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# **Saving and fearing Muslim women in 'post-communist' Poland: troubling Catholic and secular Islamophobia**

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# Saving and fearing Muslim women in 'post-communist' Poland: troubling Catholic and secular Islamophobia

## Abstract

Sexual politics play a key role in anti-Muslim narratives. This has been observed by scholarship problematising liberal feminist approaches towards 'non-Western' subjects focusing on countries such as France, the USA and the Netherlands. Yet interrogations into how these debates play out in European national contexts that are located outside of the European 'West' have attracted significantly less scholarly attention. Drawing on qualitative data collected in Poland this article aims to begin to fill this gap by analysing the centrality of feminist discourses within Islamophobic agendas in Poland. The article asks how discourses around women's rights are mobilised simultaneously, and paradoxically, by both secular and Catholic groups in 'post-communist' Poland. By showcasing how feminist sentiments are employed by ideologically opposing groups, we sketch out some of the complexities in the ways Islamophobia operates in a Central and Eastern European context.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; Muslim women, feminism; Poland; post-communism; Central and Eastern Europe.

## Introduction

In March 2010 when the news of the first purpose-built mosque in the Polish capital spread, parts of Warsaw city centre were dressed with posters portraying a female figure in a niqab, standing in front of a set of minarets that resembled missiles. The campaign was led by the *Europa Przyszłości* [Europe of the Future] association, a liberal secularist group (run by three men) that allies itself with Western European values of Enlightenment focusing on human rights, feminism, secularism and gay rights; key themes through which they oppose public expressions of Islam and Muslims. The depiction of the 'imminent Muslim threat' on the group's anti-mosque posters was modelled on the Swiss anti-minaret campaign. The Swiss flag in the background was changed to a Polish flag and new text was added: 'Stop the radical mosque in Warsaw'. The use of the modified Swiss flag was intended to give Warsaw residents the impression that the 'mosque problem', a previously largely unknown issue in Poland, was part of a wider trend throughout Europe, the so-called 'Islamisation of Europe'. Focusing on the niqab-clad body at the forefront of the poster, the secular liberal group emphasised the central position of Muslim women in the perceived 'clash of civilisations' that had now supposedly reached Poland. This sentiment was shared by Catholic right-wing groups who also warned against 'Islamisation' of the continent by focusing considerable attention on women in Islam.

The aim of this article is to shed light on the ways in which feminism and Islamophobia work together in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context of Poland. With that, we want to contribute to scholarship that troubles feminist convergences with Islamophobia in the West (Haritaworn 2012) by asking how these narratives are expressed in a 'post-communist' context. With an important exception in this journal (Kulpa 2014), most of the work in this area has focused on national contexts of the UK, USA (Puar 2007), Netherlands (Butler 2008, Bracke 2012) and France (Scott 2007, Delphy 2015) with very little work exploring contexts beyond Western Europe. This article builds on the existing research by mapping the deployment of feminist discourses by both secular and Catholic groups that are not part of the feminist movement in Poland. We problematise this discursive convergence when expressed within a Polish 'post-communist' context.

The article draws together empirical material from two projects carried out between 2011 and 2016. The first set of data draws upon a year-long doctoral fieldwork project from 2011-2012 focusing on mosque conflicts in Warsaw.<sup>1</sup> This included six focus groups (N=26), eleven individual and paired interviews, participant observations, media, and documentary analysis conducted by the first author. The interviewees ranged from members of a secular liberal group that opposed the mosque construction on the grounds of 'liberal values', to local councillors who initiated anti-mosque petitions as well as members of the local community in Warsaw. This data is used to showcase the liberal arguments that underpinned much of the opposition to Muslim presence in Poland. The second set of data draws from an ongoing project (2014-2016) on religious dimensions of Islamophobia in Poland involving systematic content and discourse analysis of the Catholic media (*Gość Niedzielny*, *Niedziela*, *Polonia Christiana*, *Fronda* and *Fronda Lux*) over the last eight years as well as ten interviews with members of key Muslim and anti-Muslim groups in the country<sup>2</sup>. Drawing upon this data, we showcase some of the Catholic opposition to Muslims, focusing on the way that liberal arguments around women's rights are used in opposition to Islam. All empirical data presented in this article was gathered in Polish and has been subsequently translated.

In what follows we set out the conceptual framework of the article by defining some of its key terms. Then, we situate Catholicism and Islam in Poland, briefly accounting for the long history of Muslim presence within the shifting borders of the country. Bringing to the fore some of the key particularities of Poland's historical and current socio-political dimensions will enable us to provide a more nuanced lens through which to analyse recent manifestations of Islamophobia in the country. Subsequently narrowing down the focus on gender as one of the key strands through which Polish Islamophobia operates, we map ways in which Islam is opposed through a feminist agenda by both Catholic and secularist groups.

### **Researching Islamophobia in 'post-communist' Poland**

Our point of departure draws from previous work that critically assesses the way in which Central and Eastern Europe is framed as 'permanently 'post-communist'' (Kulpa 2014:2). We understand 'post-communism' as more than just a geographical and chronological space and treat it as an

epistemological category in that it informs the way the CEE region that was once under Communist rule is considered as subordinate to the West (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008). We question the engrained idea that Poland is situated in a permanently 'post-communist' space and is since 1989 viewed as on a never-ending journey of 'catching-up' with the always more developed West (Kulpa 2014). This point of departure follows in the footsteps of scholarship developed in the last decade that argues for the relevance of locating postcolonial studies in postsocialist contexts of Central and Eastern Europe (Domański 2004, Janion 2006, Mayblin, Piekut and Valentine 2016). The idea that the CEE is lagging behind the West confirms the notion of the West as the dominant model for 'the Rest' to follow (Hall 1992:276). Acknowledging that 'an overwhelming majority of work in English-speaking geography ignores postsocialist contexts' (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008:340), we wish to contribute to scholarship that draws from postcolonial theory in order to work towards de-centring the dominating Western narrative. This recognises knowledge that grows out of local histories and carves out a space for that knowledge to be heard on its own terms and not subsumed into a wider European perspective (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, Tlostanova 2012) while at the same time acknowledging interconnectedness in the way that discourses around Muslims and Islam circulate between European contexts (Gawlewicz and Narkowicz 2015).

Our understanding of Islamophobia draws from Sayyid's (2014) suggestion to look at it as undermining the ability of Muslims as Muslims to project themselves into the future. This operates simultaneously in several ways, from attacks on Muslims and their spaces of worship to orientalist understandings of Muslims as threatening 'our' values. We argue with Sayyid (2014) that Islamophobia is a way of disciplining Muslims, of narrating Muslims as opposing key Western values such as gender equality. When conceptualising the West, we refer to a discursive category rather than merely a geographical or chronological one (Sayyid 2014). Writing about Islamophobia in a 'post-communist' setting necessitates a recognition of the particular historical, social and political context of racialisation. Importantly, we conceptualise Islamophobia in relation to racism and anti-Semitism, recognizing that Jews and Muslims were throughout history imagined together and Othered as part of an Orientalising discourse (Kalmar and Ramadan 2016). This is particularly significant in a Poland – a country with a history of anti-Jewish hatred that many Poles are still reluctant to confront (Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010). Despite the long history of Muslim presence in Poland, Muslims only recently have started to play the role of the new 'folk devil' replacing the figure of the Jew as the traditional enemy (Pędzwiatr 2010).

### **Catholicism and Islam in Poland**

Poland is one of the most religiously homogeneous countries of the European Union, and one of the European countries where religion plays a very important role not only in the social but also political life of the nation. The influence of the dominant Catholic Church is not limited to the private sphere of its believers, but has also a significant impact on the public life of the whole nation (Pędzwiatr 2015). It stems from the fact that Catholicism is a key element of the modern Polish national identity which initially developed in the absence of the state (1795-1918) and in opposition to occupying foreign powers viewed as religiously alien (especially Orthodox Russia and Protestant Prussia). After the re-emergence of Poland on the maps of Europe the apparatus of the state became actively involved in popularization of the Pole-Catholic identity, that survived the Communist repressions and particularly strongly revived around 1989 when the Church, then aligned with the Solidarity movement, celebrated victory over Communism (Janion 2006, Łuczewski 2012). While churches in other European countries have seen a decline in attendance, with some of them closed down or

transformed into non-Christian or non-religious venues, Poland - with churches crowded on Sundays and new places of worship being constantly constructed - clearly stands out. Despite evidence of decreasing church attendance in recent years (Czapliński and Panek 2015), the vast majority of Poles belong to the Catholic Church while the largest religious minority is made up of members of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (GUS 2015). On the other hand, the census does not provide any reliable information on the total number of Muslims in Poland. Although the Muslim community in Poland is one of the oldest in Europe, it is at the same time one of the smallest.

For most of its history the Muslim community in Poland was quite homogenous. Since its establishment in the 14<sup>th</sup> century within the shared Polish-Lithuanian kingdom, and until the 1960s, almost the entire community consisted of the Tatars (Nalborczyk 2006, Konopacki 2010). This situation altered and the Muslim community became increasingly diverse only after World War II, as large parts of the pre-war Polish Tatar community found themselves outside of the new state boundaries, as a result of processes of immigration and religious conversions. In spite of the fact that under Communist rule Poland was unofficially 'a country without exit' (Stola 2010), there was a major trend of people leaving Communist Poland as well as a minor trend of those migrating into the country. The Muslim immigration to Communist Poland took place primarily in the educational sphere inter alia from such befriended countries as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Tunisia (Gasztold-Seń 2012). Although the majority of Muslim students returned back home after their studies some decided to stay in Poland, found jobs and established families, thus becoming the pioneers of the immigrant Muslim community in the country. After the collapse of Communism, the diversity of the Muslim community in Poland continued to grow with an increasing inflow of Muslim professionals, refugees and Poles embracing Islam.

The exact number of people who identify as Muslims in today's Poland is unknown. It is estimated that there are between 25 to 35 thousand people who feel close religious, ethnic or cultural ties with Islam, which suggests that Muslims make up slightly less than 0.1% of the total population of the country. These statistics lead Polish researchers to highlight a case of Islamophobia almost without Muslims (Górak-Sosnowska 2006). Since the 1990s, Polish Islamophobia has experienced an unprecedented rise. The construction of the Muslim Cultural Centre in the Ochota neighbourhood, the first purpose-built mosque in the capital, was one of the visible outcomes of a wider Islamic revival in Poland that provoked some of the most mediatised deployments of Islamophobic sentiments so far in Poland (Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr 2016). Central to these were discourses around gender equality. Before we shed light on various ways in which Islamophobia was entangled with gender during and in the aftermath of the mosque conflict we contextualize the forthcoming discussion by drawing on some of the particularities of historical, political and social geographies of Poland in relation to gender.

### **Gender politics in Communist and 'post-communist' Poland**

The situation of women under Communism (1945–1989) differed to that of many Western European countries. Polish women had access to legal abortion, free childcare provision, and participated to a significant extent in the labour market - liberties that many women on the other side of the Iron Curtain did not have at that time (Titkow 1993). While some of these policies were beneficial to Polish women, vast scholarship on gender politics in the CEE during Communism have described it as state-enforced gender equality 'on paper', critiquing for example the double-burden of home and work responsibilities (Łobodzińska 1995, Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000). After the fall of the

Communist system, Central European governments took measures towards the 're-familisation' of their societies. Government cuts to expenditure on nursery schools and kindergartens made it increasingly difficult for women to remain in the rapidly changing labour market (Saxonberg and Sirovatka 2006). Siklova (1993) argues that for some Western feminists the fall of Communism was considered a big loss for the movement. However, researchers also argue that for many women the pressure to work outside of the home, whilst experiencing unequal treatment within the workplace, was considered an imposed condition by the unwanted government. Despite that the concept of feminism itself was associated with its Communist legacy (Einhorn 1993), the feminist movement in Poland was key in the formation of a public sphere post-1989 when women took to the streets to protest the newly introduced abortion ban (Fuszara 1993).

Until today, feminism is contested in the Polish public sphere that is largely influenced by the Catholic Church's propagation of a 'natural' division of roles with women in the private and men in the public sphere – a view supported by the political elite (Korolczuk 2013). Debates about women's rights to abortion, for example, have occupied the Polish public sphere continuously since 1989 (Fuszara 1993). Feminist groups are frequently accused by the Catholic clergy of the 'promotion of genderism' and fluid gender roles, rejection of traditional family values, and placing a 'feminist Trojan horse' into society (Gość Niedzielny 23.01.2014). In the ongoing 'war on gender', feminism is understood to be destabilising to Polish culture and traditional gender roles (Szwed and Zielińska 2017). The complexities of gender politics in Poland mean that Islamophobic discourses justified by concern for women's rights have to be analysed with this local context in mind.

### **Islamophobia through secular and Catholic gendered perspectives**

In spite of the fact that Poland is home to a very small Muslim community, Islamophobia has become quite widespread within society not least in the context of the most recent 'refugee crisis', when threats of a Muslim invasion, 'sharia courts in Poland', and refugees bringing 'cholera and parasites' to Europe were made by Polish politicians (EUobserver 14.10.2015). Surveys confirm that anti-Muslims sentiments in Poland are often more widespread than in many other European countries (CBOS 2012, Zick, Küpper and Hövermann 2011). The totality and essentialism with which the public views Muslim religious identities affects particularly visibly Muslim women – making them an easy target for gendered Islamophobia. Historically, despite a larger and longer presence of Muslims in Poland, Tatar Muslim women generally did not wear the hijab (Nalborczyk 2009) making the visibility of Muslims a recent phenomenon. This new visibility of Islam is opposed from two key camps often in tension with one another: a secular liberalism promoted by the Europe of the Future association and a right-wing Catholic one.<sup>3</sup> While the arguments advanced by both groups differ and revolve around often competing sets of values, the extensive focus on Muslim women's bodies as sites through which Islamophobia is manifested is unequivocal. While the two camps overlap in their expressions of Islamophobia the groups rarely collaborate.

One of the key strands through which Islamophobia is manifested in Poland and where both secular and Catholic narratives come together is through arguing that Muslim women are oppressed and that this serves to illustrate the 'new version of the clash of civilisations thesis' (Bilge 2010:10).

Islamophobia argued through a gendered framework was predominantly mobilised by two distinct narratives in Poland: the employment of secular liberal values and, in apparent contradiction, through Catholic national values. On the one hand interviewees in our research located their criticism of Islam within a secular liberal framework, focusing their narratives on a shared European identity that critiques Islam 'from within the liberation movements, women's movements, gay movements, human rights' and centrally critiquing 'the stripping of women's rights', as one of the members of a secularist group emphasised. Among many threads on the topic of oppressed Muslim women on the web portal of the liberal Europe of the Future group are opinion pieces about Muslim women's status in Islam deeming the niqab 'cultural backwardness' (Euroislam.pl, 5.08.2016) and arguing that 'women who do not leave their houses are according to our standards submissive and enclosed' (Euroislam.pl, 16.12.2009). The Europe of the Future's opposition to Islam showcases a certain overlap with what has been observed as liberal convergences with racist politics (Haritaworn 2012) that situate Muslims as harbouring a culture that is fundamentally oppressive to women and, as such, conflicts with Western liberal values of gender equality (Phillips and Saharso 2008).

On the other hand, Catholic groups employed religious arguments to express their negative views on Islam and its faithful and focused on Christian foundations and traditions of Europe which Poland as the 'Christian bulwark of Europe' is obliged to defend. In these narratives, Christianity functioned as a key benchmark of Europeanness – implying that Muslims are not proper Europeans. Such an approach attempts not only to oppose the advance of Islam in Europe, but also functions as a statement of the proponents' mission to reinforce the withering Christian identity of Europe, in accordance with the late Polish Pope John Paul's II vision of Poland as the bastion of Christianity and key in the wider resistance of secularisation (Dybczak 2014). At the same time, many members of such Catholic groups do not hesitate to accuse secularists of aiding 'the enemy' to install itself in Europe. One of the contributors to Catholic weekly *Niedziela* argued, for instance, that:

The EU negates our Christian roots and identity. There is no Europe anymore. There is only Eurabia. I believe that the EU is a tool that is enabling the invaders to enter our territory... Islamic imperialism always wanted to conquer the West. (*Niedziela*, nr.37, 2011)

One of the key targets for Polish Catholic narratives against Muslims were Muslim women. One Catholic magazine argued that:

Islam will conquer Europe through the wombs of women. Demography is one area on which the destiny of Europe rests, since continued demographic growth amongst the immigrants is coupled with significant decrease in the number of children amongst the Europeans. (*Polonia Christiana*, March-April, 2008)

The assumption behind this sentiment is that all immigrants coming to Europe are Muslims and that all Europeans are Christians. Moreover, the idea of women as reproducers of the faith is consistent with a broader Catholic Church focus on reproductive politics as a central tenant of upholding national values. As Szwed (2015) exemplifies in her study of attitudes towards gender roles amongst the Polish clergy, 'motherhood is understood as the essence of womanhood, and consequently, as a



key tenant in women's existence' (Szwed 2015: 146). The idea of the nation imagined and framed through motherhood (see Yuval-Davis 1997, Hill Collins 2005) has played a central role in Poland since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Janion 2006). As the 'Queen of Poland', the figure of the Virgin Mary has been placed on the national pedestal, representing Polishness in times of war and struggle, not least during the resistance to Communism when the image was pinned to the chest of the opposition leader Lech Wafesa. The Virgin Mary, the guardian of the Polish nation, embodied in the Matka-Polka [Mother Pole] figure has been important in the wider Polish debate around gender and feminism since 1989 when sexual politics became central in antagonisms between liberal feminist values and Catholic nationalist values in the aftermath of abortion becoming illegal in Poland in 1993 (Gal and Klingman 2000).

In general, many Catholic groups view feminism as an ideology that is harmful to the Church's traditional values, which espouse a naturalistic view of two dichotomously opposed genders (Szwed 2015). Consequently, we argue that when anti-Muslim views expressed by Catholics are framed within a women's rights agenda there is a form of 'gender exceptionalism' taking place (Puar 2007) where the current ideological focus of the Catholic Church is temporarily suspended in order to oppose Islam and Muslims. Despite seemingly dichotomous priorities between European liberal secularism and Polish mainstream Catholicism, one may easily notice the convergence of the two camps in identifying Islam as the Other.

The Catholic and the secular narratives strongly emphasize an imagined belonging to the Western community and what is more, the groups are able to suspend their differences and at least discursively come together in their hostility towards Muslims and Islam (Mavelli 2008). This happens in spite of very different and often conflicted ideological stands. While the former group tends to fuse Europeanness with Christianity and frequently presents Western Europe as in need of re-Christianisation, the latter one frequently imagines Western Europe as a symbol of progressive societal values to which everyone, including 'post-communist' countries, should aspire.

### ***Saving and fearing Muslim women***

The two main ways in which Muslim women's subordination was narrated is through 'rescue narratives' (see Bracke 2012) and through 'narratives of threat' (see Puar 2007). As Bilge (2010) points out, these paradoxical portrayals work in tandem, as Muslim women are understood as being simultaneously passive victims and active threats.

One of the contributors to the Catholic right-wing magazine *Fronda Lux* argued, for example, that:

Thousands of young and talented Muslims who were not able to realize their potential in their home countries came to Europe. Arab girls do not want to go back, because after they finish studies in the West, they know that it is only in Europe that they will be respected (Fronda Lux, no 71, 2014)

Numerous other articles on the Fronda web portal put the blame for the ill-treatment of women on Islam. In one of them the author argues that 'Muslim women are bitten, raped and circumcised more often than women of other cultures' because 'the Quran says that women are worth less than

men' (Frona.pl, 09.08.2016). Another article in the Catholic magazine entitled 'Woman in Islam' reads that violence and rapes of Muslim women are an everyday occurrence (Frona.pl, 26.09.2015). A vast majority of the analysed articles about Muslim women in the right wing Catholic media also featured photographs of women in niqabs, mixing the representations of women as simultaneously victims and as threats that we elaborate on in more detail below.

The claim that Islamic law oppresses women was expressed also frequently by our interviewees in Warsaw who argued that the biggest problem with Islam was the treatment of women:

Not respecting the opposite sex, precisely speaking women... Because the women don't get anything. I think they are treated worse than animals. (Elwira, paired interview)

Such narratives around women's rights were powerful enough to affect people who were initially positive towards Muslims. One such example was Celina, who worked closely with Muslim refugees in Warsaw and knew many Muslims living with her in student corridors. Her views on Muslim women were strongly influenced by the book authored by Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

I am aware that somewhere in Somalia, I don't know, in different countries, these things do happen. And often I imagine, when I meet these people, that maybe they are these girls that escaped like her [Ayaan Hirsi Ali]. (Celina, group interview)

Popular literature focusing on the plight of Muslim women authored by women who themselves were Muslim or ex-Muslims have become bestsellers in Poland in recent times. Female authors who denounced Islam quickly rose to fame as 'liberated apostates', insider experts, those that held 'authentic knowledge' about Islam (Bracke 2012:242). These 'moderate Muslim spokespersons' (Maira 2011: 120) and other self-proclaimed experts provided 'native testimonials' (Mahmood 2008:83) of their 'liberation' in the West (Ahmed 2011).

In the Polish context the orientalist covers occupying the top shelves in bookstores have become one of the ways for Poles to gain essentialised knowledge about Muslim women and the Muslim world in general, problematically making up for the limited visibility of Islam and Muslim women in public spaces. While some of the books such as Irshar Manji's *The Trouble with Islam Today* or Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin* have gained global prominence, other books such as *I only wanted to be Free* by Hülya Kalkan and *A Women's Honour* by Tiouli Touria, all keenly read in Poland, are translated from German and French. What the many titles share in common, however, is an overwhelming homogeneity in the way they portray Muslim women. The two most common book covers show either a colourful exoticised image of a woman's veiled face with one or both eyes showing and gazing at the observer, or a darker colored cover with a figure of a 'burqa'ed woman' (Puar 2007: 222), standing dehumanized and almost blending into her dark surroundings. The narratives in the books read in Poland reflect the theme of oppressed Muslim women, often involving a physical or symbolic journey to the West and subsequent liberation.

In Poland it was through the liberal concern of women like Celina that such views gained traction. Reading the books keenly, Celina evidenced a delicate balance between her positive personal encounters with Muslims and the testimonials of a 'native expert' like Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Consequently, reading a book by Ayaan Hirsi Ali shaped her understanding of what was happening 'somewhere in Somalia' or in other countries where she imagined that Muslim women were oppressed:

I know that some women choose themselves to wear these burqas and then I think there is nothing wrong with that. But if I would see such a woman I think a light would go on in my head that something bad must be going on and perhaps something should be done. (Celina, group interview)

The responsibility to 'do something' about the oppression of Muslim women reinforced an imagined geography of a liberated West where women engage in the plight of the oppressed versus the East where Muslim 'women shuffle around silently in burqas' (Abu-Lughod 2002:784).

The focus on 'saving' Muslim women from Islamic culture and religion was an important ingredient in fuelling Islamophobic attitudes in Poland and was legitimised by the writings of such 'native informants' as Hirsi Ali. Positioned in a dichotomous relationship with 'oppressed' Muslim women, they further cemented the conviction that Muslim women are in need of saving (Abu-Lughod 2002). When the saving is done by a 'liberated apostate' (Bracke 2012: 242) Spivak's (1988) original observation gets a twist that works to add further legitimacy to the rescue narrative; brown women saving brown women from brown men (Bracke 2012). Such dichotomies between the 'progressive' West and the more 'backward' East are further complicated by Poland's own ambivalent position in Europe, where it is frequently disciplined as less gender equal and more homophobic than its western neighbours (see Graff 2006). Scholars mapping transnational coalitions have stressed that 'hierarchies between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe' complicate a simple application of Western narratives on to a CEE context (Binnie and Klesse 2012: 455, Mizelińska and Kulpa 2011).

Running alongside Muslim rescue narratives are narratives of the threat posed by the veiled woman. From being victims of the Islamic religion and culture, Muslim women were simultaneously perceived as its threatening embodiment. Veiled bodies, as shown figuring on the Polish anti-mosque posters borrowed from the Swiss, symbolised an image of threat and aggression. The perception of Muslim women as threat was exemplified by several of our interviewees. Pola, for example, brought up memories of seeing veiled women when abroad, which is where Polish encounters with veiled women often take place:

A few years ago I spent six weeks in London, as a holiday, and there you can really notice it... there were women that covered from top to bottom in black and they even had some metal thing attached to their faces, which was really weird... it honestly looked terrifying. [I]t was a circle, all the women in black, you didn't know what was going on, what they were really doing. (Pola, group interview)

Pola perceived Muslim women as a threat and described feeling scared. The niqab in her narrative was linked to a threat arising from uncertainty about what the women covered in black were 'really doing', echoing the narratives of Muslim women as aggressors (Bilge 2010). Drawing from Moors

(2011), face-veiling here has a double-meaning. It creates discomfort as a symbol of gender subordination and at the same time provokes resistance to established Western normativities. Pola's observation of veiled covered Muslim women with 'some metal thing attached to their face' is reminiscent of Puar's and Rai's (2002) discussion on monstrosity in relation to the production of the terrorist body. Quoting Foucault, the idea of monstrosity can be traced back to a broader history of sexuality, where 'the monster' is understood as abnormal and a sexual deviant (Foucault 1997 quoted in Puar and Rai 2002), not conforming to established sexual freedoms. This was evident in ways that one interviewee narrated seeing Muslim women in Islamic clothing on a beach in Turkey:

When we were in Turkey the women at the seaside were bathing in these things... they did not even take them off when entering the sea. They were lying by the shore completely covered up, Turkish women... I was really frightened, and so were you, right? (turning to his female flatmate who nods). (Olek, group interview)

Olek describes being scared and feeling threatened, similar emotions to those Pola identified in the previous quote. The inability to 'make sense' of veiled women of the Orient and the need for them to be unveiled to be intelligible is reminiscent of long history of unveiling Muslim women, from European colonial encounters with Islamic societies (Alloula 1986) to recent French bans. Such portrayals of Muslims and Islam through the prism of sexual politics functions here as a key marker of Islam's difference and Otherness frequently positioned on the other side of a dichotomous relationship with liberal European values (Phillips 2012). Such a binary understanding of the West and the Muslim Rest reveal recycled colonial narratives (Hopkins 2009). We agree with Maira (2011) that the convergences between feminism, liberalism, racism and Islamophobia needs to be situated in a larger historical and political contexts of empire - traced through European colonialism and Western modernity. Additionally, it is imperative to understand these expressions in a CEE context by critically looking at the ways that Poland's position in Europe is frequently narrated as its Other. Inserted into a Central and Eastern European historical context of post-communism and strong current presence of the Catholic Church in the public sphere, the liberal feminist narratives applied in the Polish setting are not consistent with the social realities on the ground, signifying a certain form of suspension of the Polish national setting (see Puar and Rai 2002). By stressing the importance of women's rights, many narratives united in an imagined community of Europe further differentiating themselves from the Muslim Other. Arguing firmly against the 'unacceptable' treatment of Muslim women, our participants alluded to the idea that they themselves belonged more to the 'West' where such treatment of women was not acceptable, than to the 'East'. Such a narrative satisfied aspirations of a large part of Polish society to be considered part of Western Europe perceived as the avatar of freedom and consequently of gender equality (see Butler 2008).

## **Conclusion**

This article discussed the centrality of feminist narratives in Islamophobic discourses proclaimed by both secular and Catholic groups in Poland. It drew together insights gathered from two studies on Islamophobia and Muslims carried out in Poland between 2011 and 2016. We showed how the use of women's rights discourses became a common way of opposing Islam by groups that are often in tension with one another within the country's public debate.

The article argued that for the secular group, the convergence of Islamophobia and feminism reinforced an imagined idea of Western Europe as the centre of modernity and symbol of sexual freedoms that the group identified with. Through appropriation of orientalist discourses around Muslims, the secular Islamophobic narrative articulated Muslim presence in Poland as a threat to 'our' secular liberal values. For the Catholics committed to a vision of Christian Europe the promotion of women's rights in anti-Muslim narratives was, paradoxically, running parallel to the Church's active role in the ongoing 'war on gender' (see Szwed and Zielińska 2017) and its vision of women as reproducers of the faith and consequently, the Polish nation.

Gendered narratives against Muslims that drew on women's rights in both the secular and Catholic narratives were inconsistent with the politics on the ground. As such, it resulted in a version of 'gender exceptionalism' familiar in Western European Islamophobic discourses where the patriarchy at home is bracketed and the lens instead focussed on the Other (the Muslim) as always more oppressive. When expressed within a Polish 'post-communist' context, the focus on Muslim women's bodies functioned also as subtext to wider battles over Polish national identity between secular and Catholic groups – conflicts that escalated after the 2015 parliamentary elections.

### **Notes**

1. This doctoral project was part of the Living with Difference research programme in Poland and the UK.
2. This project is part of a wider project mapping Christian Islamophobia in Poland, Germany, and Russia.
3. It is important to note that there is secular and Catholic support of Muslim presence as well. During the mosque protests, for example, a left-wing group opposed the protest organised by Europe of the Future and there are Catholic initiatives (such as the annual Day of Islam) promoting inter-religious dialogue.

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