- suppresses heterogeneity and agency within Muslim women and turns them into objects that need to be saved from their oppressors

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<sup>2</sup> A more elaborate discussion on ‘intimate/sexual citizenship’ and even ‘religious citizenship’ would enrich these arguments, but the length limit made me prioritise ‘citizenship’ as understood traditionally. For a deeper analysis on these two aspects and regarding the lived experiences of queer Muslims, see Yip (2008) (for the first) and Yip (2007) (for the latter).

(Mohammedali, Sudarto, & Zaharin, 2022). The two Muslim actors in this matrix are nevertheless one, for they both are the Other of the coloniser. More examples of this can be traced back in discourses on the hijab, polygamy and clitoridectomy in different parts of Africa (Gillian, 1991) to justify and legitimise Western intervention under the banner of freedom and emancipation. Muslim women's bodies have been subject to much imperial inversion and the battleground for colonial expansionist moves towards greater colonial control, supported on a Christian concept of morale. Colonial administrations exerted control with a high impact on women and their sexuality (Arduino, 2016, p. 133) that is still operational in the management of Muslims on European soil, for example, with controversies over Islamic covering. In any case, the "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988) narrative has been central in many colonialist operations and has been reactivated in unexpected ways in the current context through the demand of LGBT+ rights.

In this scenario, the complicit role of Western women and feminists has also been thoroughly analysed in the critical feminist genealogy and described as "the handmaiden" of the colonialist project, epistemically and politically benefiting from it since the beginning of the women's emancipation movements. The framing of women's emancipation and feminism as incompatible with religious traditions has also deepened this situation. In this vein, Bracke signalled the "affinities between feminist and sexual politics and civilizational and islamophobic politics" (2012, p. 248).

Indeed, the gender and sexual politics in the form of women's rights in the Global North have expanded to LGBT+ rights while maintaining rescue narratives and deepening colonial and orientalist dynamics. In fact, one could argue that gay imperialist tendencies, or Massad's 'Gay International', have been a vehicle by which gender and sexual politics are rearticulated through the prism of 'cultural and religious issues' and thus, inevitably constituting a hindrance to the production of a 'secular liberal society' (Bracke, 2012). In other words, a project undoubtedly cut by the patterns of a "sexual and gender duality based on a Western model of heterosexuality" (Siraj, 2011, p. 104) in the form of sexual human rights that establish a one-size fits all liberation project.

In this context, women and lesbian and gay rights are instrumentalised against Islam and Muslims with the core idea that Islam cannot accept public equality ideas. Rahman discusses that gender equality is used as a weapon that induces a "dialectical

characterization of Islam around the world and Muslims in the West as unable to share these ‘values’ (Rahman, 2010, p. 945). These discourses tend to portray ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ identities as “the product of mutually exclusive ‘cultures’: ‘gay’ is understood as Western, and ‘Muslims’ as unable to accept gay public equality” (Rahman, 2010, p. 948).

Currently, “gay” is understood in terms of Lisa Duggan’s ‘new homonormativity’ which promises the “possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Bracke, 2012, p. 244). This is simultaneously articulated with contemporary racist and imperialist politics.

To elaborate on this matter, the term “homonationalism” by Jasbir Puar (2007) renders very useful. Being initially used to describe the sexual layers of USA exceptionalism, it can be applied to Europe as well. It references a historical shift marked by the rearticulation and merging of sexual and civilizational politics within a nationalist and capitalist framework. Homonationalism departs from a deep critique to “lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses which produces narratives of progress and modernity to accord some populations access to citizenship -cultural and legal- at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations” (Puar, 2013, p. 337). In this context, women and gay rights are instrumentalised in public criticism of Islam, entailing the entrance of some homosexual bodies in the area of protection of the nation-states while others remain systemically excluded. This has been possible due to the incorporation of homosexuals into the cultural identity of the nation and Western civilization.

Furthermore, acceptance and promotion of normal homosexuality has become a key marker of civilisation, overturning previous conceptions of homosexuality as degenerate and uncivilised. The fact that its contingent and non-universal character is not acknowledged in political discourse, makes this creative shift or absorption of (homo)sexual politics even more problematic. Women’s rights and especially LGBT+ rights are far from accepted in all EU countries and even less in the whole sphere of the Global North, it is a “recent phenomenon [...] far from anything like a shared cultural trait” (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016, p. 13).

Nevertheless, despite its shaky discursive foundations, the implications of homonationalism are pervasive through its capacity to normalise the queer, the ‘queer as regulatory’ (Puar, 2007), which signals a paradox with terrible effects, like Falquet

indicates in her account on ‘lesbonationalism’. According to her findings, lesbonationalism may even serve to measure the degree of ‘integration’ of the foreign member of a female couple, reinforcing, in turn, a certain white definition of lesbianism (Falquet, 2019, p. 74).

Homonationalism benefiting from rescue narratives apart from justifying foreign interventions, has generated a quagmire that queer Muslim women must navigate with no easy possibilities of exiting.

### **2.3. Lesbianism in Islam**

Firstly, we must acknowledge that when we address sexuality within religion, we do so at several levels in order to conceptualise and understand it holistically. Following Yip (2009), these include religious orthodoxy, i.e., religious authority structures or elites; religious community/space and religious individuals, i.e., lived/everyday religion. This approach “offers us a more accurate picture of how religion is lived” (Yip, 2009, p. 2) by revealing contradictions and complementarities in lived experiences.

It has been widely proven that the current secrecy of Muslim societies regarding sexuality contrasts with testimony from other epochs and that two main factors contributed to this shift, namely the colonisation processes and the puritanical influence that came along with it (Valcarcel, 2017, p. 187), as well as the rise of more conservative trends within Islam. Classic Arabic includes two words to refer to homosexual sexual practices: male homosexuality as *liwāt* (sodomy) and female homosexuality as *musāḥaqa*, (Estomba Giménez, 2018, pp. 93-94) whose root is “to reduce into powder or to rub” (Tolino, 2020, p. 35). Scholars like Habib (2007) and activists like the organisation Hidayah have reclaimed a vast array of medieval homoerotic poems and stories, and practices such as same-sex weddings in Yemen and Saudi Arabia have been brought to light. This heritage is being used to counter the conservative theological positions on homosexuality in Islam.

Acknowledging the degree of scripturalism within Islam, one major source for fighting against homophobia has been the re-reading of the Quran, or ‘queer readings’ as conceptualised by Yip (2005). The traditional justification used to condemn homosexuality is the story of the prophet Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah, which has undergone diverse re-readings that counter the homonegative interpretation by considering that what is censored is the attitude of the inhabitants of Sodom and



Gomorrhah beyond same-sex relations, such as inhospitality to strangers and sexual violence (Hendricks, 2010; Jamal, 2001). Given that the story only addresses men, and thus theoretically lesbians would not be condemned, the following verse could indicate a condemnation of lesbianism:

*As for those of your women who are guilty of lewdness, call to witness four of you against them. And if they testify (to the truth of the allegation) then confine them to the houses until death take them or (until) Allah appoint for them a way (through new legislation) (Quran, 4:15) (Siraj, 2012, p. 451).*

Very simplistically, “lewdness” or “indecenty” (Jamal, 2001, p. 26) could refer to many attitudes beyond lesbianism, and in general, one could consider that there is an omission of lesbianism in the Quran. It also introduces the private-public divide by mentioning how sexual acts are only punishable if observed by witnesses.

In any case, condemnation, legal and moral, comes from the hadith, so it is not a simple application of revelation but rather the result of a particular interpretation that emphasises some Islamic epistemologies and ethics over others and thus can be contested (Mourchid, 2010).

To finish this brief commentary on the scriptures, the following verse is at the core of queer readings:

*O people, we created you all from a male and female And made you into different communities and different tribes So that you should come to know one another Acknowledging that the most noble among you Is the one most aware of God (Quran, 49:13).*

This verse emphasises the importance and value of diversity and can be interpreted as how one can be both homosexual and Muslim. Some progressive trends of Islam are therefore based on the essential idea that all Muslims are equals and should not be discriminated. These approaches understand discrimination as anti-Islamic because Islam is a liberating force for the oppressed and vulnerable, and judgment can only come from God.

One could argue that colonisation and conservative trends within Islam deepened already existing cross-cultural attention regarding the moral and social institutions of the respective ‘Other’, present since the medieval times (Schmidtke, 1999, p. 260).

Schmidtke tells us how, in particular, “questions related to sexual morality, including the issue of homosexuality, were, and still are, used as a polemical focus for mutual denigration” (Schmidtke, 1999, p. 260). The stigmatisation of homosexuality within the Islamic world that increased in the 19th century (Valcarcel, 2017, p. 187) has only deepened due to the increasing visibility and decriminalisation of Western homosexuals, and of homosexual sex-tourism, among other factors that are in line with a wider geopolitical issue indicating the decay of Western culture (Schmidtke, 1999, p. 260).

Consequently, “lesbianism in migrant communities is often perceived to be a symptom of ‘westoxification’ (being intoxicated by secular Western culture)” (Yip, 2008, p. 105), and coming out may be construed as the evidence of women’s cultural assimilation with the white majority and their adoption of fundamentally “un-Muslim’ norms and values” (Siraj, 2011, p. 103). This idea connects with Western discourses that negate cultural and religious diversity within the framework of the LGBT+, as derived from Massad’s thoughts. The universalist framework by which one should understand sexuality is so narrow that it cannot comprehend variations within cultures and locations. The claims of westoxification could be understood then as backlash against the “Gay International” (Massad, 2002) that “in espousing this liberation project [...] is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image, one wherein its sexual categories and desires are safe from being questioned” (Massad, 2002, p. 385).

This backlash relates to what Siraj identified among heterosexual Muslims in Britain, whose attitudes are both “heterosexist and homonegative” (Siraj, 2009). Within Muslim communities, heteronormativity prevails based on the views of the notable scholars of Islam (Jamal, 2001; Murchid, 2010; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) who agree on its deviation from one’s true heterosexual nature, which accordingly “has created a repressive climate that inhibits Muslim women from openly identifying as lesbian” (Siraj, 2016, p. 192). Some other factors that “influence views of homosexuality among racial and ethnic minority cultures are predominant religion within the culture, traditional views of family, and traditional gender roles” (Solarz, 1999, as cited in Siraj, 2011, p. 116). The following subsections will provide more nuances to this claim.

### 2.3.1. Women’s sexuality and gender

Women’s sexuality is a subject of debate within Islamic orthodoxy and communities as it is within many organised religions. Islam, in the framework of the secularised West,

fits in the popular image that religion “stringently establishes the boundary for acceptable/moral and unacceptable/immoral sexual desire, behaviour, and identity and is generally perceived as sex-constraining” (Yip, 2009, p. 2) to a point where it is regarded as sex-negative (Yip, 2009, p. 1).

To start with, it must be noted that the idea of ‘complementarity’ is paramount in dominant Islamic discourses on sexuality, based on ‘bivalence’ and ‘dual relations’ (Yip, 2009, p. 2). This is connected to the concept of ‘zawj’ (parity and opposition between sexes) which is creative and procreative. Therefore ‘nikah’ (marriage) becomes the proper expression of sexuality, and the institution that regulates sexual relations, meaning that extramarital relations or any relation outside marriage is ‘zina’ (Bouhdiba, 1998; Estomba Giménez, 2018, p. 88): “outside this framework, all sexual activities [...] are considered sexual deviation” (Yip, 2009, p. 2). Zina, then, could be defined as including “both adultery and fornication, but there is a difference in the punishment of these offenses” (Jamal, 2001). Moreover, as posed by Boellstorff, marriage “is not simply an expression of desire or a sign of being pious, but a practice that makes one a more pious Muslim” (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 578). As Shannahan reminds us, “Islam has a moral classification system that defines actions by the relationship between the actors. It is thus impossible to disentangle (at least heterosexual) sexual activity from the halal-nikah, haram-zina duality imposed upon their contexts” (Shannahan, 2009, p. 62), meaning that the only permissible sexual activity is within marriage while zina is forbidden.

In this scenario, “homosexuality holds no spiritual or sacramental significance as it undermines the Islamic importance of the complementarity and unity of the two sexes, weakens the institution of marriage and the natural context for raising children” (Siraj, 2016, p. 187). In fact, nikah “sets the bases for the structure of the family and the patrilineal lineage” (Rubiera Mata, 2004 as cited in Valcarcel, 2017, p. 185). This does not mean that sex’s only function is to reproduce, in fact “en el islam estas [sexual relations] se entienden también como fin en sí mismas, recomendando, incluso, el uso de anticonceptivos” (Estomba Giménez, 2018, p. 89).

In relation to lesbian sexuality, there are complementary and oppositional opinions on the matter. To some, two women do not pose so much risk since there is no penis involved, so some would not consider it a zina in the sense of fornication (Peumans, 2016). This does not entail that women can have complete sexual autonomy to have lesbian relations. In fact, Shannahan considers that “women-women sexuality remains thoroughly

submerged” and questions whether Islam’s framework of nikah leaves spaces for female sexual autonomy within its vision (Murray & Roscoe, 1997, as cited in Shannahan, p. 65).

Taking all this into account, Siraj considers that, within Islamic hegemonic discourses, “being a lesbian is the antithesis of the ideal Muslim woman: mother and wife” (2011, p. 111). Beyond the discussion on whether it is or is not a zina, lesbianism impinges on the natural order of zawj and is disruptive from the moment it repudiates “man’s pleasure dominance and control” (Siraj, 2016, p. 187) and unsettles biological and social categories of binaries. At this point we can highlight the difference between lesbian practice and lesbian identity which would bring nuances on this discussion but that cannot be addressed in depth in the framework of this study.

Another aspect of women’s sexuality is its circumscription to the private space, which in Estomba’s words regarding women in Tunis, “conduce en diversas ocasiones a cultivar un sentimiento de represión generalizado y una doble moral alimentada por las estructuras sociales patriarcales” (Estomba Giménez, 2018, p. 85).

Countering these patriarchal and heteronormative social and political structures with inclusive approaches to Islam generate a challenge that “arises from a *paradox* which pervades Islam’s whole interpretive framework; women are equal before God yet different (not equal) before (hu)man” (Shannahan, 2009, p. 64).

However, we should not be deterred by this, as hegemonic approaches to Islam are partial and incomplete and sometimes buttress essentialist views of Islam as a social and individual practice in which heterosexual marriage is totalising (Yip, 2009). Regarding this discourse in research studies, Yip reminds us that it does not account for the intricate workings of agency, “namely the capacity of individuals to construct lived experiences by resisting, contesting and adapting religious orthodoxy and cultural hegemonic systems” (Yip, 2009, p. 2).

In this line, acknowledging that Islam is a multi-faceted system and for some, a form of being-in-the-world for Muslims (Valcarcel, 2017, p. 184), should not limit the way we reflect on these issues. It should rather promote a nuanced approach to how the outcomes of the interactions between religion and sexuality are not outright but can have both constraining and empowering outcomes and everything in between. This idea of going beyond hegemonic discourses and exploring its cracks through lived experiences will mark the rest of the study.

## 2.4. Queer intersectionality

Two terms become paramount to understand the experiences of queer women of Muslim background: queer and intersectionality. These two concepts have been broadly discussed, contested, framed and reframed and it is not my wish to contribute to those discussions any more than what has already been said. Notwithstanding, acknowledging that ‘intersectionality’ has become a catchphrase and ‘queer’ still raises some brows, some clarification should be made.

While intersectionality derives from postcolonial/black feminism that revealed the differences within the feminine difference, it evolved in contact with postmodern feminism. Under this light, intersectionality is useful to question and go beyond the theoretical and political focuses based on identity (Yuval-Davis, 2015) for it helps us denaturalise and unfix discriminated groups, presenting the categories in movement. For example, Mohanty demonstrated how the experience of gender was not the same among women, because not even the category of ‘gender’ is uniform (Mohanty, 1991). Intersectionality then, makes visible this simultaneity of oppressions: “LGBTQ-POC individuals are faced with ‘a fluid and contextual sexualization of race and a racialization of sexuality’, rather than with each-ism individually” (Narváez et al., 2009, p. 65).

Following this point, research on LGBT+ Muslims, as noted by Rahman (2010, p. 949), has implicitly raised questions of intersectionality, given that it is a useful tool to theorise and understand oppression within a matrix of domination in which identities are located. Kimberlé Crenshaw showed how black women were located in the intersection of racism and sexism and consequently, their experience is the product of both, with no equivalent (1991). A certain specificity derives from these two locations configuring a hybrid experience of oppression. The relational manner by which identity construction occurs in relation to matrices of domination means that this social location is not just a place of marginalisation but can be productive and creative.

At this point, I will borrow Rahman’s term ‘queer intersectionality’ that despite seeming an unnecessary repetition, Rahman considers to be “simply the necessary tautology: intersectionality is inevitably disruptively queer, and queer must be analytically intersectional” (Rahman, 2010, p. 956). This term indicates how queer Muslims occupy an “intersectional social location *between* political and social cultures and that they suffer oppression through this position” (Rahman, 2010, p. 945). As he puts it “the very

existence and evidencing of LGBT Muslims, understood intersectionally, undermines the equation of universal identities with monolithic and exclusive cultures” (Rahman, 2010, p. 951). The simultaneous location of queer Muslims inside and outside of categories is constitutive of their intersectional location, which concurs with the identity uncertainty present in queer theories (Rahman, 2010, p. 951). The impossibility of this location is what, in Foucault’s terms, represents their power in resistance (Rahman, 2010).

All these elements help us understand the actual lived experiences of queer women from Muslim backgrounds beyond the identity labels of ‘lesbian’ and ‘Muslim’ and to appreciate differences within them. In fact, a queer and intersectional approach also overcomes the polarisations that too often derive from analysis like Massad’s regarding the Gay International by changing the focus from the abstract to the concrete and ultimately “rendering visible intersectional social locations particularly when doing so challenges oppositional discourses” (Rahman, 2010, p. 949).

The racialisation and class aspects are key in this matrix as well, adding to the combo of marginalised identities of lesbians of Muslim backgrounds. In fact, Yip suggests that for LGBT+ Muslims in Britain, “sexuality does not take on a ‘master status’ in identity construction as racism and Islamophobia are pressing realities for many” (2005, in Shannahan, 2009, p. 76). In the approach of this study, the migration background, which can relate to the class aspect, and racialisation are linked, given that participants in the study are first or second generation from countries in the Maghreb and West Africa<sup>3</sup>. Their situations would probably be different to those of autochthonous queers and converts.

“Muslim lesbians [...] are a multiply marginalised and oppressed minority because of their gender, ethnic and religious identity” (Siraj, 2016, p. 186), which makes them susceptible to homophobia, racism, and sexism, and is sometimes understood as a ‘triple jeopardy’. Still, we should move away from a ‘triple oppression’ approach because these elements are not additive since their lived experiences reveal dynamics of intersecting positions in which all three categories are intermeshed (Fotopoulou, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Research on LGBT+ Muslims needs to regard the transnational aspects of their lives. This is important, for instance, to understand how sexuality is negotiated within the family. The limitations of this master’s thesis did not allow to deepen enough into their migrant backgrounds and apply a transnational approach, which I believe is key to continue this discussion. For a deeper integrated transnational approach, see Peumans (2016); Klapeer & Laskar (2018) or Rahman (2015).

#### 2.4.1. Through the cracks

Dealing with identities may obscure part of the narrative and not give us a full picture of the lived experiences of lesbianism in Muslim communities, partly due to the social meanings attached to each identity label that we have been tracing so far.

At the level of religious orthodoxy and community, Massad tells us that the Arab world “has [traditionally] included a measure of tolerance for same-gender sex practices, without recognising a separate socio-sexual categorisation” (2002, p. 369). This is also made evident at the very level of language, as Siraj reminds us “Arabic terms for lesbianism (sahq, sihaq, and sihaqa) and ‘lesbian’ (sahiqa, sahhaqa, and musahiqa) signifies behaviour and action not an emotional connection or identity” (2016, p. 187). We can recognise a tension between practice and sentiment that needs to be regarded since according to Islamic law, homoerotic sentiment is not forbidden but practice is (Schmidtke, 1999, p. 260). Furthermore, research conducted by Shannahan determines that:

*Respondents who distinguish between innate sexuality and sexual acts seem to me as more plausibly reflecting Islam’s traditional distinction between behaviour and desire. This is further evinced in the many fatawa available online, where non-heterosexual desires are depicted as innate, yet the ability to avoid acting upon them is stressed (Shannahan, 2009, p. 67).*

Therefore, while identity labels are useful to approach this topic, we should be aware of the potential constraints they pose to grasp the realities that slip through the cracks of these labels. In this line, Rahman calls for more evidence on homoeroticism of queer Muslims living in the West to understand how their sexual identity relates to their sexual practices at different levels (2010).

However, focusing on practices and homoeroticism might not even be an option in some cases. Siraj (2011, p. 117) warns us that bringing attention only to women in relationships with other women and the visibility that this entails might hide the experiences of closeted lesbians who are not engaged in a sexual relationship with another woman and that maybe have no intention of doing so.

Coll-Planas, García-Romeral and Martí Plademunt (2021) bring this issue to the centre by analysing how the discourses of queer Muslims reproduce and/or subvert the hegemonic gay/lesbian Western narrative. Their findings show how sexual practices with people of the same sex do not necessarily constitute an identity. Nevertheless, this “fluid experience of sexuality and a rejection of the idea of encapsulating desire, reducing it to a category that they experience as limiting” is countered by the fact that interviewees use identity labels (Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021, p. 8). This occurred either with those who apparently intended to follow them but were not doing so in the Western way, or with those who were critical but not completely alien to them. The authors make sense of this contradiction by applying the ‘lens of hybridity’ that sheds light on this issue by showing how queer Muslims, finding themselves in a complex position, had to “embark on a creative process in which they had to create their own ways to live their sexuality far from predefined solutions” (Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021, p. 8).

Hybridity has proven to be a useful tool to analyse the discourses of queer migrants (Abraham, 2009). For example, in Coll-Planas (2020) the author analyses films under the assimilationist category and under the hybrid category. Films under the latter “present characters who explore their gender and their desire through the hybridization of elements from the culture of origin and from the country where they live” (Coll-Planas, 2020, p. 21) and whose practices do not constitute set identities that must be discovered and assumed.

## **2.5. Coping and binding**

In this brief subsection we will note some of the strategies that queer women from Muslim backgrounds deploy to conjugate these allegedly exclusive dimensions of their lives, as a way of introducing the following three subsections and the strategies regarded in each site. These strategies contribute to achieving a positive sense of self and helped deal with the two spheres by means of reaching a comfortable position between the normativities of the minority community and the majority culture.

Even if the research on the lives of lesbian Muslims in the Global North is still scarce, the last twenty years have witnessed a rise in countries with vast migrant trajectories, such as the Netherlands, the USA and the UK, and other scattered but essential contributions



across the Global North appeared (Falquet, 2019; Coll-Planas, García-Romeral, & Masi, 2022), all of which underscore the importance of starting off from the very experiences of the queer women from Muslim backgrounds. The research has shown the complexities of the strategies deployed, which combine the diversity of elements that we have been tracing so far.

The assumed outcome, under Western eyes, of binding the two dimensions together is breaking ties with Islam. Still, there is not much research that points in this way and for several reasons, this might not be the desired or optimal option for a queer woman with a Muslim background. The processes are more complex than just breaking ties and here is usually where the creative potential of the intersection comes into play, a strand more explored in recent academic research.

For example, research on gay Muslims showed how “the emerging gay identity is initially resisted but then accepted as innate, while the reverse process occurs for the religious identity-initially taken for granted but later renegotiated to make room for their homosexuality” (Anonymous, 2015, p. 12). Interestingly, regarding British Muslim gay men, “national identity may be invoked in order to alleviate this [identity] threat” (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 867).

These processes configure coping strategies for queer men. A coping strategy is defined as “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 851) and takes place when changes in the social context obstruct identity principles, which will be regarded in the subsection “2.8. Inner level”.

Siraj’s studies are a cornerstone regarding the lives of lesbian Muslims and their coping strategies. She explores the negotiations and reconfigurations of religious discourse in relation to the meanings attached to being a Muslim lesbian that leads “to the acceptance of their sexual identity” (Siraj, 2016, p. 186). She discovered that after a time of reflection in which respondents studied and met likeminded people, they could cope with identity threat and thus were “able to bind previously incompatible identities” (Siraj, 2016, p. 196), which reframed the identities of ‘Muslim’ and ‘lesbian’. These two elements she highlights, studying and meeting people, will be central in our analysis.

From the above process described by Siraj and other research, we can grasp that the process of binding and/or unbinding is not a straightforward or linear progression towards a sort of liberation and happiness culminating in the coming out (El-Tayeb, 2012). Actually, seeming contradictions and ambiguities imbue the stories. For instance, in another study, Siraj explains the experience of her respondent, showing that while “self-acceptance” in terms of sexuality grew, so did her isolation and detachment from her family, which made her plunge into a hopeless future (Siraj, 2011, p. 115).

In what follows, we will put the focus on three sites of tension, with points of ease and struggle: the community, the inner dimension and the constant of the coming out.

## **2.6. The community**

In a context where the majority population is marked by ideas of nationhood and patriotism, and Muslim people, especially men, are often labelled as terrorists, the access of Muslim women to the “full citizenship package” is far from guaranteed. Likewise, within their respective minority cultural and religious communities, they encounter heteronormative barriers. One of the main obstacles for lesbians and the reason that foregrounds their exclusion is “their failure to conform to cultural, traditional, familial, and religious customs” (Siraj, 2011, p. 104).

Ghabrial summarises the community situation of racialised queers as follows: “in addition to everyday racism and heterosexism, this population experience racism within LGBTQ (or queer) communities and relationships, heterosexism within their ethnic community, and varying forms of oppression that interact in different contexts” (2017, p. 42), what Abraham has called ‘critical hybridity’ (2009) to negate the exclusionary nature of each “-ism”. Their experience of intersectional discrimination means that “there is no safe place, no place to belong, whether in the majority or minority community” (Bradshaw in Siraj, 2011, p. 105).

Homonegative attitudes transcend the field of interpretation of Islamic orthodoxy that we have addressed. Thus, while the task of contesting the scriptural justifications of homophobia is important and has been influential to a degree, the limitations of this effort to have real influence are many, since the resistance they face is part of a wider phenomenon entangled with geopolitical interests. In other words, queer alternative

theological interpretations cannot counter by themselves heteronormativity and the enhanced backlash in a comprehensive manner.

Estomba Giménez (2018), talking about Tunisia, brings together issues raised by other scholars in the Global North. She believes that the oppression of queer Muslim women within Muslim communities differs from men in two senses: firstly, because they enjoy a degree of mobility that women do not, and secondly, because gay's situation is more present and subject to public debate. While one could argue that this second reason may be beneficial to women since they might get less suspicion, de facto it can mean that their situation is rendered invisible because "sexist stereotypes in communities of color deny the existence of lesbians of color" (Siraj, 2011, p. 104), which in turn, lessens the opportunities to connect with fellow queers who might be undergoing similar situations.

This physical and emotional separation from other queers ends up creating an emotional distance with friends and family (Siraj, 2011, p. 105). For example, Siraj, in her seminal essay on closeted lesbians in Scotland, studies the case of a woman who developed a "code of silence primarily through isolating herself from those around her, typically her family members" (Siraj, 2011, p. 114). This 'code of silence' refers to feelings of estrangement associated to the fact that disclosing information about one's sexuality can produce negative effects.

Considering the discrimination from LGBT+ people in the majority culture and from the wider context of the Global North, Ghabrial highlights "the importance of feeling connected to both ethnoracial and LGBTQ communities for LGBTQ-POC and the value of queer spaces specifically for racialized individuals" (2017, p. 53). Actually, creating a sense of community can help with the negotiation of sexual and religious identities (Manalansan IV, 2006; Yip, 2008) and furthermore, "affiliation with gay affirmative support groups and gay Muslims nurture theological capital in a positive manner" (Siraj, 2016, p. 191).

The tensions between the local and the global influence the nature and configurations of queer Islamic communities. Klapeer and Laskar (2018) bring up the importance of 'transnationalism' and the 'local' in analysing these communities. For them, the "quotidian practices in the local context" and "performative acts signalling particular identifications and ways of belonging" are intermeshed and indicative of configurations

of transnational ways of belonging to ‘imagined queer communities’ in another twist to Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’. They refer to a process in which the local, rather than a negotiation of the transnational, opens up “for multi-layered understandings of the relationship between queerness, transnationalism, imagined communities of belonging and boundary objects like the rainbow flag” (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018, p. 536).

The queer identification with these communities and the subjectivities it produces are “entangled with transnational networks [and] are therefore ruptured and ambiguous, and not the sole effect of either local or global situations nor of the discourses alone” (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018, p. 536), other aspects that ground this connection are LGBT+ violence at a global level and estrangement from national images. This queer identification could also facilitate the shift towards a personal religion and the prioritisation of human subjectivity identified in other research on queer Muslims.

In these processes, the role of the internet is essential, as Kort began to identify in his investigation on the Cyber Islamic environment or ‘Dar al-Cyber Islam’ (2005), in which the author predicted the huge impact of the internet on Muslims in the following years, recognising how some notions like the ummah and ijihad were already changing. Dar al-Cyber Islam is also providing space for Muslims in the Global North to create new meanings in relation to their gender and sexuality, because “forms of electronic communication move Islamic discourse beyond the classical language of texts into contemporary vernaculars and involve new actors, sites of production, and consumption” (Anderson in Kort, 2005, p. 364).

## **2.7. The ‘closet’**

Come out culture in the LGBT+ community has been under scrutiny for long, with both activists and scholars calling for the eradication or modification of it (Ghabrial, 2017, p. 53). Coming out of the closet is “often not a viable [or the optimal] option for LGBTQ-POC, yet little is being done in the mainstream to acknowledge these realities and redefine the coming out process for LGBTQ-POC” (Ghabrial, 2017, p. 52). In fact, El-Tayeb considers that the “coming out becomes a decontextualized fetish around which the familiar superiority of Western individuality is built, while queers of color are expected to catch up, to overcome their inherent cultural disadvantage” (El-Tayeb, 2012, p. 89).

Many elements collapse in the construction of closet, such as homonationalism and the differences regarding public/private or identity/practice.

In any case, what remains true is that for some homosexual and lesbian Muslims there is “no clear-cut route to legitimising their love in an ‘Islamic’ way” (Shannahan, 2009, p. 74) and this process is further complicated by “trusted and loved ones” who can thwart “the process of gay or lesbian identity development and self-acceptance” (Greene, 1994, in Siraj, 2011, p. 112). Therefore, choosing to avoid or hide that part of themselves to others is an option for many, even though it can lead to feelings of being “psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script” (Siraj, 2011, p. 105) and have negative impacts like internalised lesbophobia, resulting in “behavior that involves duplicity and deception” (Herdt, 1998, in Siraj, 2011, p. 105). The closet can be about “isolation” and “secrecy” resulting in an enormous drainage of energy and ultimately being “maintained by feelings of guilt, shame, and fear” for lesbian Muslims (Siraj, 2011, p. 105), which is also stressed in Peumans’ study on the “moral breakdown” between religion and sexuality for queer Muslims (2016).

On the other hand, the closet can be a safe space and a person can come to terms with their sexuality individually without coming out to their environment. Still, it does not necessarily mean that the threat to identity coherence is obliterated for queers, or at least for Muslim men (Anonymous, 2015). In an article that explores the limits and entanglements of identity at an intrapsychic and interpersonal level, the researcher concludes that “while these young men may have successfully negotiated and integrated their identity at the intrapsychic level, the continuing denial and rejection by their families means the process is incomplete, and interpersonally they remain conflicted” and therefore, “achieving intrapsychic coherence and being comfortable in themselves with their dual identities, does not necessarily lead to interpersonal coherence” (Anonymous, 2015, p. 11).

Even though the person does not hold negative feelings like guilt, they may end up sharing some information in slower tempos than those dictated by the Western coming out model. In order to prevent a potential interpersonal and intrapsychic conflict: “homosexuals anticipating this possibility [negative effects of coming out] attempt a partial disclosure over a period of time” (Siraj, 2011, p. 110).

This partial disclosure is contained through two methods: “compartmentalization and collusion” (Siraj, 2011). Compartmentalisation involves separating the sexual and religious identities into areas where one is recognised as queer and others where it is hidden (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Collusion, on the other hand, involves sharing this information with one to three people, usually family, and often a sibling as a sort of testing the waters prior to telling the parents, who pose a bigger emotional risk (Siraj, 2011, p. 110).

A central element in coming out, from a Foucauldian perspective, is the incitement to discourse through confession mechanisms. From this perspective, the Western man is a confessing animal that seeks liberation through confession by looking for the truth in himself through a process of self-examination, which culminates in the finding of one’s true sexual identity, confessing it to oneself and ultimately to others (Foucault, 1986).

In this line, and complementary to the ideas of partial disclosure, compartmentalisation and collusion, a relevant strategy “consists of transmitting the information without explicitly verbalizing it, thereby avoiding open conflict and preserving family and community ties” while enabling to “develop their emotions and sexuality” (Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021, pp. 9-10).

The respondents in that research also provided a differing understanding between the private and public spheres:

*While in western societies there is an increasing effort to make public, and even exhibit [...] in the milieu of Muslim migrants there is a clear division between what is public and what is private, which leaves a space to transgress the norms without questioning the sense of belonging* (Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021, p. 10).

Both the “distinction between the public and private sphere and the management of information” (Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021, p. 14) are considered by the authors hybrid strategies in line with the hybrid identities that their respondents embody.

## 2.8. Inner level

The paradigmatic LGBT+ identities are above all white and secular, weaved in human rights discursive rhetorical resources and Western supremacism. This leaves little space for the identity development of racialised and religious queers within its parameters. This statement does not intend to suggest that the claim for LGBT+ rights imbricated in these identities should be dismissed, but rather that it should be completed to avoid generating exclusions. Identity struggles may arise from the difficulty of defining oneself in those terms, potentially because it involves acting in a specific manner that might not concur with their religious or cultural terms: “the framework for personal behaviour that Islam has given them is not compatible with the dominant values of the wider LGBT+ community” (Shannahan, 2009, p. 74). What becomes clear is that detaching homosexuality and lesbianism from the exclusive link to Western culture is a necessity, not only in the public sphere of policy and activism but in the personal sphere, given that the struggle plays out in the intimacy of Muslim queers.

On the one hand, lesbian Muslim experiences might lead to ‘minority stress’, which occurs when a person experiences a conflict between the values of society and their lived experience (Meyer, 2003). This is shaped by “stress processes, including experiences of prejudice, expectations of rejection, hiding, concealing and internalized homophobia” (Meyer, 2003, p. 674). Intersectionality might help understand the effects of minority stress effects on the lived experiences of queer people, however, there is not substantial research available (Ghabrial, 2017, p. 44).

Briefly, another aspect borrowed from psychology that adds to the understanding of the lived experiences of lesbian Muslims is the concept of ‘psychological coherence’ that authors have used to learn about LGBT+ Muslims (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Anonymous, 2015) and that derives from the Identity Process Theory (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). In Breakwell’s view, the following identity principles guide the processes involved in identity structure: “continuity across time and situation [continuity], uniqueness or distinctiveness from others [distinctiveness], feeling confident and in control of one’s life [self-efficacy] and feelings of personal worth or social value [self-esteem]” (Breakwell in Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 851). Importantly enough, there is also “belonging, which refers to the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people, and meaning, which refers to the need to find significance

and purpose in one's life" (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 851). These authors add the 'psychological coherence' principle, which refers to the need for compatibility and coherence between pre-existing identities, i.e., between different constituent elements of the self-concept (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 865).

Also, when tackling sexual identity development, understanding it through stages (awareness, exploring, integrating) might be an option, but there is a "inadequate amount of knowledge and understanding on sexual identity development of lesbian women and less of women of colour" (Siraj, 2016, p. 190) that prevents us from confirming that lesbian Muslims go through these stages.

Whereas I do not intend to offer an elaborate psychological analysis, introducing these concepts might be helpful to recognise aspects that otherwise could go unnoticed. The importance of these topics in the sphere of the social is self-evident. As an example, Ghabrial points out how more research is needed to explore the ways in which self-esteem and anxiety might be linked to come out stress, essentially grounded on societal expectations, for LGBTQ-POC people (2017, p. 52).

#### 2.8.1. Renewing the relationship with God

There are many studies that explain that queer Muslims use faith as a framework from which to gain understanding of their sexuality and that document the desire and drive to reconnect faith and sexuality. In this scenario, "self-acceptance" and embracing faith are, in fact, "complementary not contradictory" (Siraj, 2016, p. 193).

Strengthening the faith entails a shift from organised religion and a community-based religious practice to an individual experience of religion (Robinson, 2009). The connection to God is reinforced and religious belief and practices become individualised and framed by a personal reading of the Quran and the sunnah as well as their experiences. Drawing from queer interpretations of the scriptures and exercising their own *ijtihad* is a cornerstone for many queer Muslims in coming to terms with their sexuality. Especially, the re-reading of the story of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah provides ease to many believers. In other words, spirituality is maintained but organised religion is set aside in pro of the creation of "an individual belief system, which allows her [the interviewee] to have a more personal and intimate relationship with God" (Siraj, 2011, p. 117).



The basis of this renewed relation to their faith is usually the assurance that God would not reject them for he created them that way. Precisely, seeing lesbianism as innate, is also what in Siraj's words "helps bridge the difference between faith and sexuality and comfort and contentment" (Siraj, 2016, p. 198) and, as we have mentioned in the subsection "2.3 Lesbianism in Islam", marks the difference between sentiment and behaviour (Anonymous, 2015; Yip, 2007).

The importance of marriage in this process has yet to be explored in depth, what is known is that it holds an important position in their understanding of religion. Shannahan gets the "sense that they are more concerned about their contractual relationships conforming to (individual interpretations of) Allah's will, over and above the British government's" (2009, p. 73).

Another aspect to highlight is that traditional frameworks are reworked and embraced regarding the adherence to the traditional legitimacy/illegitimacy paradigm. For example, by distinguishing "between casual encounters and meaningful relationships" while offering "scripturally-supported arguments as justification" (Shannahan, 2009, p. 71). This also connects to the private/public and the sentiment/behaviour discussions above. The ways in which these elements impact the "myth of the happy celibate" (Yip, 2009, p. 3) affecting Muslim women need to be further explored, especially regarding lesbian sexual relations.

This approach agrees with the efforts made at the level of the so-called 'gender jihad' (Wadud, 2006) and shows the aim to work towards the democratisation of religious knowledge and authority. It also entails a reassembling of "the politics of spirituality/sexuality [...] (to a) religious individualism, a religiosity that prioritizes the authority of the self over that of the institution" (Yip, 2005, p. 278).

The Quran itself insists upon the spiritual equality of all believers, yet its aim is not to offer a comprehensive account of human sexuality. The task of integrating a positive idea of female sexual autonomy into Islam's vision of sexuality is left to readers (Shannahan, 2009, p. 64) and therefore, there is a huge ground for queer Muslims to explore.

### 3. Methodology

The research focus of this master's thesis required a qualitative approach, which helped grasp more comprehensively the experiences, attitudes and behaviours of participants. Moreover, "qualitative inquiry facilitates queer theory because it enables the exploration of difference, fluidity of identities, hierarchies and spaces" (Fotopoulou, 2012) and facilitates non-linearity in the research process. These elements agree with my approach to this research and its exploratory and inductive nature. Also, quantitative data on this issue is non-existent and I do not have the capacity to generate it.

Two techniques were conducted: a literature review and interviews. In relation to the latter, semi-structured in-depth interviews have been used to retrieve information. The interviews were based on a script structured in four interrelated sections: sexuality, religion, discrimination, and strategies. It allowed for enough flexibility to grasp spontaneous speech, similar to the rhythm of an informal conversation. It also allowed to introduce new questions and explore relevant themes for the participants that were not considered or foreseen during the design of the script. The paths and outcomes of the interviews were constructed jointly, and I believe this led to a partial destabilisation of the multiple intersecting hierarchies that were present in each interview. After the interviews, the information was literally transcribed, anonymised, and entered into an Excel matrix to process the data.

Furthermore, the information collected was treated with confidentiality, identity was protected and the people participating were informed of the features of the study through an informative paper that accompanied the informed consent they were asked to sign<sup>4</sup>. Before the interview, conditions such as the place of the interview, the format, or whether it could be recorded were agreed and the informed consent was elaborated after that.

In total, I conducted four interviews between the months of April and May. Interviewees were sought according to the following criteria: (1) women who identified as lesbian, bisexual, non-heterosexual, queer, or simply desired other women and (2) who had a Muslim background, meaning they were raised in, at least a partial, Muslim environment, such as their family.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Annex I for the model of the informed consent and the informative paper.

I tried to follow a diversity criterion in the profiles of the respondents regarding origin, education, migrant background, sexual identification, etc. However, as scholars on this theme have previously noted, lesbian Muslims are a “hidden and inaccessible population” (Siraj, 2012, p. 455), and finding female participants is not an easy task (Abraham, 2009; Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021; Yip, 2003). Accordingly, finding respondents proved a challenge and I did not have the chance to be selective and exclude potential respondents. As a result, the number of interviews is unrepresentative of the group but is considered sufficient given the aforementioned and bearing in mind the exploratory nature of this research.

The participants were recruited in four ways. Firstly, through friends, family, and acquaintances, which resulted in one interview. Then, through social media and the contact of associations, which resulted in another one. Finally, through Tinder, which provided the last two. Although I was hesitant about the ethics to use this last method at first, Koc’s research on Grindr as a recruitment tool (2016) provided key theoretical and practical information on this method, which the author believes is likely to become very common in research on hidden groups. I especially liked that Tinder allowed participants to self-select themselves and ultimately that it increased the variability in the sample. Finally, while the ‘snowball effect’ was the desired outcome of each agreed interview, the participants were generally isolated from other women under the same circumstances.

Before presenting the results of the interviews in the next section, I will briefly introduce the research participants. The names are pseudonyms chosen bearing in mind geographical origins and connotations and phonematic similarity:

- Reda is in her early 30s, born and raised in Tunisia, PhD in the area of humanities, living on her own in a medium-size city near Barcelona.
- Yasira is in her early 20s, born and raised in Catalonia, of Moroccan background, working as an administrative assistant and living in a medium-size city near Barcelona with her parents and siblings.
- Nadia is in her late 20s, born and raised in Catalonia, of Gambian/Catalan background, studying a university degree in the area of social intervention, working and living in a very small town near Barcelona where she was raised and now lives in with her partner.

- Iris is in her late 20s, born in Morocco, raised in Catalonia from an early age, trainee lawyer, working in Barcelona and living in a small town in the interior near Barcelona with her parents and siblings.

An important bias in the sample to address is that being open or known to be homosexual is a constitutive element of the homosexual community's identity, which "raises the question of who has 'the resources to be open about their sexual orientation'" (Barret & Pollack in Abraham, 2009, p. 81). Therefore, the methods used to recruit the participants inevitably reproduced some exclusions.

With reference to the categories used, McCall's intra-categorical approach was useful, a point between rejecting categories (anti) or using them strategically (inter). Thus, even though I have used traditional categories from the beginning, I have tried to grasp the complexity of the lived experiences within such groups (McCall, 2005). Fotopoulou claims that this approach "reflects the idea that in order to understand the lived experiences of subordinate groups, we have to look at the social settings where oppression intersects" (2012, p. 22). Based on this idea, their discourses become useful for this task since they can account for subjectivity in the experiences of inequality. I concur that this position is not an assertion of the superiority of subjective knowledge but "an assertion that the voices of those being theorised are legitimate and need to be heard alongside the equally legitimate voices of those doing the theorising" (Gray & Cooke, 2018, p. 408).

In this line, the format of the interview allowed them to develop their own discourses, the challenge was then to narrow down the complexity of their social location and experience. This challenge also translated in how this research did not aim to classify respondents into singular identity labels but rather reveal intersectional dynamics through them and despite the protagonist dimensions of categories in the research, i.e., sexual orientation and religion. Moreover, the aim is not only to register the intersections of social differences but to point to hierarchies within their contexts to participate in their disruption.

## 4. Discussion

In this section, we will introduce the analysis of the interviews. In order to focus the exploration of the intersection lesbian-Muslim, we will rely heavily on the discourses of the respondents, and thus this section is structured around the themes that were most relevant to them during the interviews.

### 4.1. On sexuality

In this first subsection, we will introduce the diverse approaches in which respondents express their sexuality. Understanding the ways in which they name their sexuality will give us an insight into how they think and understand it.

Firstly, Reda is a Tunisian young woman who has been living in Catalonia for seven years. She was the only one who defined her sexuality straightforwardly and without hesitation: “I’d say a 100% lesbian, if that’s a thing”. Beyond the fact that she had never felt desire or had sexual relations with men, this identification is the result of a lengthy process that occurred while living in Tunisia: “it became a necessity to put into labels and to find your position with all those elements that you are living and interact with”. We could probably argue that the breach in the ‘continuity’ principle (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) brought about this “necessity” that was eventually solved. Moreover, as Rahman (2015) argues, the Western historical conceptualisation of the lesbian identity can be a resource but not a blueprint for developing queer identities in non-Western cultures. This is clear in Reda’s case because even though her identity as a lesbian was the culmination of a process, and her understanding of the label can resonate with the Western conceptualisation of the lesbian, her lesbian identity dislodges the predominant Western approach, primarily due to the importance of faith, in which we will delve later.

While this commitment was reassuring for Reda, it did exactly the opposite for Yasira, a woman in her early twenties, born in Catalonia and living with her parents and siblings in a medium-size city. For Yasira, the label lesbian “tiene un peso” that she did not want or could not take: “etiquetarme [as a lesbian] haría que me sintiera mal, con una responsabilidad”. This responsibility is concerned with the public dimension of identifying as a lesbian. In her case, identification would necessarily have consequences in her public life, since it would oblige her to take decisions that involved verbalising it and acting upon it on her environment. The meanings that Yasira attached to identifying with a queer identity align more with a Western notion of sexual identity -inevitably tied

to a coming out and to producing big changes in one's environment- in contrast to Reda's, for whom it had personal, inner consequences.

This rejection to the label lesbian and the prioritisation of a fluid approach to sexuality was also the case for the other respondents, even if their reasons were varied. Nadia expressed a clear rejection of identity labels: "M'agraden les persones. M'he enamorat de noies, nois, gent que no es considerava res, m'és igual si té penis o vagina. No m'agrada etiquetar-me". She considered labels to be limiting. In general, her discourse was very political, informed by postmodern approaches to relationships and identities. On the other hand, it also connects to the findings of other authors on queer Muslims for whom identifying with labels is not that relevant (Manalansan IV, 2006; Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Marti Plademunt, 2021; Ghabrial, 2017).

Moreover, Iris and Nadia demonstrated resistance to the word 'bisexual' for being too narrowing. Despite being critical or not totally comfortable with it, Nadia used it to signify her experience and communicate it to me. Similarly, all of them used these categories throughout the interview and the persistent use of 'lesbian' by Yasira was especially notable.

This contrasts with their assurance when talking about their sexuality publicly: "yo tengo muy claro cómo lo nombro a mi alrededor [heterosexual]" or "si hagués de dir alguna cosa diria heterosexual". There is an evident separation between how they think and reflect on their sexuality privately and how they convey it publicly. Ultimately, using labels was functional, but could not grasp their personal concerns, reflections, and experiences, which unfolded in their intimacy. This was the case for Iris, a young woman who migrated from Morocco as a toddler, lives with her family in a medium-size city and was just starting to question her sexuality: "el que em quadra, el que jo sento és la gent que diu que 'vale no ets hetero o bisexual', cinquanta-cinquanta (...) que sigui gradual". This personal interpretation does not conform to identity labels with fixed boundaries. Still, the fluidity could lead to uncertainty and make her worry: "potser m'estic autoenganyant per no posar-me una etiqueta". Her wondering was not conflicting until the need for labelling appeared. This quote also conveys a general belief that failing to adhere to a label means deceiving oneself and failing since there is always an inner truth to be found.

Thus, the discourse on being dishonest can be connected to that of finding your true self. This was important for Yasira: “tampoco sabría decirte cual es mi verdadero yo”. We should not venture to say whether these discourses are solely the result of a Western understanding of sexuality. It is possible that the values that they highlighted from their religious and cultural backgrounds, such as honesty, are intertwined. In any case, the pressure to unveil this true self by labelling or naming their sexual identity becomes clear when Yasira concludes: “seguramente lo podría llegar a etiquetar pero no quiero, me da miedo ver la realidad”.

Another element that arose during the interviews was related to the origin of their desire. For three respondents, there was an innate component to liking other women: “I think it’s within you (...) good or bad or not, but still there”. This opinion generated varying effects on the respondents that will be explored in the last subsection.

In contrast, Nadia, a young woman raised Muslim by her Gambian father but currently an atheist, thought that sexuality was a construction, even though she relied on essentialist language: “tothom neix bisexual, però a mida que creixes et posen dins d’una caixa”. It is interesting to consider how participants make use of the discursive resources available in their contexts to make sense of their sexuality even when they are not totally consistent. In this vein, I will be careful when assuming meanings of the words and identity labels that the respondents use even if I am employing the identity labels myself.

Returning to the point on essentialism, it must be said that it is not an unequivocal idea for the three Muslim respondents. Iris merges these visions considering that there is enough ground for fluidity within not-so static sexual identities:

*No crec que es pugui realment controlar (...) crec que és innat (...) [but] crec que ho pots desenvolupar en diferents punts de la teva vida, pot ser que t'atreuin més uns atributs a nivell de persona o certes connexions.*

There is another layer to this discussion, which relates to Shannahan (2009) findings on the difference presented by her respondents between innate sexuality and sexual acts, in accordance with Islamic traditional views. The Muslim participants in this study all pointed at a gap between desire and behaviour, despite having different approaches to it. For Yasira, resisting lesbian behaviour was part of her “libre albedrío” and she judged herself harshly because of her past and potential future sexual experiences with women. The approach to desire in Iris’ quote above was combined with self-controlling behaviour

that seeped through the interview and that lessened the possibilities of engaging in relations with other women. Contrary to these narratives, for Reda, the innatism of her desire is precisely what legitimised her lesbian behaviour and provided a compass for her free will.

Finally, given that we have been locating some elements around how they understand their sexual identity and sexuality, I will briefly comment on their gender identity. In general, their identification as women was strong while they also claimed to resist the gender roles associated with them. In terms of their gender expression, they did not feel especially constrained by feminine norms, but Yasira expressed how she would want to present herself with elements that have been stereotypically associated with lesbians if she was 'out'.

#### **4.2. Visibility and coming out**

Being visible and coming out were central points in the discourses around the respondents' experience of sexuality. The degree to which their environment was aware of their sexual orientation varied from all/some friends and/or some family members to nobody. The above reflections on naming one's sexuality come into play, taking into account that coming out becomes the critical point of naming one's sexuality. We can identify multiple dimensions that can be explored from here, especially in terms of the interwoven processes of verbalising it and how that overlaps with inner processes of understanding it personally. This section will provide a general overview of their approaches to coming out and introduce the main issues raised in the conceptual framework about the emotional consequences of it, as well as the strategies to circumvent the Western model of coming out, which played a major role in the interviews.

Firstly, the notion of the 'decontextualised fetish' of coming out, as expressed by El-Tayeb, gains strength in the discourses of the queer respondents who dismantle the assemblages that sustain the coming out as the central element of the "normative, healthy and desirable LGBT identity" (El-Tayeb, 2012, p. 86). The false promises of the coming out process were summed up by Nadia: "és com que et surten ales i tots els problemes s'arreglen (...) i no" and questioned the benefits of that decision: "després tot s'estabilitza i no et sents millor que si no ho haguessis dit". While coming out was not a "viable option" (Ghabrial, 2017, p. 52) for the respondents, they developed several strategies to circumvent or go through the coming out.



This does not mean that they all had positive experiences around this topic: Yasira, for instance, was struggling with this issue. She used a vocabulary traditionally linked to the coming out, such as “secret”, “hide”, “deceive”, “negate”, “conceal”, to describe her queer experience, which reminds of Siraj’s respondent, who felt trapped in a closet in which isolation and secrecy were central elements (2011, p. 105). However, although she was having mixed thoughts and feelings, we should be careful in stating that this caused her lesbophobia, which is Siraj’s conclusion in the research. And while we will later come back to the emotions that desiring women triggered in the context of her family and religious orientation, we must note that Yasira used the three exact words that Siraj believed to be the pillars of the lesbian Muslim closet: “guilt”, “shame” and “fear”, or “culpa”, “vergüenza” and “miedo”.

Even if the participants seldom used vocabulary associated to secrecy, they were ambivalent about whether they considered they were hiding their sexuality. Keeping that information to themselves was part of the personal way they chose to manage information between two clearly differentiated spheres: the public and the private, of equal importance to them. Under this light, not coming out does not equal to hiding. Following Coll-Planas, Garcia-Romeral, & Martí Plademunt (2021), we could say that there was indeed a division between what is public and private and no desire to make public or even less exhibit their sexuality.

Notwithstanding, due to their gender and the greater social control that being a woman entails, the possibilities for mobility between the public-private spheres were scarce, especially in the cases where respondents lived with their families. Mobility applies to the physical aspect but also to the emotional aspect since the family responsibilities and fulfilment of expectations could not be so easily separated. In this line, Nadia and Reda, who did not live with their families, were more mobile between spheres, which also provided greater room to experiment with their sexuality. Accordingly, the size of their municipality and the greater or lesser social control derived from it were also determining factors in how they experienced their sexuality. Living in bigger cities or away from their families made it easier for them to separate the private from the public.

Alternatively, they mostly considered that the public display of their sexuality did not align with the way they experienced their sexuality. The disinterest varied from indifference to a straightforward refusal concerning visibility. Reda contested the link between coming out and the goal of achieving visibility “[coming out] is important for

yourself, not for the visibility but for yourself”. She was critical of visibility, which apart from the clear Western dimension, soon added a gender dimension: to her, men had a natural drive that pined to be visible: “[men] need to show it publicly (...) it’s by nature regardless of Arab, Muslim or whatever (...) they live active socially”.

Generally, their families did not know about their sexual orientation and the reasons the women provided were mainly wanting to avoid any suffering to their parents and siblings. When weighting the implications of such action, the benefits were scarce. Still, not verbalising it did not mean that their families did not know. These issues will be explored in depth in the following subsection given that the family is the main area with whom they conducted strategies like collusion, compartmentalisation or transmission of information without verbalising.

Moreover, for the respondents, the act itself of making others know and of verbalising their queer sexuality is more pressing when it comes to their friends. For instance, the ones who had friends with whom they could share this part of their life, like Nadia, relativised the importance of the family knowing and were more at ease. In contrast, Yasira struggled about not being able to share this information with her group of friends due to shame. There might be more limitations to sharing their sexuality with friends: “I can share with them everything I want but I know girls who can’t do that because they have friends who will stop being their friends if they know they have this kind of sexual orientations” (Reda).

Moreover, while in Siraj study (2011) not coming out entailed a separation from other queers, which in turn created distance with family and friends, in this instance we find that, even if not “out”, the respondents had significant connections to other queers regardless of their cultural background, which partially eased isolation.

The women framed coming out as an inner process to oneself that started and finished with them in the centre and that is very much in accordance with that of ‘psychological coherence’ (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). For them, this process could also entail a partial disclosure to friends over time. This is in line with an anonymous study that concluded that even though intrapsychic coherence may be achieved by these “dual identities”, the process might not be completed since interpersonal coherence must also be gained (Anonymous, 2015). Nonetheless, family may not be a unique actor with whom this interpersonal coherence can be achieved.

Lastly, “freedom” was a concept repeatedly used by the respondents when talking about the coming out, the closet and the private-public boundaries. I believe it is interesting to note that freedom and visibility are not associated but rather opposite. In the case of Yasira, who was experiencing her sexuality with anxiety, she found ease and freedom when she thought about the possibilities of a fake marriage: building a façade strong enough to protect the bond with her Muslim community publicly while giving her enough room to have relations with women in her private life.

### **4.3. The families**

Family was the main site of struggle for the respondents and even though they came from different cultural origins, they all agreed that for Muslims family is highly regarded. Moreover, the migrant factor gave more weight to family bonds and in some cases put pressure to “intergenerational expectations of reciprocity” with migrant families who considered queerness a “breach of the intergenerational contract” (Barglowski, Amelina, & Bilecen, 2017, p. 13). For many, close or extended family is the principal connection they hold with the religious community and the communal aspects of religion tend to concentrate in the family unit.

As said earlier, living in the family house posed limitations to engaging in sexual or emotional relations with women. The two respondents who lived on their own conceded that it was a determining factor to experience their sexuality more freely. In the case of Nadia, she was in a “hierarchical polyamorous relationship” with a man with whom she lived, meaning she had a central relationship with her partner but together or separately engaged in other sexual or emotional relationships of lesser importance. She highly regarded the intimacy that her new household offered, which allowed building relationships with other women in a deeper way that she could before in the context of the family household.

That situation did not involve breaking with their family bonds. For example, Reda, who was dating women and lived on her own in a medium-size city had a solid relationship with their parents with whom she talked very often.

When asked about whether their family knew about their sexuality, there were two cases: they had no clue and could not even picture it or they were “in denial”, in Reda’s case.

The respondents had “tested the waters” several times, mainly by discussing films or series and stories of fellow queer Muslim acquaintances and neighbours: “I tested that they [her parents] did not accept [lesbianism], not on me obviously but when you see it on TV”. While sometimes their non-acceptance was straightforward, other times it could bring confusion, especially for Iris and Yasira, whose families demonstrated some degree of tolerance, especially the mothers, not only to other queer people but to queer Muslim people.

Following Siraj’s reflections on ‘collusion’ (2011), this strategy was attempted with siblings with successful and failed outcomes. In the latter, the bad reception of the sibling prevented the respondent from disclosing more information to the rest of the family. Additionally, regarding sibling relationships, another trend was observed in which the partial disclosure of their sexuality to the parents was attempted but in relation to a queer sibling. Their undisclosed queer sexuality made them allies for younger non-normative siblings. Yasira provided a relevant example of this: in the homonormative context of her household, she uses her age and heterosexual privilege to contest normativity and protect a younger sister who “wants to become a boy”. The role as allies could take subtle forms, for example, sharing social media regarding queer Muslims with other family members or more directly questioning claims based on homonegative interpretations of the Quran. Nonetheless, in Yasira’s case she worried this might expose the sibling too much.

As expressed in the above section, there is a key principle that guides the behaviours and actions of the respondents in relation to their families: not provoking suffering to their parents. Reda explains it as follows: “it is a culture and a religious thing; you have to be obedient [...] not worry them or sadden them in any way”. The alleged main effect of the parents knowing about their sexuality would be in all cases ostracism from their families; in fact, all of them considered this the main challenge for Muslim queer women in general.

For the families and mainly parents who were oblivious to this reality, the respondents considered that the personal cost that such kind of information could have on them was too high. Nadia explains: “me mare sempre diu: com tu o te germana sigueu lesbianes, al papa li dona algo” and Yasira says “les podría afectar a la salud mental, se mueren”. Under this light, the idea that they conveyed of duty and respect for their parents is charged with more meaning, given that not letting them know was part of their duty as daughters to protect them.

It was also enlightening how, when talking about their families, some respondents raised the point of them being “tolerant” in relation to transgressing Islamic norms. While in some of the respondents’ households the possibility of them having sex outside marriage or drinking was accepted or tolerated to some degree, lesbianism is where most drew the line. In an added twist, allegedly meeting or talking to men had served as an excuse for them to engage in relationships with women. For Yasira, she first used this pretext when she was a teenager and not “aware” of her lesbian desire although she still managed to foresee and circumvent the suspicion from her parents. The fact that lesbian Muslims are not that present in the public debate (Estomba Giménez, 2018) does not mean that families in Catalonia, like Yasira’s, or in their origin country, like Reda’s, do not suspect of lesbianism, but rather that the strategies, tensions and resolutions occur in more private spaces.

One consequence of the family’s homonegativity was the impossibility for the respondents to imagine having an emotional stable relationship with a woman: “era tot un cercle, mai m’he plantejat res seriós amb una noia per tot el que comportaria a nivell familiar, posant a me mare enmig i passant-ho malament” (Nadia). While the family’s opinion was highly regarded and undoubtedly impacted on how they approached their sexuality, the more practising Muslims stressed that the main barrier for acceptance was not in the exterior, in the family, but rather in themselves: “nunca he pensado en tener ninguna pareja mujer, jamás nunca es que vamos nunca se me ha pasado por la cabeza es como negativo, imposible” (Yasira). Reda, who had been the only one to ever have long-term female partners, had undergone an acceptance process that will be addressed in the last subsection. Her experience of compartmentalising and not sharing her relationships and lesbianism with her family for years contrasted with the unexperienced claims of the other respondents, who agreed that they would want to make their parents participants of their imagined relationship with a woman if they ever fell in love.

#### **4.4. The constant of marriage**

The perspective of marriage imbued the possibilities that most respondents envisioned for their futures, it was common to have the idea of marrying influence other decisions in their lives. In fact, marriage affects the lives of Muslims in several ways and has attached several social obligations including rights and duties related to personal, family and community life (Bouhdiba, 1998).

Iris' family was not particularly sex negative as long as they lived according to the politics of 'don't ask, don't tell' (Jivraj, Jong, & Tauquir, 2003). Moving out of the family household could risk that but she used her job, as Reda had used her studies, to justify that decision:

*quan era més jove i deia d'anar a viure a Barcelona era com 'què dius! com has de marxar de te casa?' (...) a Marroc marxés de casa dels teus pares per anar amb el teu home, però ara crec que ja s'ha anat fent a la idea (...) és com l'excusa [working in Barcelona and having long commutes] no és com que soc una fresca i vulgui parrandeo.*

At this point, we can identify an education component since they both had promising high-paying careers ahead of them.

Accepting that their daughters could leave the house for other reasons than marrying entailed that they conceded that marriage would be delayed: “me mare ha fet un treball de deconstrucció heavy per tant ella entén que jo no em vulgui casar jove i em diu que ole jo” (Iris). Nevertheless, the families assumed that the respondents would marry in the future.

In contrast, sometimes the pressure to marry or have children could provoke a separation from the extended Muslim family, as it was the case with Nadia, who had chosen to distance herself from her Gambian relatives and who was severely criticised by her father since he did not agree with her living together with a man she was not married to.

For Yasira, who was engaged to a Muslim man, marrying was a religious and family duty:

*cuando eres musulmana tienes que tener una pareja, obviamente tiene que ser un hombre, te tienes que prometer, al tiempo casarte y todas esas cosas que se hacen porque la religión lo dice así y punto entonces pues conocí a un chico y (...) estoy prometida (...) tampoco es que haya amor, nos queremos porque también él es una persona que (...) me respeta. Lo voy a ocultar [being queer] y ya al final pues voy a estar con una pareja que es un hombre.*

She had an outright idea of what her religion said about marriage and accepted it as a step in her lifepath that would make her a better Muslim (Siraj, 2011). Her discourse replicated

that of the halal-nikah, haram-zina duality<sup>5</sup> (Shannahan, 2009), being engaged provided an institutional framework for sexual relations that made her feel better because their parents believed that children could be underway. The way she talked about her marriage conveyed an inescapability she accepted piously as she reckoned to be already married under the eyes of God. Still, this was momentarily countered by her admitting that she was internally rethinking her marriage. She was indeed in a self-contradictory situation and while she was convinced that marrying this man was the only step forward, doubt arose when she pictured ideal futures that would fulfil her, such as creating her ideal family, on her own or with a woman, far away.

All in all, her contradictions are summed up in two strong elements. Firstly, while it was precisely religion what led to that engagement, it was her faith what made her question it since she believed she was “hiding” and “lying” about her true self. Secondly, getting married would give her freedom and power within her family, and that was appealing as she could be more influential in her sister’s upbringing, especially as her parents got older: “ya no puedo luchar por eso y tampoco quiero luchar (...) y si puedo hacer algo por mi hermana pues es como luchar”.

On the other hand, Reda brings up the possibility of having a fake marriage, which she claims is usual:

*the thing that all lesbians and gay men do in Arab countries which is a gay man marries a lesbian to avoid pressure from everyone and each one of them lives their lives.*

She believes it is a form of betraying herself, so she would never do it. This contrasts with Yasira’s willingness to fake a marriage if given the option.

Although they both were practising Muslims, Yasira was closer to a religious community than Reda, who lived religion individually and according to her own personal beliefs. Likewise, Reda was once engaged to a woman but eventually it did not work out, among other reasons because of the following:

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<sup>5</sup> As defined in subsection “2.3.1. Women’s sexuality and gender”.

*lying to them [her parents] about why I am single or why I'm not married to a man is one thing but it's another thing to have a family or be married to a woman and not sharing that with them.*

As in Yasira's case, these issues are not black and white, and exerting agency is not the opposite of complying with familiar and communal expectations, but are rather interwoven with personal expectations, cultural upbringing and usually a strong holding to one's belief system.

#### **4.5. Perspectives on the religious community**

During the interviews, the respondents kept connecting their experience and Muslim backgrounds to more abstract thoughts about their religious backgrounds. Highlighting some recurrent topics in their discourse can be useful to locate their arguments and the roots and meanings of their resistances.

An issue that respondents brought up were the unclear boundaries of culture and religion and the association of homonegativity to one or the other. Generally, they claimed that homonegativity was cultural rather than religious.

In this vein, all respondents demonstrated an evolutionist approach to their own cultures. They believed that people from the same cultural origin and Muslim backgrounds thought about lesbianism “com vint anys enrere en relació a com estem en el nostre entorn, tu i jo a Catalunya (...) falta una mica donar-li una volta, madurar-ho” (Iris) or “van deu mil passes enrere (...) és un tema cultural completament de no avançar” (Nadia) following Western logic and denoting a clear differentiation between them, the origin community, and us, Catalans, regarding homonegativity.

Identification and disidentification work in complex ways. They also perceived differences among countries and stereotypes of Muslims from different cultures abounded at times understood as “clearly delineable wholes” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 4): “crec que és un tema de cultura [homonegativity], crec que la cultura magrebina, aràbiga, és molt més agressiva que la negra fosca” (Nadia) or mixed the two arguments: “Tunisian society, the most advanced society in the Arab world, you can compare it to your parents, my generation would be the generation from your parents” (Reda).

Emphasising culture allowed Iris to question the authority of homonegative claims by reading them in the context of sexist societies: “pots buscar-li la interpretació religiosa



però és més cultural (...) i més venint d'homes (...) per reafirmar la teva masculinitat has de rajar dels homosexuals”.

We find a notable exception:

*tú aparte de sentirte culpable porque dices ‘mi pareja me dice esto, es porque él es religioso y él sabe que hay que hacer esto’ y al final pues es lo que te dice la religión, ya no es la cultura porque mucha gente dice ‘no, es que es cultura’, también es religión. En la religión una mujer no puede ser lesbiana porque no y es así.*

This quote by Yasira mirrors the homonegative discourses that some authors have identified in their research that underscored a generalised understanding among Muslims by which Islam, and more specifically the Quran, disapproves homosexuality outright (Mourchid, 2010; Siraj, 2012).

There was still another layer to the homonegativity that they perceived among other people of Muslim backgrounds. Nadia, referring to her Gambian family living in Catalonia, considered that holding on to homonegative standpoints was related to holding on to the roots “per culpa de la discriminació que pateixen aquí també”. This would partly relate to how the European citizenship and lesbianism is built antagonistically to the migrant communities and the potential backlash it entails.

#### **4.6. Islamophobia**

Islamophobia and racism are also two constants in the lives of the respondents. Insults and microaggressions had been a part of their lives, particularly in school, and they all called for the inclusion of “counter stories for anti-racist/Islamic pedagogies in schools” (Ali & Sonn, 2017, p. 12).

The centrality of islamophobia is summed up by Yasira “cuando me vaya a pelear con alguien (...) el primer paso va a ser meterse con mi religión o con mi etnia”, the phrase ‘puta mora’ was claimed to be the most “typical” insult that the two Moroccan women had received. The discourse of ‘all opinions must be respected’, very present nowadays due to the legitimisation in public political discourse of the far right, is very pervasive:

[a man in her current classroom while doing a presentation] *‘todos los musulmanes son terroristas’ y tú eres la única musulmana que hay en clase (...)*

*al final la tienes que respetar por mucho que no te parezca bien (...) directa y indirectamente me faltó al respeto pero ahí [in the presentation] no pone mi nombre (Yasira).*

The participants pointed out at other axes of discrimination that impacted their lives, some connected to the migrant process, such as language or class: “el fet de venir d'una família d'immigrants, el nivell socioeconòmic no és el més alt del món sobretot quan ets primera generació (...) a la uni es nota” (Iris). Regarding lesbianism, Reda mentioned the conflicting laws in terms of same-sex marriages: “in your country you will forever be single in the official documents because you cannot register your marriage and that makes me angry”. Another source of discrimination was being a woman, both within their religious communities and in the wider society. In fact, the boundaries between one and the other were blurred, and gendered expectations came from diverse sources for Iris and Yasira.

However, Iris used an interesting collocation: “en estar més integrada *no m'associen*, no crec que molta gent tingui en compte el meu origen”. She connects this ‘integration’ to the fact that she does not use the hijab, and thus she is not associated with the singular identity of the ‘Muslimwoman’ (cooke, 2008). They all noted how Muslim women wearing the hijab were “easy targets” compared to them and how they had learnt about experiences in which women wearing the veil were abused, insulted and ignored. Contrary to this, the behaviour from the cultural majority society towards the respondents was bettered when they discovered that they smoked, wore piercings or any other factor that in the Western mind is not Muslim but Western: “es como que ya no te ven tan mora” (Yasira).

This division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ permeated the way the majority society perceived their potential queerness. And here is where homonationalist dynamics arise.

Firstly, the Muslim woman in the West and from the Western perspective is fundamentally defined by her oppression by the ‘dangerous Muslim man’ (Rahman, 2010), her relation to that figure is constitutive and so is her heterosexuality: “tú ves una marroquí y jamás piensas que ella es lesbiana, imposible (...) lo primero que se te viene a la mente es pues hetero y se va a casar y va a tener hijos” (Yasira). The traditional gender roles attributed to Muslim women revolve around being mothers and wives and correspond to the figure of the ‘Third World Woman’ (Mohanty, 1991).

Consequently, this is incompatible with queerness: “jo no crec que siguin dos temes que la gent lligui massa (...) ‘haurà sortit de l'Islam’” (Iris), which reinforces how the two are construed as mutually exclusive (Rahman, 2015).

Furthermore, according to Yasira, a public lesbian Muslim would face further discrimination and islamophobia and deepened estrangement:

*incluso las personas que no son musulmanas dirían ‘pues mira la marroquí, la mora, al final bollera’, te discriminarían porque lo verían como extraño y a nosotros, a la sociedad de hoy en día las cosas extrañas nos asustan tanto que las acabamos discriminado, excluyendo, criticando.*

The realm of the queer belongs to the West, and Islam, condensing all the anti-Western elements, stands as the indisputable representative of homonegativity and conservatism (Mohammedali, Sudarto, & Zaharin, 2022), a conception that is then mirrored at each Muslim person: “you represent a culture that does not represent the accepted LGBT”.

Additionally, when talking about “the accepted LGBT”, which reminds us to Duggan’s ‘new homonormativity’, Reda brings nuance by hinting at a division. Beyond the accepted, white, Western, and secular LGBT+ subject, there are Muslim racialised abjects. Unveiling this counterpart challenges the hegemony of Massad’s ‘Gay International’ and provides alternative modes of being queer in the West beyond the universalist paradigm of the LGBT+. In this vein, Reda, who grew and developed her first queer community in Tunisia, is the one who discerned this alternative possibility of embodying the queer. In fact, it is representative of how Yasira, born in Catalonia and having a group of non-Muslim queer friends, refers to queer people with the singular “el colectivo” and in her discourse she replicates the politics of belonging and non-belonging and membership to this group. A striking example is when she mentions a female relative who fled Morocco “para formar parte del colectivo” demonstrating how geopolitics and borders are interwoven in the creation of this group.

#### **4.7. Islamophobia in focus**

We recognise two main grounds where the mutual exclusivity of these identities is more visible for the participants: their relations with the wider LGBT+ community and with their friends.

Regarding the first, Nadia categorically expressed:

*hi ha molta discriminació dins del col·lectiu (...) el racisme està molt present. Molts cops, les esferes LGTBI i feministes estan pensades per gent blanca (...) quan vas a aquests espais trobes gent del primer món, amb bones feines, no pateix discriminacions múltiples. Veig la seva realitat molt llunyana a la meua i prefereixo no involucrar-me.*

The normativity of these spaces marked by the “accepted LGBT” might prevent racialised women from engaging as they do not belong and there is no space for religious or cultural diversity (Massad, 2002). Another tangential aspect that caused disidentification with the LGBT community were gay men and their alleged public display of sexuality, in line with what religious respondents in Beekers & Schrijvers considered a trend towards a “sexualisation of society” (2020, p. 151). This alienated Reda, as seen in the above subsection, but also Nadia: “en general, el col·lectiu gai és molt promiscu i ho sexualitzen tot”.

Beyond religion and ethnicity, exclusion of other queers derives from a restrictive essentialist vision of the LGBT person:

*queer people could be very judgemental, not accepting, not tolerant to other people (...) at some point you decide ‘I have a crush on this boy’, what do you think who will judge you the most? all the fucking lesbians that you know: ‘you are changing’. (Reda)*

This example shows that committing to a label might bring about more social pressure related to a static vision of the sexual identities that consider fluidity a form of betrayal. This static vision of identity is reminiscent to that of some current Muslims who consider sexual dissidence a betrayal (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016).

Secondly, the estrangement of queer women can take place within groups of queer friends. This was the case for Yasira, who had a girlfriend group with at least three lesbians, “Catalan” and “Christian”, as she described them. Even if her friends were generally respectful and even did symbolic acts like fasting during Ramadan to show her support, the issues related to sexuality that concerned Yasira were of no concern to them and the limited framework by which they understood sexuality excluded Yasira. For example, sharing her fear of going to hell would be considered an attack to them or simply “surrealista”.

Simultaneously, there is a fear that ‘rescue narratives’ (Bracke, 2012) could be activated if the “amigas super hippies y liberales” knew about her desire for other women. Yasira believed that in an outburst they could not only tell but confront her parents: “[recreating the potential situation] ‘porque ella es una mujer libre, es lesbiana’”. Drawing from this, she also worried that her friends would consider her an icon: “que me tomaran como la ídola, la mora lesbiana, me muero, me da algo, por eso pues tampoco lo cuento, porque se les iría la pinza”. The urge of her friends to make her sexuality visible, put labels to it and even risk her relationship to her family deepens Yasira’s estrangement while ‘Western intervention’ is again justified under the flag of freedom and sexual emancipation, as religion hinders the achievement of the ‘secular liberal society’ (Bracke, 2012).

On the flip side, ‘westoxification’ claims (Yip, 2008) were explicitly verbalised by Iris when she imagined her father’s reaction to her queerness: “el meu pare diria ‘es que estáis aquí y os pensáis...’ jo crec que aniria per aquí”. While we could not extend this claim to the rest of the participant’s families, it is true that, except for Reda, the respondents themselves deemed lesbianism as essentially un-Muslim.

In any case, these circumstances place queer women from Muslim backgrounds in a position of non-belonging to the majority or minority community: there is no safe place (Bradshaw in Siraj, 2011). Reda compares the political or public side of this situation to that of feminism:

*like it happens with feminism, if you don’t say the same claims, it means you are not a real feminist and if you say the same claims, not because you want the West to accept you but because you believe that, you become like a traitor who’s just adopting the other’s without applying it to our culture. So, in both ways it’s not doable.*

The exclusivity of the use of ‘feminist’ or ‘lesbian’ by white LGBT or feminist groups and the co-optation of that by Arab and Islamic hegemonic discourses leaves no space in the mainstream for stories like the respondents’ or for a polyvocal ‘narrative view’ of cultures (Benhabib, 2002). Recurring to cooke’s question: “How can they [the Muslim women associated to the Muslimwoman] break free from the cage Islamists and neo-Orientalists have together erected around them?” (2008).

### *Dealing with the majority and the minority community: Nadia and Iris*

At this point, I will highlight specific parts of Nadia's and Iris' discourses that I believe are important to understanding their processes of navigating and binding or unbinding their sexuality and religious and cultural background.

For Iris, Islamophobia and racism had a very clear face and she had interiorised much of it “[her origin] et fa sentir com petita, et fa sentir indesitjable et fa sentir com si fessis pudor”. However, after going to university and meeting more and diverse people, she started considering that her origin was valuable and gained confidence in herself, which entailed the following:

*arriba un punt que dius 'it's who I am, I'm gonna own it', tens més seguretat en tu mateixa, 'what if I like a girl? what if I date someone from my same background?' perquè no ho veus com algo dolent.*

Iris' process of dealing with internalised islamophobia and racism brought about an eventual reunion with her cultural and religious origin that encouraged her. The renewed strength was connected to an increase in her feelings of personal and social value that relate to the 'self-esteem' identity principle (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Under this new light, she explored her sexuality from a non-judgmental standpoint that made her question previous ideas, such as desiring other women or having a relationship with an Arab-Muslim person, which she had avoided and rejected before.

This was not the case for Nadia: “em sentia que la persona que era havia estat creada per una cultura que no sento pròpia”. She felt she could not and did not want to fulfil her father's expectations and reacted to them by being very “radical”, as she put it, until she eventually became “una construcció antagònica al que volia el meu pare”. Her discourse revolved around the idea of “seeking freedom” and combined it with that of finding ease and tranquillity. For her, there was no freedom or ease within the framework of religion as her father and paternal family understood it and expected her to understand it. Consequently, she had made an effort to ameliorate her relationship with her father while rearranging its terms.

They described different processes of empowerment, in which their sexuality might not be the main driving force but was nevertheless affected and reinvented in the context of an inner and outer transformative phenomenon. The contrasting methods they employed

had nevertheless similar outcomes in the sexual terrain, primarily being more at ease with their sexual orientation and binding it with their religious orientation.

Both Reda and Yasira went or were going through a process where sexuality and faith were more intertwined, which will be addressed in the last section.

#### **4.8. Queer communities**

Beyond the circumstances within their immediate religious and cultural community and the majority community that we have addressed, the participants raised some topics that positively or negatively impacted the negotiation of their cultural and religious identities and their sexual identity. What they have in common is their reflexivity and proactive behaviour in this intersection. This subsection will tackle their connections with other queers and to a wider queer community in the context of transnational ways of identification.

##### **4.8.1. Lesbian constellations**

When addressing the exposure and connection of the participants to other queer realities and people, respondents traced back their queer-lesbian journeys. One of the main themes they identified were the ‘referents’, or more specifically the lack of them: “és molt heavy, repassant la meva infància, adolescència etcètera i no he tingut cap personatge [lesbian], incidental com a molt” (Iris). The lack of queer referents for Reda, who grew up in Tunisia when TV and other forms of media were censored, was similar to the respondents who were raised in Catalonia without Muslim and/or queer and lesbian referents. By contrast, they acknowledged a notable shift in the mainstream media marked by heightened presence of racialised queer women and lesbians, which Iris and Yasira noted as beneficial for their younger siblings. Queer referents in media served to signify some of the experiences that the respondents explained, the most notable example was provided by Yasira who talked about a scene from a famous Spanish TV series in which a lesbian Romani woman is exposed to her parents by other white women. This incident had a real impact on her as she imagined this same situation happening to her.

Globalisation and the development of the information technologies is another linked factor that can influence the development of their sexual identity by promoting alternative communities of belonging, meaningfully ‘imagined queer communities’ (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018). Reda confirms this: “[while growing up] you get exposed to more, and the

global community, the queer community, and your town or your city or whatever so you start getting into the culture of the queerness”.

Here, we see that the local and global elements are presented as intertwined and that the identification of Reda with the “culture of queerness” is not the mere outright summatory of the two but is rather “ruptured and ambiguous” (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018), given that the transnational is intrinsically entangled in her identification and not an outside element. It is possible that this understanding challenges the ‘queer as regulatory’ (Puar, 2007) since the particularities of religious and cultural diversity are constitutive to that “culture of queerness” and contest Western normativity.

The case for the other participants who had grown in Catalonia differs, but further evidence is needed to study their attachments, ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018) in the context of queer transnationalism. Still, their holding to a Muslim queer community is weak to non-existent. This is partly compensated by their social media content. Through Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, they are exposed to, and at times engage with, “activist” type of content made by racialised and/or Muslim queers. Otherwise, they probably would not reach these messages, for most were alienated from LGBT+ activist groups: “no em moc en aquests cercles” (Iris) and had no interest in joining one. This relates to Ali & Son research on Muslim women in Australia, who despite not demonstrating overt political action, “they challenged and resisted hegemonic discourses in ‘everyday ways” (Ali & Sonn, 2017, p. 12), as it was the case for the respondents.

Moving away from the intersection between sexual and religious diversity, most of the respondents’ queer friends, and particularly lesbians and queers, are non-Muslim. This impacts the way they view and experience their sexuality beyond the negative points raised in the above subsection. Yasira argued that her friends were referents to her and that the lesbian couple in the group made her reflect and rethink her own goals and expectations in a relationship. For Nadia, a lesbian group of friends can also be a safe space to experiment: “vaig fer un grup molt maco de lesbianes, on em vaig atrevir a experimentar, perquè les meves amigues d’infància abans eren molt heteros”. The experiences of queer friends can also mirror one’s experiences, despite the disparate cultural or religious origin:



*tengo una amiga que fue súper difícil [to explain that she had a girlfriend] porque los padres no lo aceptaban y sinceramente creo que hubieran sido las mismas situaciones y los mismos comentarios que yo que soy musulmana (Yasira).*

Interestingly, whereas at first they could not identify other queers in their families, when inquiring a little deeper, they brought up stories, gossips and rumours that circulated quietly in the families. Going back to the abovementioned example of Yasira's relative that fled Morocco: "por lo que oíamos (...) de los hermanos se llevaba unas palizas (...) pero ella se mantuvo en su línea (...) y creo, juraría entender que tiene pareja". This case introduces a common aspect among the stories they shared, which is that most resulted in breaking ties with the family; also, that "endings" tended to be unhappy or open in the best cases, in the sense that respondents did not know what had happened to them.

These negative stories could have a deterrent effect on the respondents in relation to their experience of sexuality. For instance, Iris is insecure about meeting other women in case her family finds out, and she mentions a story she heard from a Muslim neighbour: "a la mare li anaven com arribant coses (...) rumors, i es feia la loca (...) el germà el va pillar, el van fer fora de casa. Veus el que et dic que és moguda [engaging in a relationship with a woman]?".

Nevertheless, the visibility of some queer Muslim people, despite the "unhappy endings" and the deterrence effect, can set a precedent and foster the weaving of unexpected alliances. The fact that a Muslim gay neighbour of Yasira meets her mother still shocks the respondent due to her mother's alleged homonegativity: "él es gay y lo dice (...) mi madre (...) si se lo encuentra se toma un café con él y me sorprende la verdad (...) es bastante guay y a él le da igual lo que piense todo el mundo". According to her, the contact with him made her mother more empathetic to the discrimination of homosexuals.

The Western LGBT community, carrying the banner of visibility and imposing the coming out as the rule of conduct, receives legit criticism. However, it is undisputable that dismantling heteronormativity and giving more opportunities to queer women goes hand in hand with the visibility of referents like the latter and of positive stories.

#### 4.8.1. Building communities and forging relationships

Despite respondents being at different moments of their lives, the following quote invokes a recurrent idea that impressed the past, present and future possibilities of some

respondents to be or act according to their sexuality: “és tot un cercle, mai m’he plantejat res seriós amb una noia per tot el que comportaria” (Nadia) at a personal, familiar, or community level. In spite of the reluctance to engage in an emotional stable romantic relationship, there was a will to engage in other types of relationships, mainly sexual and amical with other queer women from the same religious and/or cultural background.

The most convenient and, for some participants, the only way to achieve that, was by dating apps. They highly regarded the anonymity and partial sense of control it provided them. However, the outcomes of such experiences were mixed.

The participants from small and medium-size municipalities who lived with their parents (Iris and Yasira) recognised that the main challenge for participating in these apps was the high level of social control they felt in their hometowns. Essentially, they were afraid that an acquaintance or friend of the family might encounter them and pass on the information. This obstacle was difficult to overcome since apps like Tinder use the location of the person, which inevitably exposed the participants to their surroundings:

*em fa vergonya, no vergonya però si algú em veu pensarà... i em ralla que després això tingui conseqüències a nivell personal, que això li arribi a me mare i sigui com una moguda per una cosa que per mi és insignificant. (Iris)*

Despite this, the two respondents had used these apps in punctual moments, applying all sorts of mechanisms to avoid being found. There were still risks:

*la primera vez que voy a mantener relaciones con una tía que no conozco de absolutamente nada, que conozco en una página web, te la juegas porque tampoco puedes poner ni tus fotos. (Yasira)*

Although her experience with that woman was positive, she felt it was too risky and chose to eliminate her accounts: “menos movidas porque solo falta que me encuentren ahí”.

The effects of social, communal and familiar control that have been tackled throughout this discussion impacted the opportunities they had to meet other lesbians or queer women. Exposing themselves in apps was challenging, but meeting them publicly was not even an option: “crec que em rajaria abans de quedar i de fer algo” (Iris). There was a general view that the people from the same religious and/or cultural backgrounds could be very controlling: “és una comunitat on a vegades hi ha molt de parlar de l’altre, bastant, a vegades et sents una mica observat” (Iris). In fact, using these apps in a different and

bigger city like Barcelona did not alleviate their concern because they worried that people from their same backgrounds could find them anyways.

Besides the mechanisms and prospects for meeting women that we have addressed, there was another dimension emphasised by the participants in relation to engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with fellow queers, which revolved around whether they looked for people sharing their cultural and/or religious background.

Firstly, the two Moroccan respondents noted that they were actively looking for people from the same background. As it has been mentioned in the case of Iris, she acknowledged it as part of her process of reconnecting with parts of her religious and cultural origin: “quan era més jove fugia locament de gent del meu mateix background i ara ho veig com un valor afegit” referring to both men and women. In a similar vein, Yasira was actively looking for women from her same backgrounds through these dating apps, where she gave away information about her origins in her profile hoping she would match with other women from her same background. Nonetheless, this strategy proved unsuccessful and, reflecting on it, she reckoned that maybe it was precisely because she gave away that type of information that fellow Arab or Muslim would not be interested in talking to her.

On the other side, Reda explicitly claimed to “avoid Arab lesbians”: “I don’t know how hard the other person worked on herself to arrive to a point where she is in peace, or it will be a recurrent drama”. Nadia agrees with this from an ex-Muslim perspective: “no vull tornar a tenir a prop els valors de la cultura musulmana, porten a moltes contradiccions per la pròpia persona. Per això no buscaria com a parella una persona musulmana”.

What we can distinguish from both standpoints is that the desire to engage with queer women with a shared religious or cultural backgrounds can be linked to a process of self-exploration or self-acceptance in the line of the research on gay Muslim men, in which the religious and cultural identity is eventually renegotiated to make room for homosexuality (Anonymous, 2015). This could be a long process in which lesbians or other queer women with a more stable and/or open non-normative sexual identity might not want to participate. The process of coming to terms and fusing two identities or dimensions of oneself that are deemed incompatible is knotty and challenging. Still, while it is not a linear and homogeneous process, it is true that the age difference between

respondents in the first case and in the second case placed them in different positions in relation to experiences and expectations from a relationship.

Apart from emotional and sexual relationships, they all attached great importance to having a network of queer people from their same background: “l'únic que puc parlar és el [name of a friend] que el seu pare és de Túnez (...) ens podem entendre a nivell de molts sentiments (...) si no ningú t'entén” (Nadia). In broad terms, it appears that the possibility of sharing could lessen the social and psychological stress derived from their minority status, or ‘minority stress’ (Meyer, 2003).

As has been explained so far, Reda was connected to a bigger queer community in her origin country: “[in] Tunisia (...) we had our own underground world, which is a huge community”. This contrasts again with the isolation that Catalan<sup>6</sup> respondents experienced regarding queer people from the same background. Meeting likeminded people is an element that Siraj (2016) underscores as central to coping with identity threat and binding the two identities since it reinforces the ‘belonging’ identity principle (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

The main limitation that Iris and Yasira identified to build this community was being able to verbalise issues about their sexual orientation to fellow Muslims. Yasira concluded:

*no conozco a ninguna mujer lesbiana musulmana, pero es que si lo hubiera sería casi imposible que me lo pudiera decir a mí siendo yo también musulmana y yo pues decírselo a ella siendo también ella musulmana, sería casi imposible.*

She would like to have a group of lesbian Muslim women in order to exchange family experiences and particularly to discuss issues of coming out, which were important for her: “si por ejemplo una de nosotras ya ha dado el paso tú ya tienes esa referente musulmana (...) porque yo ahora veo historias pero no hay nadie que se haya sentado conmigo”. Yasira wants tools, referents and resources to conjugate these conflicting parts of herself, which is particularly relevant in a moment when she is about to get married.

Iris introduced a class element to the configuration of these spaces. For her, engaging and building a Muslim queer community had a central educational and class component. She reflected on how she felt more related to the Muslims she had met through her work or

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<sup>6</sup> Iris and Yasira identified interchangeably as Catalan or Moroccan depending on the situation they described. They were first and second generation, respectively. Here, it is used to mark the differences in the context: Arab and Western.

studies because their interests and aspirations aligned more with hers. Even if not lesbian or queer, she believed their “openness” to other aspects of life made them more tolerant of lesbianism.

#### **4.9. Religion**

In this subsection we will deepen more on the two main dimensions that religion had for the respondents: spirituality and community. Connecting to Nadia’s and Iris’ personal processes of binding the religious and cultural backgrounds with sexuality, we will highlight Reda’s and Yasira’s cases in which faith was particularly crucial. After providing an overview of the general and community aspects of religion for all respondents, we will focus on them.

To start with, as we have seen throughout the discussion, Nadia detached from religion because of the pressures she felt to comply with a set of rules: “me’l van imposar i el vaig rebutjar”. Iris is not a practising Muslim and conveyed a certain degree of adaptation of Islamic norms to her world and inner view:

*I don't go out of my way per criticar una persona, intento no ser envejosa, no desitjar mal als altres, aquestes coses les compleixo a raja tabla però don't drink, ok but moderadament sí (...) puc entendre perquè no està bé però no crec que em perjudiqui a nivell espiritual.*

This approach was, to some extent, co-opted by the two other Muslim respondents. Moreover, all four respondents agreed on sharing Islamic values such as generosity and humility.

The community dimension of religion was largely rejected, which at times was inherited from their own family. Family ties to the religious community varied in each case. In general, the respondents despised how appearance mattered over real piety. According to them, the centrality of the performance of ‘Muslimness’ entailed that conflicted Muslims were progressively turning away from religion. In any case, there is a clear shift from communal practice to individual faith for the three Muslim respondents caused by, among other reasons, the hypocrisy they pointed out.

In gender terms, some referred to the paradox exposed by Shannahan (2009) about women being “equal before God yet different (not equal) before (hu)man”:

*muchas veces para que lo vean bonito lo intentamos adornar (...) la mujer es muy importante en la religión musulmana pero demasiado (...) en el Corán, el estatus de la mujer está en un nivel tan, tan alto y elevado, sí genial pero la mujer también tiene que estar en casa, tiene que cocinar tiene que taparse para no provocar al hombre, tiene que cuidar a sus hijos, no puede ir a la guerra. (Yasira)*

This was a turning point for Nadia. According to her experience: “la religió que jo conec (...) que no és igual que a Aràbia Saudita, Gàmbia (...) no va ni amb el feminisme ni amb la inclusió de col·lectius no heterobásicos, ho tinc clar”.

### ***Dealing with religion: Reda and Yasira***

Reda and Yasira were concerned about their faith and the negotiation of their sexuality within their religious identity. Despite this, they were at entirely different life moments, which influenced the way they related to their religion, community, God, and themselves. Still, there were many correlations between the two paths, which raised common issues. If we use Siraj’s categories on sexual identity development (2016) we could argue that while Reda had ‘integrated’ her sexual identity, Yasira was in a previous stage, ‘exploring’; however, this is only an approximation.

Firstly, Reda explains how she started struggling with her lesbianism as a child once she “put her sexuality in the context of religion and society”:

*‘yes, this is allowed’, ‘this is forbidden’ and you just see it and it becomes more and more present in your life and then you try to position yourself, it’s like ‘who am I?’ (...) I don’t fit in that image it’s like there’s something wrong.*

Identity struggles did not only occur because she could not understand her identity in Western terms (Shannahan, 2009), but because she could not do so in any terms at all. When describing her inner processes and feelings while growing up, they very much connected to the stress processes described by Meyer, which include “expectations of rejection, hiding, concealing, internalized homophobia” (2003, p. 674). With time, though, she came to terms with it: “it took me some years, some depressions (...) at some point it wasn’t all pink and easy, it was a ride, a journey”.

On the other hand, what was made evident in Yasira’s interview is the fact that she is experiencing her intersection with anxiety. The recurrent words she used to describe her feelings were “miedo”, “inseguridad” and “vergüenza”. While the triggers for these

feelings were partly social, Yasira was mainly referring to her relation to God, her main source of struggle.

A key explanatory difference between the two respondents was the way in which they framed their sexuality in relation to the scriptures.

Reda had undergone a process in which she decided: “let’s break everything, let’s smash it, you don’t think there is a God from the beginning, ‘who are you God?’ and I started from there”, she read the other major religious texts trying to gain a deeper insight, to finally “came back to the same starting point”. This is an interesting detour that made her commit to her faith at a deeper individual level while allowing her to disagree or not fully understand all aspects of it.

She also finds comfort in history and refers to the vast production of homoerotic stories and poetry: “in the time of the prophet it was accepted, it was cool being gay, it was a normal thing, it’s in society (...) you see it in poetry, you see it in books”. While Yasira might not have been aware of this history, she often thought that it was possible that in the time of Muhammad, lesbians probably became Muslims regardless of their sexuality. Articulating these questions and drawing inspiration from powerful women in the Quran inaugurated an exploration phase marked by many questions, contradictions and achievements that were directed at helping her bridge the distance between incompatible identities.

In this line, a major element in Yasira’s understanding of religion was that one should respect all lives regardless of sexual orientation and should not judge. This made her very critical of the homonegativity she perceived in her religious community and in her home: “¿cómo que va a ir al infierno? ¿dónde pone eso y por qué? porque si realmente Dios es tan bueno, que lo es, te va a aceptar como seas”. These theological questions and her resistance to the discourses of those around her were at the same time contradicted by herself: “es verdad que se le condena en la vida después de la muerte”. While she was determined to argue, there were some theological gaps she could not bridge, essentially condemnation in the afterlife.

This was combined with a heavy discourse on the innateness of sexual orientation, which has been briefly addressed in the first section. Seeing their sexuality as innate provided solace: “porque en el mundo hay personas totalmente distintas y Él ha hecho que yo sea lesbiana o que mi hermana trans o que el chico de la esquina sea bisexual o gay”.

Nevertheless, it also put pressure on her and how she employed her free will, which could relate to the distinction described by Schmidtke (1999) between how homoerotic practice, and not sentiment, is condemned.

The Quran had different meanings for the two practising believers, Yasira and Reda, and the latter insisted on the importance of “reading the book” consciously and on your own to be able to generate new queer meanings, as Hendricks highlighted (2010).

For the former, reading and listening to the Quran is a regular activity she enjoys and that helps her when she is struggling emotionally. She did not know about alternative queer interpretations of Islam and had not thought about the possibility of having different interpretations of the same text, which she perceived as a threat to the authority of the scripture: “el Corán está escrito ya y no se puede modificar (...) porque para qué va a cambiar si el Corán está escrito para el antes el después y el futuro”. While this statement is true for all Muslims, the fact that Yasira did not even envision the possibility of alternative interpretations might be connected to Reda’s historical claim that the exegesis of Islam has been gatekept: “it was decided that the field of interpretation of religion should be closed (...) it means this way we keep the unity of the community”.

In this vein, they explained different versions of the story of Lot. While Yasira had very present the popular interpretation that it condemns homosexuality, Reda brought up an alternative one that refuted that traditional meaning (Jamal, 2001). For her, it is a story about rape and under no circumstances about lesbianism. Moreover, she claimed: “if you put it in the context, this huge book did not find space to talk about homosexuals (...) it shouldn’t be there for a reason”.

Finally, even though they were at different points regarding their approach to the Quran, they both questioned the authority of any hadith condemning homosexuality, which according to Mourchid (2010) are approximately four. Yasira believed that there are political interests from the most conservative branches of Islam, and she gives an example: “han sido muy contradictorios, en un hadiz el profeta dijo ‘maten’ (...) incorrecto por 3000, el profeta nunca va a poder decir maten”. This personal appreciation is corroborated by Reda’s more academic approach: “the hadith that says that homosexuals are bad is not reliable according to the chain of successions<sup>7</sup>”.

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<sup>7</sup> She is referring to the ‘chain of transmission’ that determines whether a hadith is reliable.



## 5. Final remarks

This research has attempted to shed light on how queer women from Muslim backgrounds living in Catalonia in the context of the Global North navigate the intersection of their religious orientation and backgrounds and their sexuality. This qualitative study has presented and analysed the lived experiences of four queer women living in Catalonia within an interpretive paradigm. The examination of these lived experiences has proven valuable to deepen in queer Muslim intersectionality (Rahman, 2010). Intersectional and queer approaches and the inclusion of contributions from a range of disciplines have comprehensibly framed this study.

This research has shed some light on the ways in which the respondents negotiate their social locations regarding their sexuality and religious backgrounds and orientation. In this way, navigating and living their intersection is an intricate endeavour. This scenario is further complicated by intersecting axes like gender, education, migrant status or age in the context of different communities of belonging, such as family, religious community, society, etc.

Due to its exploratory and inductive nature, this study has essayed to provide an account of that intersection by examining and emphasising common “knots” in the discourses of the participants regarding their lived experiences. This approach has enabled us to focus on aspects of much relevance to the participants and to weave the disparate strands of their discourses into a single fabric, a textured and by no means homogenous fabric. Still, their experiences have not been universalised, but understood in a wider historical and social context, which has also provided room to entertain in their subjectivities.

Remarkably, it has been demonstrated how their experiences in the intersection are shaped by the presence of hegemonic discourses in line with normative Muslim and Western LGBT approaches, which claim lesbian/queer Muslims are mutually exclusive identities (Siraj, 2016, p. 191). The rigid boundaries of the dichotomies in which this presumption roots were smoothed by the nuances that the participants exposed and that were revealed in their everyday life.

Following this point, their discourses account for more than the divide between subordination and resistance. Beyond or through this paradigm, queer women from Muslim backgrounds embrace and contest the different dimensions of their lives and inner selves and their communities of belonging. The ‘lens of hybridity’ proposed by Coll-

Planas, Garcia-Romeral & Martí Plademunt (2021) can help us understand the alleged inconsistencies, disputes and contradictions of their lived experiences by shifting the focus out of the dichotomy to make sense of the complex strategies deployed to deal with these normativities.

Despite the fact that we have not deepened in the concepts of ‘resistance’ or ‘agency’, which I believe is essential to provide a nuanced account of their strategies of resistance and avoid the risk of engaging in ‘rescue narratives’ (Bracke, 2012), we have identified several mechanisms and strategies to simultaneously bind and unbind conflicting aspects of their sexuality and religious orientation/backgrounds. This process of binding and unbinding was particular to each participant and had different outcomes as well; in “extreme” cases, it could lead to a total rejection or a deeper embracement of religion. In any case, what these processes had in common was its motivation to find coherence, meaning and ease in their lives.

Some arenas in which these processes take place are family, queer white friends or groups, the wider societal context, sexual and emotional relationships and at the intrapersonal level.

At a family level, we can identify a common theme in their discourses, mainly the big role that expectations played. These expectations had to do with heteronormative ideals and thus marriage was utterly present. The participants had diverse experiences and ideas regarding this subject but in general chose to embrace this custom, which gave them the margin to postpone it. In cases where participants were older or had directly rejected it, the importance of family pressure lessened. The framing of marriage in religious orthodoxy had different meanings for them that did not directly accord to their degree of piety, or whether they were practising, non-practising or non-believers, which is exemplified in the opposing stances on fake marriages among the practising Muslims. The possibilities that they envisioned of constructing a life far from the sight of others conditioned their opinions on marrying and other customs.

The pressure to meet gender and sexual expectations is also located beyond the walls of their family household and with their extended family, friends, neighbours, etc., especially from the Muslim community. The respondents perceived a high level of social control, which made it challenging to engage in emotional or sexual relationships with other women while living in their hometowns.

Dating apps were the main mechanism to meet other queer women. This could be a double-edged strategy for the women living with their parents since the features of the apps did not assure them total anonymity.

It is remarkable how they navigated the blurry barriers between visibility/invisibility in the Global North. The only participant who lived part of her youth in a Muslim country talked about a large underground LGBT community, which provided opportunities to engage in sexual and emotional relationships with other women and build community. On the contrary, the presence of the LGBT community in the lives of the other women was very normative in a Western sense and made the participants ambivalent towards it because of the importance of visibility, the coming out model, the whiteness, etc.

In relation to this, islamophobia, racism and xenophobia were tangential in the discourses on their lived experiences. It is especially relevant how this also assembles in the core of friendships or groups with queer white people where a certain 'Muslimness' is expected.

The Western normativity of the LGBT+ arena shaped the opportunities and hindrances in their journeys of becoming, as did the heteronormativity of their Muslim community. Isolation deriving from the two spheres was highlighted, but still women built queer alliances that, regardless of them being out, encouraged them to experiment and to think about the possibility of a queer existence. Overall, the abidance to both the normative LGBT+ and Muslim community was not outright but disputed. It was also crossed by the axis of gender, which in their Muslim community made them more suspicious compared to men, for example, in terms of mobility. On the other hand, the normative LGBT+ community and wider white society expected them to be the 'Muslimwoman' (cooke, 2008). Higher education entailed more possibilities to circumvent some of these expectations and norms.

When referring to the views on sexuality in their religious communities, their discourses distilled an evolutionist logic that relates to Western ideas. However, they distanced from such ideas in the culture-religion distinction that they pointed out, which put emphasis on the possibilities for tolerance of queer people among Muslims.

The women reckoned that "acceptance" from families, a concept heavily associated to the Western coming out paradigm, would be generally denied to them. However, this claim was nuanced: they presented it as a process, which did not necessarily have to include a verbalisation of their queerness (Coll-Planas, García-Romeral, & Martí

Plademunt, 2021). Despite the homonormativity of their families, they did not regard them as inherently homonegative and emphasised the “tolerance” they showed for example by supporting other LGBT+ people or being sympathetic to LGBT+ discrimination.

To them, there are many ways by which one can “announce their queer existence” (Abraham, 2009, p. 88). Generally, the respondents maintained a heterosexual façade with family and sometimes friends, whether their parents knew or not. In this way, they could transgress boundaries without being suspected of lesbianism. There is a general disinterest in experiencing their sexuality visibly or in risking the family bond by explaining it. Despite this, the ‘closet’ also entailed isolation, which was exemplified by the participants who had not disclosed the information to any loved one in contraposition to the ones who had disclosed it. In relation to this, we could also identify a will to start or continue articulating liaisons with other queers and especially queers from Muslim backgrounds.

In general, identity categories could not convey their approach to their sexuality, which was quite fluid. Acknowledging that labels carried many meanings made them both avoid and embrace them, sometimes publicly, other times at an inner level, naming their sexuality was done strategically to address feelings or identities of their non-normative existence.

The women recognised the incompatibility of the two spheres that could generate resistances regarding their sexuality. In order to reconcile them, they tended to search for a reconnection to their cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds, by working on internalised islamophobia, reflecting and then preserving or detaching from certain elements. Religious resources can be of significance for some believers who can or would want to queer their religious approach. However, the hegemonic homonegative discourses are pervasive and alternative queer understandings of Islam are far from the mainstream.

The queer women from Muslim backgrounds participating in this study oblige us to think about their existence in that intersection from a perspective that transcends faux dichotomies and avoids generalisations. Locating their discourses in the wider frame of ‘critical hybridity’ (Abraham, 2009) helps us grasp a little better the complexity of the cultural exchange at stake and acknowledge how they simultaneously negate the exclusionary nature of several communities of belonging. Starting off from the allegedly

contradictory aspects of their lives, we have pointed out a variety of common “knots” in their discourses from which to gain insight into the manner they bind and unbind, the tensions and harmonies, the complementarities and contradictions, the accuracies and inconsistencies, the compromises and disputes that occur in their intersection. From there, queer women and lesbians seek liveable lives in everyday ways that challenge constraints and create new meanings in the process of binding and unbinding. Two key elements in their discourses are the connection to other queer people from Muslim backgrounds and the renegotiation of their backgrounds that help advance towards reconciliation.

Future research should keep focusing on the lived experiences of queer women to explore the lesbian-Muslim intersection beyond the hegemonic discourses that talk for them. The strategies of resistance and the agency of these women are interesting issues to tackle, but closer attention should be given to avoid engaging in epistemological violence. Using hybridity more comprehensively and accurately as a methodological approach, as proposed by Fotopoulou (2012), could enrich analyses like this. The axis of religion should also get more attention in our context since it is still regarded as contrary to sexual and gender diversity. It should also entail a deeper analysis of its implications in public policy and the realities and actual needs of queer women from Muslim backgrounds.

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## Annex I. Informed consent and the informative paper

### Informació per a les persones participants

#### **“Approaching the lesbian-Muslim intersection. Experiences of lesbianism among women of Muslim background in Catalonia”**

La Marina Garcia Castillo està portant a terme el projecte d'investigació: *Approaching the lesbian-Muslim intersection. Experiences of lesbianism among women of Muslim background in Catalonia* en el marc del treball final de màster del Màster d'Estudis de Dones, Gènere i Ciutadania de l'Institut Interdisciplinari de Dones i Gènere i amb la tutoria del Dr. Gerard Coll Planas.

L'objectiu general del projecte és explorar les experiències viscudes de dones d'origen-entorn musulmà en relació al lesbianisme. Aquest objectiu es desgrana en dos sub-objectius: identificar les interseccions d'eixos de poder que les travessen i configuren i reconèixer les seves experiències de discriminació, així com identificar les resistències i estratègies que produeixen per viure vides vivibles.

En el context d'aquesta investigació s'està portant a terme un treball de camp que inclou la realització d'entrevistes a persones protagonistes, és a dir, que encaixen en el perfil dels subjectes d'estudi: persones que s'identifiquen com a dones, que tenen o han tingut un entorn o origen musulmà i que no són heterosexuales o que puguin tenir alguna relació amb el lesbianisme. Les entrevistes es faran de forma presencial durant l'abril i maig de 2022 i tindran una durada aproximada d'una hora i mitja.

L'entrevista serà enregistrada (àudio) pel posterior anàlisi i sistematització de les dades. Aquestes entrevistes es complementaran amb l'anàlisi de literatura acadèmica.

El fitxer de dades de l'estudi estarà sota la responsabilitat de la investigadora, davant de la qual podrà exercir en tot moment els drets que estableix la Llei orgànica 3/2018, de 5 de desembre, de Protecció de Dades Personals i garantia dels drets digitals i el Reglament general(UE) 2016/679, de 27 d'abril de 2016, de protecció de dades i la normativa complementària, relatiu a la protecció de les persones físiques pel que fa al tractament de dades personals i a la lliure circulació d'aquestes dades, i analitzada en conjunt per a publicacions científiques i difusió en congressos especialitzats. En cap cas es publicaran els seus resultats individuals ni cap tipus d'informació que pogués identificar a les persones participants.

Tots els documents en format electrònic es guarden en ordinadors protegits per la contrasenya personal de la persona investigadora. Els arxius amb els àudios de les entrevistes seran anonimitzats i transcrits literalment, la investigadora es compromet a que la informació transcrita no serà utilitzada per cap altre fi i que els arxius d'àudio seran destruïts un cop hagifinalitzat la recerca.

La participació en aquest estudi és totalment voluntària, sense contraprestació o gratificació individual. Té dret a lliurement decidir no participar, així com a retirar-se en qualsevol moment sense tenir que donar explicacions ni sofrir cap penalització per això. Al finalitzar l'estudi, la investigadora es compromet a explicar els resultats a totes les persones participants que estiguin interessades a conèixer-los, i així ho indiquin.

Si té algun dubte sobre la recerca o sobre la participació en la mateixa pot fer preguntes ara o contactar en qualsevol moment durant la seva participació amb la investigador responsable (marina.garcia.castillo@uvic.cat).

I per a que hi hagi constància per escrit, a efecte d'informació de les persones participants i/odels seus representats legals, es lliurà el present full informatiu i una còpia idèntica del document de consentiment informat signat.

Marina Garcia Castillo,

**MARINA  
GARCIA  
CASTILLO**  
- DNI  
**45794333**  
**E**

Digitally signed  
by MARINA  
GARCIA  
CASTILLO - DNI  
45794333E  
Date:  
2022.04.13  
14:53:56  
+02'00'

## Consentiment informat

Actuant en nom i interès propi

DECLARO QUE:

- He rebut informació sobre el projecte *Approaching the lesbian-Muslim intersection. Experiences of lesbianism among women of Muslim background in Catalonia*, del qual se m'ha lliurat el full informatiu annex a aquest consentiment i per al qual se sol·licita la meva participació.
- N'he entès el significat, se m'han aclarit els dubtes sobre els seus objectius i metodologia i m'han estat exposades les accions que es deriven d'aquest projecte.
- Se m'ha informat de tots els aspectes relacionats amb la confidencialitat i protecció de dades pel que fa a la gestió de dades personals que comporta el projecte i les garanties donades en compliment de la Llei orgànica 3/2018, de 5 de desembre, de Protecció de Dades Personals i garantia dels drets digitals i el Reglament general (UE) 2016/679, de 27 d'abril de 2016, de protecció de dades i la normativa complementària.
- La meva col·laboració en el projecte és totalment voluntària i tinc dret a realitzar totes les preguntes que em semblin pertinents sobre l'estudi i la meva participació. Així mateix, tinc dret a retirar-me'n en qualsevol moment i revocar aquest consentiment, sense que aquesta retirada pugui influir negativament en la meva persona en cap cas. En cas de retirada, tinc dret a què les meves dades siguin cancel·lades del fitxer de l'estudi.

Per tot això,

DONO EL MEU CONSENTIMENT A:

1. Participar en el projecte *Approaching the lesbian-Muslim intersection. Experiences of lesbianism among women of Muslim background in Catalonia*.
2. Que la meva participació sigui enregistrada en àudio a través d'un enregistrator de veu.
3. Que la Marina Garcia Castillo, com investigadora, pugui gestionar les meves dades personals i difondre la informació que el projecte generi. Tindrè garanties que es preservarà en tot moment la meva identitat i intimitat, tal com estableixen la Llei orgànica 3/2018, de 5 de desembre, de Protecció de Dades Personals i garantia dels drets digitals i el Reglament general (UE) 2016/679, de 27 d'abril de 2016, de protecció de dades i la normativa complementària<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A efectes del disposat en el Reglament Europeu de Protecció de Dades (RGPD) 2016/679 del Parlament i del Consell de 27 d'abril de 2016, relatiu a la protecció de les persones físiques pel que fa al tractament de dades personals i a la lliure circulació d'aquestes i el Reial decret

1. Que la Marina Garcia Castillo conservi tots els registres efectuats sobre la meva persona en suport electrònic, amb les garanties i els terminis legalment previstos, si estan establerts, i a falta de previsió legal, pel temps que sigui necessari per complir les funcions del projecte per les quals les dades són recaptades.

Signatura de la persona  
participant:

Signatura de la investigadora:

Digi tally ed  
MARINA sign by MARINA  
GARCIA GARCIA DNI  
CASTILLO - CASTILLO -  
DNI 45794333E Date: 2022.04.13  
45794333E 14:54:12 +02'00'

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994/1999, de 11 de juny, de Reglament de mesures de Seguretat dels fitxers automatitzats que contenen dades de caràcter personal, el participant queda informat i expressament consent la incorporació de la seva informació als fitxers de caràcter personal dels quals és responsable la Universitat de Barcelona.

La Marina Garcia Castillo garanteix que tots els dades personals i / o dels seus familiars representats facilitats pel titular seran tractats amb la major confidencialitat i en la forma i amb les limitacions previstes en la RGPD i altres normatives aplicables. El consentiment informat es concedeix sense perjudici de tots els drets que li assisteixen en virtut de la normativa anteriorment citada i, en especial, de la possibilitat d'exercir gratuïtament els drets d'accés a la informació que ens ha facilitat i de la rectificació, cancel·lació i oposició en qualsevol moment que ho desitgi. Per això, cal dirigir-se per escrit a la Marina Garcia Castillo (marina.garcia.castillo@uvic.cat).