

Article

Islamophobia, Representation and the Muslim Political Subject. A Swedish Case Study

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Abstract: Applying media analysis, this article addresses how the exclusion of Muslim women from fields of common public interest in Sweden, such as partaking as an active citizen, is materialized. Focusing on a specific event—the cancellation of a screening of *Burka Songs 2.0*—and the media coverage and representation of the cancellation, it discusses the role of discourses of gender equality, secularity and democracy in circumscribing space for Muslim political subjects. It casts light on Islamophobic stereotyping, questionable democracy and secularity, as well as the over-simplified approaches to gender equality connected to dealings with Muslim women in Sweden. Besides obstacles connected to Muslim political subjects, the study provides insights into media representation of Muslim women in general, specially connected to veils and the role of lawmaking connected to certain kind of veiling, in Sweden and Europe.

Keywords: Islamophobia; Muslim political subjects; *Burka Songs 2.0*; representation; gender equality

1. Introduction

Islamophobia is of rising concern in Sweden, manifested, for example, in hate crimes [1–3], discrimination in the labor market and housing [3,4] (pp. 11, 117), and racial profiling [5] (pp. 24–26). Hate crimes in the country increasingly target Muslim women [2,6] (pp. 54, 74), especially women who wear some kind of veil, thereby enhancing their visibility as Muslims. According to Mattias Gardell and Meheke Muftee [7], Islamophobia has also entered mainstream politics, in line with which, this article argues that one of its aspects concerns matters which result in excluding Muslims from active citizenship. There are numerous ways to implement such exclusion, three of which are discussed below: by law, through representation and as a result of political decisions. The study adds to a growing body of research analyzing the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women [8–16], which remains largely understudied in the context of Sweden [2,17–20]. It therefore constitutes a significant contribution to analysis of several aspects of the complex phenomenon of contemporary Islamophobia in Western countries. Islamophobia as a concept will be discussed and defined below.

I begin by focusing on one specific event, occurring in March 2018, that serves to illustrate how exclusion materializes and operates in Sweden and how decisions framed as protecting democratic values, instead risk dominating, and hence producing inequality. Hanna Högstedt's film, *Burka Songs 2.0*, was scheduled for screening in Gothenburg on 14 March as part of a pre-Europride program arranged by the Municipality of Gothenburg. The director, Hanna Högstedt, describes the aim of the film:

The movie and the conversation afterwards are about interpretative prerogative: who can speak for whom, who is considered credible and not; about the difficulty of seeing structures in which oneself is part of the power, such as seeing white racism's effects as white; about Europe's colonial history and how it affects our society today [21,22].

On 1 March, the Municipality of Gothenburg announced that the screening of *Burka Songs 2.0*, with its following panel discussion, had been cancelled due to critique of the focus of the arrangement and composition of the panel. In August 2018 it happened again. Reclaim Pride Gothenburg had planned a screening of *Burka Songs 2.0* with a discussion to follow between the filmmaker and Fatima Doubakil, who features in the film; the day before the screening the organizers were called to a meeting with the Municipality of Gothenburg and told that the event could not go ahead [23].

Before examining the implications of this double cancellation, I discuss increased hostility and Islamophobia in Sweden in more general terms. Legal bans on aspects of Islam, such as items of dress, most of which were instituted after 9/11 [24] (p. 5), also play a part in normalizing the exclusion of Muslims; I therefore include an overview of the legal situation in other European countries, as well as Sweden. While studies of specific contexts, Sweden in this case, are necessary given Europe's heterogeneity, insights into the broader context are also valuable due to similarities which have an impact on Europe more generally; for instance, via EU legal rulings, which are applicable in many European countries, including Sweden. I conclude by highlighting some media events and political processes—a ban on the *niqab* [25] (veil) and concrete proposals in favor of bans—connected to representation and gender.

The examples presented in this article are analyzed with a focus on Islamophobia and ideas of gender equality; taken together they demonstrate that forbidding certain items of clothing is also about barring certain people from participation, hence denying them the right of expression and drawing attention to democratic shortcomings. The principal questions addressed below are the following: In which ways do liberal arguments favoring a *niqab* ban and actions taken against political subjects identifying actively as Muslims relate to the discourse of Islamophobia? How are the critiques of *niqab* and Muslim political subjects represented? How do ideas of gender equality operate in the representation and exclusion of Muslim women?

I start with a part clarifying my materials and methods, followed by a short background to the film *Burka Songs 2.0*. After that I will give a background to the terms “Islamophobia” and “gender equality”, followed by both a background and analyses connected to the cancellation of the film screening and to the media debate in connection to it. This will be followed with a background to the Swedish and European legal discourses connected with veiling. This is then followed by two parts that give both background and analyses connected to gender and representation and to the concept of “white men and women saving Muslim women”. The final discussion is mainly used as an analytical conclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

This study comprises media analysis of representations and the political agency of Muslims in Sweden. Studying media discourse has offered a fruitful method for such exploration, supplying tools with which to access structures of knowledge regimes inherent in the data used in the study, and uncovering the rationales whereby some dicta are accepted as the truth, while others are silenced.

Discourse analysis specifically aims to show how the cognitive, social, historical, cultural or political contexts of language use and communication impinge on the contents, meanings, structures, or strategies of text and dialogue, and vice versa, how discourse itself is an integral part of and contributes to the structures of the context [26] (p. 45).

Teun A. van Dijk describes Critical Discourse Studies as an approach for studying social problems and political issues that can be used for analyzing how discourses (re)produce social domination, in one group's power abuse over another, as well as how the dominated part responds. The study and analyses aim to contribute to the understanding of social problems, especially those caused by public talk and text, and to point out social inequalities [27].

The material cited in this article consists of fourteen articles from the principal Swedish newspapers (four editorials [28–31]; eight debate articles [32–39]; one culture review [40]; one news story [41]; three radio reports [42–44]; three press releases [23,45,46]; seven blog posts [47–53] from

the Social Democratic Municipal Commissioner in Gothenburg, Ann-Sofie Hermansson; and, finally, two bills passed in the Municipality of Norrköping [54,55].

I have, however, been following the Swedish debates connected to the niqab in the principal Swedish newspapers since at least 2009, which means reading every article connected to banning face veils and discussions connected to incidents where niqab has been pointed at as a problem in educational and work-related situations. In addition to the elements discussed here, there have been three coherent and nationwide waves, spurred by three separate incidents: in 2003 two students at a high school were asked to remove their niqab while in school; this was repeated in 2009, involving a student in a municipal adult education program; and, in 2015, a preschool teacher was told that she could not wear a niqab at work. These debates have been largely similar to those discussed here in terms of speakers and content, with few exceptions. This article does not provide detailed accounts of the debates; I have instead chosen three articles that discuss common features within the debate [56]: compulsion connected to face veiling, connections with phenomena such as honor violence, secularity and gender equality. The material connected to the cancelling of *Burka Songs 2.0* has been chosen because it is written by the main actors connected to the cancellation, but also because they bear parts of “making of an Islamist” [57] which I refer to in my analyses.

Available media research in Sweden concludes that a stereotyping representation of Muslims is common in Swedish media. The representation reinforces already existing negative ideas of Muslims, which tends to result in factual representation also being affected by negative associations [58–61].

3. Burka Songs: A Short Presentation of the Content and the Idea Behind

Whose voice may be heard in public space? What stories can be told in Sweden today? What happens to the artistic process when it gets caught up in these issues? *Burka Songs 2.0* is a film about a film that went wrong, about white spaces, about solidarity and fear. Hanna Högstedt received funding to make a film, following the burqa ban in France in 2011, in which she would walk along the Champs-Élysées singing the French national anthem and wearing a face veil until she was arrested. That film was never made. *Burka Songs 2.0* begins with a protest against the French face veil ban on the Champs-Élysées, followed by a talk about representation, racism and the stories that may be told in Sweden today. In the course of the documentary, director Hanna Högstedt speaks to Athena Farrokhzad (poet), Baker Karim (film consultant) and Fatima Doubakil (human rights activist), among others.

The debate organized after the screening was supposed to address issues such as power structures and interpretative prerogatives. Maimuna Abdullahi, who was one of the planned panelists, is a social work student, writer and secretary to the Antiracist Academy in Sweden. Fatima Doubakil is a human right activist and a commissioner on the Muslim Human Rights Committee (MHRC). They are two of the most influential Muslim debaters/lecturers in Sweden.

4. Background Gender Equality and Islamophobia

It is challenging to discuss matters of Islamophobia, because as Salman Sayyid puts it: “Islamophobia, both as a term and a concept, is widely used, hotly disputed and frequently disavowed” [62] (p. 1). There have been several attempts to define Islamophobia, one by Mattias Gardell, who suggests that it comprises “socially reproduced prejudices of and aversions against Islam and Muslims, as well as acts and practices that assail, exclude or discriminate people on the basis that they are or are believed to be Muslims and associated with Islam” [56,63] (p. 17), I will use Gardell’s definition when analyzing Islamophobia but, fruitfully for this study, Sayyid adds to that definition with a discussion of what Islamophobia seeks to discipline. He argues that it is present whenever Muslims or Islam are described as antithetical to Western [64,65] values and emerges in contexts where being Muslim has political significance [66] (p. 17). In the context of the screening of *Burka Songs 2.0* and its attendant panel session, it strongly accentuates the significance of analyzing actions taken in connection with the Muslim political subject.

Defining Islamophobia is also challenging because it tends to be absorbed into a discourse of “racism without racists” [62], which differs from racism in which biological difference is in focus, such as Nazism, in that it can be explained as religious critique. The question of whether Islam may be criticized occurs often and the answer should be that of course it can and, indeed, should be; the problem is, however, that much of the criticism directed towards Islam and Muslims is not free from Islamophobia. Conforming to the profile of racism without racists, it bears colonial and orientalist connotations harking back to projects of “civilizing” unruly Muslims [62], and is often justified in terms of democratization and the defense of Western values.

There are no reliable figures for the size of the Muslim population in Sweden. A study from 2007, based on country of birth or origins, estimated it to be in the region of 400,000 persons [67], a figure that has increased since then; currently a credible estimate would be around 5% of the population in total, but that includes people with an assumed Muslim cultural background, not only those practicing Islam, and it excludes people who are living in Sweden but have not yet received (or been denied) a permanent or temporary residence permit. As Jonas Otterbeck argues:

Sweden has become obsessed with its Muslim population. Blogs, newspapers, TV shows, debaters, artists, politicians, interfaith activists, academics in the social science field, school personnel, comedians, right-wing Christians and, of course, people with a Muslim family history are active participants in an endless discourse about Muslims. Integration, criminality, honor, sexism, undemocratic thinking, rape, nativity, radicalization, etc.—everything is given a Muslim angle [4] (p. 103).

The subjects of discussion in Otterbeck’s quote also offer a sample of some of the most common biases and stereotypes that flourish in understandings of Muslims in Sweden. Further, Islamophobia makes use of gendered practice; in effect the stereotyping and biases differ depending on a person’s sex. Muslim women, specially veil-wearing women, are largely constructed as a homogenous group in terms of lack of agency as well as being oppressed [10] (p. 313). The discourse of a unique Swedish gender equality contrasted with stereotypical representation of Muslim gender relations is something that matters in analyzing the parts where gender equality is discussed [56]. In this context stereotypes of both “us” and “them” are in use, which may prevent us from seeing things in their whole complexity.

5. *Burka Songs 2.0: The Media Discussions and the Political Processes*

On 27 February 2018, the liberal writer Jenny Sonesson wrote an editorial in *Göteborgs Posten* with the title, “The critics of the burka must also be invited”; even if the title indicates that the concern is face-veils, she states in the article that the panel should also include credible critics of veils in general [28]. She claims that the problem consists of the combination of Abdullahi and Doubakil who, together with Högstedt, were to participate in the panel after the screening. Sonesson argues that Abdullahi and Doubakil do not problematize forced veiling; in her view, what they do—labelling as colonialists and racists those Europeans who invoke the oppression of Muslim women—is the opposite of this. She does not give her source, but it is fair to assume that she is referring to an article by Maimuna Abdullahi, Zaynab Ouahabi, Aftab Soltani and Fatima Doubakil [68], written in response to an article by journalist Lars Åberg with the title, “The veil as a weapon against secular democracy”, that critiques a conference named “The hijab as political resistance” [38]. The article by Abdullahi and her co-writers posits a problem with policies and representation that are used as tools to promote women to take off their veils; clearly this differs from what Sonesson suggests they advocate. In some ways it is quite the contrary.

Sonesson also refers to Lars Åberg’s article when arguing that Abdullahi and Doubakil relativize honor-related oppression and equate anti-terror measures with racism; specifically, she quotes Åberg’s interpretation of an Alternative Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (written by Doubakil et al.), rather than referring to the report itself. She thereby presents Åberg’s interpretation as a “truth” on which the reader may depend when determining who

Abdullahi and Doubakil are: a common device in discourse-making [69]. As Åberg's article is central to the resulting furor, it is worth summarizing and analyzing its content, which is principally devoted to claiming that there is an Islamist network in Sweden of which Doubakil is a central figure. But what has Doubakil done in order to be labeled in such manner? In 2013 Doubakil was a member of a group entitled Muslims in Cooperation Network (MCIN) that wrote the Alternative Report to CERD. Åberg claims that the report demanded that the state should monitor and control the media on matters connected to Islam. In the part of the report that concerns this issue, however, Islam is not mentioned; rather, Muslims and, more specifically, freedom of speech, are the topics raised:

The government through its various branches, such as the chancellor of Justice, must ensure that the freedom of speech and freedom of the press is balanced by respect for the rights and reputation of others. In particular the Chancellor of Justice must use its discretion to prosecute offences against the freedom of the press and freedom of expression targeting Muslims. Special attention also needs to be paid to the commentary fields of Internet media outlets [70] (p. 7).

Responding to Doubakil et al.'s Alternative Report, the CERD recommendation reads:

That the State party effectively investigate, prosecute and punish all hate crimes and take effective measures to combat hate speech in the media and on the Internet, including by prosecuting the perpetrators, where appropriate, regardless of their official status. The Committee urges the State party to take the necessary measures to promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue and respect for diversity, aiming those measures at journalists, *inter alios* [71].

CERD repeats basically the same statements in its concluding observations for 2018 [72], and the same kinds of concerns were highlighted by the United Nations Association of Sweden in their alternative report to CERD in 2008 [73].

Åberg also expresses dissatisfaction with the report's concerns about the Government's work with issues connected with the honor culture, work which is criticized both for being ineffective and for its imbalance:

[T]hese policies are stigmatising Muslims since the practices they target are perceived to be linked to Muslims in the public imagination. Given this stigmatisation downside, it is important that the policies address real societal problems instead of just giving the impression that these practices are common features among certain people [70] (p. 36).

One question that arises here concerns who should be allowed to criticize how the work against honor violence is carried out. Åberg himself has written several newspaper articles and co-written a book [74] criticizing the conduct of measures against honor violence by the authorities, for instance for their ineffectiveness. Concerns that resonate with the views of the MCIN regarding representations of stigmatization can also be found in a different Alternative Report to CERD, written by the United Nations Association of Sweden in 2008 [73] (p. 34).

Åberg argues that some of what he regards as Islamist propaganda is fundamentally a critique directed at improved anti-terrorism laws. The MCIN's Alternative Report of 2013 presses for the creation of an independent truth commission to investigate the effects of anti-terror laws and their compliance—or otherwise—with human rights. In response to this, CERD states in its concluding observations in 2018 that:

The committee is concerned at reports that at present the Terrorism Act disproportionately targets Muslims, while crimes committed by other groups, such as neo-Nazi groups, are not investigated as terrorism. . . . the Committee recommends that the State party ensure that measures to combat terrorism are undertaken in such a way as to protect fundamental human rights, including the right of equality [72].

Notwithstanding this similar framing by a high-ranking body of concerns that replicates those expressed by the MCIN five years earlier, Åberg ended his article by stating that individuals in the Islamist group he references seem to dislike the society (Sweden) in which they live: a society that provides greater equality than most, as well as freedom of speech, freedom of association and funding.

What we may observe from this is that, when expressing their views—for instance, when writing an Alternative Report requesting equality, fair treatment and practices in according human rights—Muslim political subjects must be prepared to be criticized and described as Islamists in one of the country's mainstream newspapers. I have failed to find a similar critique when it comes to the United Nations Association of Sweden or to CERD, who have both expressed similar concerns. Another important aspect of this exchange is that media actors such as Sonesson and Åberg use their platforms in order to take part in, and attempt to shape, agenda planning resulting in limitations being placed on the space in which Muslim political subjects may act as active citizens.

The cancellation of the *Burka Songs 2.0* screening soon became a political matter. The decision was not made by politicians, but by public officials; nevertheless, the (former, after the elections in September 2018) Social Democratic Municipal Commissioner, Ann-Sofie Hermansson, has been one of the most influential opponents of the screening and the panel discussion to follow, stating unequivocally that, “These kinds of arrangements are totally unacceptable” [34]. Furthermore, she writes that the City of Gothenburg should never be a platform for extremists. Her rhetoric concerning Abdullahi and Doubakil has followed the same pattern in several interviews, as well as on her private blog [75]. She has stated that both have expressed religious extremism, although, when asked to provide specific examples, she merely replied that they could easily be found on Google [39].

Meanwhile, the furor over *Burka Songs 2.0* is becoming heated. On 27 March 2018, Swedish Television announced that the film would be screened at Gothenburg Literature House on April 16th [41]; on 28 March, Swedish Radio reported Hermansson's statement that the Municipal Cultural Affairs committee would be inspecting municipal funding arrangements for the venue [43]. Meanwhile the Cultural Affairs Director in Gothenburg, Anna Rosengren, defended both the film screening and the Literature House, asserting that neither have overstepped the mark [44]. The debate continued between Hermansson and a politician for the liberal party, Helene Odenjung, in which Odenjung claimed that the MHRC is known for inviting hate preachers, spreading anti-Semitic propaganda and expressing hatred toward women and homosexuals [37]. Similar statements were issued from Gothenburg Municipality when it attempted to stop Doubakil from participating in a discussion in August 2018; they could not be sure that Doubakil agrees with principles of democracy and human rights [46]. Odenjung did not present any proof for her allegations. Abdullahi and Doubakil were not formally accused of anything; rather, Sonesson and Hermansson used guilt by association to affirm their theses. Gothenburg Municipality in their press release (and Hermansson in her blog) referred to debaters, terror experts and police while stating that Doubakil can be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, extremists and non-democratic organizations. These evocative terms were not defined, nor their referents explicated; it is enough for the purposes of tarring Abdullahi and Doubakil with the brush of Islamophobic discourse that such notions should be associated with them in readers' minds. There appears to be no foundation for these statements, however, and the organizers of the projected August screening requested Gothenburg Municipality to produce the documents on which the statements about Doubakil were purported to be based [23]. Finally, they decided to stage the event despite the Municipality's embargo.

The actions and responses in connection with screening *Burka Songs 2.0* clearly resonate with the underlying aim of the film, highlighting issues such as who is to be considered credible and by whom. These questions did not arise on a theoretical level in the form of debate, but in very concrete form in, for example, the cancellation of events due to who was supposed to be participating. In many of the arguments against the screening and the panel conversation, the criticism also seemed to work on autopilot via the thoughtless application of Muslim stereotypes. From an analytical point of view,

it needs to be highlighted that an accusation of someone being Islamist happens in a context where the term Islamist, since 9/11, has in much media debate lost many of its necessary nuances, and gets easily connected to a person being a terrorist [76]. It is therefore a serious accusation, especially when it is used without a definition. I call the process “making of an Islamist”. It successfully undermines someone’s credibility and it proceeds without clear evidence or explanations of exactly why the person deemed an Islamist deserves the label. It is further a claim that you are Islamist in all aspects of your character. Common here are also references to democratic core values, as something that needs to be protected, again without specification of the ways in which “the Islamist” is threatening them. This takes place in an already hostile environment where Muslim stereotyping is a common feature, hence leading to decreasing space for Muslim political subjects. All the above creates a polarized political and medial public sphere, where those with interpretative prerogative use their platform to overshadow and potentially also prevent those inadequately defined as Islamist to respond and participate. The process of “making of an Islamist” has happened on several occasions in the Swedish political sphere. Connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, are often repeated when discrediting Muslim political subjects, but so far have appeared without references [76]. This needs to be seen as a part in the discourse of Islamophobia, where both stereotypes and restrictions of political subjects are used as tools, resulting in decreased space for active citizenship.

As an aside, it should be noted that the film is not about forced veiling and, as far as I have been able to ascertain, neither Abdullahi nor Doubakil have indicated they are in favor of it. It needs to be mentioned, however, that this article does not have the intention of passing judgements regarding the overall political work of Abdullahi and Doubakil, but to analyze how their practice of active citizenship is met.

6. *Niqab* and *Hijab* within Legal Discourse and the Law—In Sweden and in Europe

There are no general, national or specific, local laws in Sweden that forbid the wearing of the *niqab* or *hijab*. The only context in which such bans can be put in place is within private companies in accordance with a general policy that forbids philosophical, religious and political symbols for staff members coming into contact with customers, based on an EU Court of Justice ruling on 14 March 2017, in Case C-157/15, Samira Achbita vs. G4S Secure Solutions, and Case C-188/15, Asma Bougnaoui vs. Micropole Univers. Several proposals have been put forward in favor of a legal ban of face veils, however, the first by two MPs for the Centre Party in 2009. Other attempts have been made in parliament by Liberals, Moderates and Swedish Democrats [6] (p. 74).

Until 2011 (when France and subsequently Belgium introduced a national ban on covering the face), there were no national prohibitions against the practice in Europe; however, there were local prohibitions of various degrees, which prohibited specific ways of covering the face in specific contexts in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland and Catalonia [77] (pp. 4–6). Bulgaria introduced a general national ban on the *niqab* in 2016, Austria in 2017 and Denmark in 2018. In Finland, Germany, Latvia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Spain there are pending legislative proposals that seek to ban face veils; in Belgium, Spain and Germany at least one type of legal ban is already in place [24] (p. 11). In Estonia and Hungary, the governments are working on a bill aimed at banning the *niqab* in public places, while in the non-EU country of Norway, the government plans to introduce a ban on wearing face veils at schools and universities and, in Switzerland, the lower house has approved a ban on wearing the *niqab* in public places.

In France, it is forbidden to wear the veil in schools (together with other religious symbols), while national bans on religious clothing can also be found in Denmark and Spain in specific settings and sectors, and local bans prohibiting religious symbols exist in 8 out of 16 states in Germany [24] (p. 10). Common to the processes in the EU member states mentioned here has been the role played by nationalist and far-right parties in proposing, promoting and introducing the legal bans, even if, in most cases, it has been mainstream parties enacting the restrictions [24] (p. 5).

7. Gender and Representation in Media

In the *New Cambridge History of Islam*, Manuela Marín [78] raises an essential issue concerning scholarly representations of Muslim women that she claims have tended to lack intersectional analysis. Historical research—which is scarce—has treated Muslim women as a discrete and uniform category, yet Marín urges the importance of exploring further dimensions. Differences between women's lives, positions and opportunities are difficult to understand only by means of the single analytical category of gender; social and economic factors are also very important, as well as, historically, whether the individual was free or enslaved. Furthermore, marital status has likewise played a crucial role, along with issues of ethnicity, urban or rural residence, a nomadic lifestyle, and so on. These factors are not important only in historical studies, but are also highly relevant to contemporary research; class, age and functionality comprise further considerations.

In order to put this into context, I continue this discussion by highlighting material from Swedish media contexts which exemplifies facets of how Muslim women are represented in Sweden. I start with a debate article in *Svenska Dagbladet* in which Ghazala Chaudhry reflects on her own perceptions:

Something that can be seen in Swedish society is that Muslim women are usually seen as puppet dolls. A person who is a puppet doll does not stand up for something of her own, lacks character, and lets herself be led and guided by others. The veil is seen as something imposed and women who wear it appear to be ruled by others or indoctrinated to believe that the veil is something that is good [32,79].

The voices of Muslim women, often in the form of debate articles, have become more common in Swedish media, often testifying to similar experiences as Chaudhry, and not rarely to their vulnerability to threats and violence [2,80]. In sharp contrast to these voices there are others (debate articles, editorials, columns, etc.) that discuss Muslim women—and especially the clothes that some of them wear—from a very different perspective. I explore this discourse below, highlighting its common themes through a number of profiled debaters.

Sophia Jarl is a right-wing opposition commissioner in the Municipality of Norrköping in Sweden, who published a debate article in *Aftonbladet* on 2 August 2016, entitled “The burka and niqab are symbols of oppression”. Not only aimed at the face veils, the article advocates a ban on wearing veils of any kind in schools. After stating that the face veils are not religious symbols, she continues by discussing the struggle against honor-related violence in Sweden. This resonates with the introduction to Jan Guillou's column in *Aftonbladet*, “Sweden should not allow the degradation of women in schools”, which reads, “There is a minority in the world who believes that it is God's will that young women should be genitally mutilated” [33]. Guillou stated later in the article that genital mutilation and the face veil cannot be considered equally serious tendencies, but Jarl does not clarify how the veil and honor-related violence have any relevant connection at all. Rhetoric that links veiling or specifically the *niqab* to genital mutilation and honor-related violence is rather common in similar contexts [56] (pp. 174–177).

In an article in *Göteborgs Posten*, “Why not sit naked in the classroom?”, Lars Åberg (2012) argues, much like Jarl, that the *niqab* is a quasi-religious phenomenon, adding, “[w]ith reference to religious freedom, any craziness can now be justified if given a religious meaning” [40]. Although Jarl observes that the veil is not about religion, but, rather, “originates in cultural, traditional and patriarchal structures” [36], she continues with the statement that Sweden should, as a secular society, “put the law before religious freedom” [36]. In addition, Jarl believes that the veil manages, simultaneously, to encourage shyness and the diminishment of the sexuality of those wearing it, while sexualizing girls. “In Sweden, neither men nor women are seen as representatives of their gender. Our identity is so much more than sexuality. We meet as equals based on free and individual choices of whom we want to be” [36]. Apart from painting a far too ideal image of “our” gender-blindness in Sweden, the liberal tolerance discourse appears in its most clearly contradictory form when free and individual choices become the slogan with which to ban people dressing the way they wish.

Wendy Brown (2006) argues that tolerance as discourse requires dichotomies such as civilized, free and tolerant on the one hand and barbarians, fundamentalists and intolerant on the other. Discursively, civilization and tolerance have been identified (by Western scholars) with the West, both historically and in the present time [81] (p. 6), while non-Western societies or people are (discursively) sorted into illiberal categories. In this way tolerance can be used as an argument for phenomena as diverse as bans on the hijab/niqab and military invasions [80] (p. 2). Jarl's argumentation asserts the idea of a form of gender equality that is specific and unique to Sweden [56,82] (p. 7), meaning that, as Gardell argues, "[t]hrough the patriarchy associated with Islam and Muslims—among those who are not like us—gender discrimination becomes an ethnically and religiously coded problem, an immigrant problem that does not concern us equal Swedes" [56] (p. 182).

What Marín emphasized regarding the lack of intersectional analysis in scholarly texts is also clearly present throughout Jarl's debate article. For instance, although Jarl claims that multi-dimensional identities are the norm in Sweden, the Muslim women in her text are described only in terms of their assumed gender roles and sexuality that then become parts of a sexist and Islamophobic representation, presenting the Muslim women through stereotypical understandings of her as passive and controlled by men's desires. Further, the representation touches upon a common discourse, discussed by Mayanthi Fernando, where a successful integration happens through an undressed female Muslim body, together with a successful heterosexuality (Fernando 2013). The discourse also plays a part in differentiating the West from the rest, through what Fernando calls "a sexual clash of civilizations" [83].

Something else that is remarkable in these texts is that neither Guillou, Åberg, nor Jarl include the perspectives of women who have experience of wearing the *niqab*, yet, although access is rather limited, such views are available in Sweden via blogs, newspaper interviews, television shows and debate articles. These writers impose their own interpretations of what religiosity means on these women when stating that the *niqab* does not qualify as a religious symbol, completely disregarding and silencing the possible objections of *niqab*-wearers themselves. Nor do they take into consideration their own participation in meaning-making connected to the *niqab*. Consequently, Heidi Safia Mirza (2013) argues that it is actually through discussions like these that the complex dress of Muslim women has been given a meaning greater than its religious or social status. These texts together also contain many of the ingredients that have been used in the broader context of European countries when arguing in favor of banning face veils: the drive for gender equality, secularity and the inclination for homogeneity [24] (p. 7).

Besides writing debate articles, Jarl has in her capacity as a politician written two bills [51,52] in the Municipality of Norrköping, together with Pär Linderöth, one of which aims to forbid face veils for employees within the municipality. Here again they connect their arguments to honor culture by claiming that wearing face-veils is the result of its presence in Norrköping. The bill does not mention religion at all, rather describing the veil as an item of cultural and traditional clothing. The second bill aims at investigating the possibility of the municipality of Norrköping's imposing regulations banning children under the age of 15 from wearing the *hijab* when taking part in any of the municipality's activities. The city council of Norrköping has rejected both proposals with references to the Discrimination and Education Acts.

The texts of Guillou, Åberg and Jarl make similar arguments in their statements regarding connections between honor-related violence and the oppression of women, on the one hand, and representations of the Swedish self as gender equal on the other. There is very little evidence put forward to support either claim, however, underlining the fact that some dicta are expected to be naturally accepted [69] (p. 11).

8. White Men and Women Saving Muslim Women from Muslim Men?

In her essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the phrase: "white men saving brown women from brown men" [84] (p. 93). Saving Muslim women from Muslim men is

a practice and motif present both in historical and contemporary instances, and one in which the veil has also played a central role. The unveiling of Algeria [85] (p. 103), the war on Afghanistan [86–88] (p. 29) and the French veil debate(s) [89] all bear elements that reference gender equality as seen through the lens of a Western viewer. The texts that I have analyzed for this study are similarly distorted, as I have indicated, and all demonstrate shortcomings in understanding the diversity within veiling. Lila Abu-Lughod, however, emphasizes the importance of taking into account the different circumstances and heterogeneity of women wearing veils, observing that it is a reductive oversimplification to analyze a large number of women simply on the basis of a single piece of cloth that they all wear [86,90–93] (p. 40). Abu-Lughod goes on to add that veiling tends to be described as evidence of a lack of agency. Åberg assumes, for instance, that the *niqab* can never be a free choice made by the person wearing it [37,77,94–97] while Guillou states that, “[i]t is time to free the schoolgirls [98] who are either forced by their parents to wear the niqab or burqa in school, or possibly themselves imagine that [it is part of] being grown up (adult), cool, exclusive or God’s will” [33]. Finally, Jarl describes the *niqab* as a manifestation of women’s inferior position [33], and then all three writers reach the same conclusion: banning the niqab is the correct way forward in terms of gender equality, secularity and freedom of choice. This claim is made without considering the consequences such bans have had in countries like France and Belgium [96,99,100]. Over the past two decades, scholars have also challenged the conventional narrative connected to secularity as simply a separation between church and state, religion and law, political and church-based authority. It cannot be understood as a pillar upon which the disappearance of religion is leaning on, but as a historical product containing its own epistemological, moral and political parts—which in turn cannot be understood simply by describing a modern state’s retreat from religion [101]. Using this understanding of secularity provides the insight that the term is, in a similar way to the term Islamist, used in ways that do not provide any depth to the understanding of what is meant when secularity is used as an argument for banning certain clothes.

There is also a clear difference in representations of nameless hijab-wearing women and the Muslim political subject. Even if both stereotypes carry socially reproduced prejudices and hence lean on Islamophobic ideas, the actions taken to exclude them differ. The oppressed hijab-wearing woman must be saved by us, while the Muslim political subject is a person from whom we (or the democracy) needs to be saved. Relevant to this, Mirza discusses the dual roles of the nameless hijabis—who have, in light of the “war against terrorism”, become some sort of obsession in which all the measures taken against them, such as banning veils, appear in endless discussions and debates—being concurrently portrayed as voiceless victims in need of saving, and at the same time dangerous and a potential threat [10] (p. 304). The representations can be connected to the Islamophobia seeking to discipline political subjects, understood as if there is a will of her own, there is a threat. The ambivalence also became clear in France during 2004 in connection to the banning of the wearing of religious symbols at schools. Muslim women were often represented as not having a choice or lacking will-power to decide when it came to wearing the hijab. When it gradually became clear that the *hijab* was also worn as a result of the women’s free will, representations of them shifted from being a victim to being dangerous—she has chosen it, therefore she is a threat [102]. Different aspects of Islamophobia are mobilized to interpret the actions of a woman who exercises her own will and those of a woman presumed to lacking one.

As an aside, it is also worth noting that the construct of our remarkable Swedish equality should be problematized with vigor, due to the outcome of #MeToo, which demonstrated the extent to which women, regardless of their positions in Sweden, are exposed to sexual harassment and abuse—not by “the others” but by men in every walk of life. Most of the articles discussed here are written prior to #MeToo, and hence have not taken the movement into consideration. I might have left some stone unturned, but a regular search indicates that of the journalists mentioned in this article, only Sonesson has written something related to #MeToo, while Guillou has given an interview in which he stated that he is nowadays afraid of hugging female friends [103]. This leads me back to Abu-Lughod’s reflections

that saving “the other women” is a mainstream global issue for white men and women, which elides the women’s will to be “saved” and the consequences of the saving, while demonstrating an inability or unwillingness to see shortcomings in the gender equality they advocate [86] (p. 166).

9. Discussion

When liberal discourses such as tolerance are used to ban, or argue for a ban on, a certain kind of clothing, and when freedom and gender equality serve as rhetorical tools to convince audiences of the correctness of the proposed prohibition, it demonstrates who the discourse considers able to practice tolerance. Within such discourses tolerance is an undisputed Western norm together with freedom and equality, accompanied by a drive to eradicate their presumed opposites, forbid them, take measures to hold them back. In the cases I have discussed here, stereotypes are used to justify these dichotomies; further, communication is most often only in one direction—from majority to minority. This though does not happen without a resistance, which is, for instance, shown in the increasing amount of Muslim women voices in media advocating their own understandings of both veiling, Muslim political subjecthood and the Islamophobic environment in Sweden. But in the case of debates, liberal majority voices tend to ignore the actual arguments of Muslim intellectuals or wearers of *niqabs* and rather resort to character assassination as a strategy. The language of stereotypes and the casting of suspicion have been used in all the fields that I have described in this article: in arguments in favor and justifications of face-veil bans and hence lawmaking; in representations in mainstream Swedish media; in the cancellations of screenings of *Burka Songs 2.0*. All instances have produced similar results: suggestions to restrict or actually forbid certain clothes, bodies, voices, ideas, actions—or put differently, attempts to disqualify certain people from their sought role as active citizens, not for their ideas but for whom they are presumed to be.

If we approach the topic of (face) veiling from outside the described discourses, Mattias Gardell interprets the laws relating to clothing in diametrically oppositional terms to the voices that advocate these bans:

This wave of laws and authoritarian decrees that govern the dress a Muslim woman may wear if she leaves her home and enters public places, has led many European democracies to embrace a policy that was previously restricted to authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, such as Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan and the countries on Arabian Peninsula, where the state has long been dictating Muslim women’s clothing [56,104] (p. 166).

This observation once again strikes at the very heart of the contradictions of so-called liberal tolerance. In Jarl’s text we may see references to Sweden’s secularity, what it is committed to and what it cannot include. Secularity understood in this way creates an internal contradiction between secularism’s ideal of freedom of religion and the state’s desire for regulations that break down the public/private barrier, thus directly opposing ideas of the individual’s freedom [101] (p. 4).

Attitudes connected to “saving” Muslim women follow a secular epistemology within which there are clear tendencies towards translating religion-based truths/interpretations as compulsion [105] (p. 11). Indeed, secular epistemology is closely linked to the liberal tolerance discourse [105] (p. 3), something which became clear in the French veil debate, where the idea of *Laïcité* as opposing religious symbols in public spaces played a central role [88], as it seems to play even in the case of Sweden. The problematization of veils and the propagation of suspicion that tends to lead to exclusion are performed in the name of secularity and democracy, which are presented as inherently Swedish values; discourses colored by historical and cultural specificity are also part of this representation. The forced or false connections made between face veiling and practices such as honor violence, extremism and Islamism are often repeated, but seldom come supported by any evidence, constituting a discourse because the rhetorical patterns seem to be taken for granted to the point that no further explanations or evidence are required.

How and where to delineate what fits within both democracy and secularity seems very unclear. As the space for participation among Sweden's Muslim population decreases, so too may their sense of belonging, something already affected by Islamophobic victimization in the country [8]. It is therefore necessary to highlight the question of what democracy obligates, and to address it from a starting point where certain bodies do not automatically possess democratic values and hence get to define it, regardless of how they act.

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99. 27 out of 32 interviewees in a French study have claimed that their social lives were negatively affected and their activities outside the home were circumscribed. The fear of the police’s ID checks and verbal abuse prevents the interviewees from leaving their homes. Freedom of movement has also been restricted for those participants who chose to stop wearing the niqab because they do not feel comfortable in public without covering their faces. Only one person said that she socializes more since she stopped wearing the niqab. Several respondents argue that restrictions on freedom of movement have led to less physical activity, which in turn has resulted in physical and mental problems. Interviewees have also reported that they have suffered from depression and felt anxiety in connection with venturing outside their homes [[96](#)] (pp. 2–3). *The Belgian ‘burka ban’ confronted with inside realities* written by Eva Brems et al. [[100](#)] deals with similar issues as the French report after the ban. The informants in the Belgian study experienced indignation, frustration and humiliation and felt worried about the future after the ban came into force.
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104. My translation. Original: Denna våg av lagar och myndighetsdekret som reglerar vilken klädsel en muslimsk kvinna får bära om hon beger sig hemifrån, ut i det offentliga rummet, har medfört att många europeiska demokratier kommit att anamma en politik som tidigare varit begränsad till auktoritära regimer i den muslimska världen, som Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan och länderna på Arabiska halvön, där staten sedan länge dikterat muslimska kvinnors klädsel.
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