How do young Brussels Muslims construct and express their identity and religious practices in a society where debates about the place of Islam are increasingly polarized?

Key messages

1   Discrimination is part of the mental map of the Brussels' Muslim young people we interviewed about their life trajectory, whether because of personal or family experiences, or as a result of identifying with a group whose fundamental rights are perceived to be violated.

2   Our research also shows that we cannot consider these young Muslims from Brussels as a homogeneous group in terms of their identity and identification.

3   The vast majority of the Muslim young people we interviewed about their identity stressed their belonging to Brussels, to Belgium and to their neighbourhood.

4   The link with the country of origin of their (grand)parents is, for many of them, loosing its salience but others identify solely to that country.

5   They were also numerous to identify themselves primarily as Muslims. For most of these youngsters being Muslim is not in opposition with others, nor is it exclusive of other simultaneously claimed identities. However, for a minority it clearly stands as a reactive identity.

5   Finally, despite this strong identification as Muslims, the results of the SECUR project highlight the existence of processes of individu-alization and reflexiveness towards religious practices and norms.

Introduction

In Belgium, since the first instances of girls wearing headscarves in schools in 1989, the public discussion on the place of Islam and Muslims in Belgian society has always remained present. That debate has become more affectively polarised in the wake of the attacks of 22 March 2016. In the survey "Noir, jaune, blues" published in 2017, 60% of respondents felt that the presence of Muslim communities in Belgium posed a threat to Belgian identity ("Noir Jaune Blues: constat d'échec pour le vivre-ensemble en Belgique", RTBF.Be, 09 January 2017). However, these debates are often carried out among experts, with the target audience, namely Muslims, having relatively little input and rarely voicing their opinions. The same observation can be made - even more strikingly - for young Muslims. However, two decades of Islamist terrorism in the West, in which the 15-25-year-old age group is most at risk of violent radicalisation (Lynch 2013), have only reinforced this enduring image of 'enemies from within' (Cesari 2001).

In this context, focusing on the religious practices and identity processes of the younger generations of Muslims is of special interest as Brussels has some key characteristics relating to them. In 2015, there were 177,722 young people between the ages of 12 and 24 in Brussels, i.e., 15% of the population (Sacco et al. 2016). Many of those are of foreign descent: if the variable of origin is considered (rather than merely nationality) the number of people of foreign origin - either born with a foreign nationality or with a parent who was born with a foreign nationality - represents two thirds of the total population of the region (Sacco et al. 2016). The aim of this research was therefore to understand the mechanisms of identity construction of young Muslims socialised in Europe and, in particular, to focus on the impact of religious practices, discrimination, and attitudes towards Brussels and/or the country of origin of their (grand)parents on the existence of reactive identities processes, or, on the contrary, on processes of individualisation and secularisation.

Methods, approaches and results

Our research involved a mixed method using qualitative and quantitative data from, with, and on young Muslims in Brussels.

Regarding the qualitative method, the results presented in this research report are drawn from 16 group discussions and 20 individual semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a two-year research project. By the end of the project, 124 young people had actively taken part in the study. We were careful to ensure a certain degree of representativeness among our participants. First of all, the age range was between 16 and 25, with the majority of young people aged between 16 and 19. This offers a great diversity of profiles depending on whether the participants are still in high school, enrolled in higher education or were at the beginning of their working life. Secondly, we ensured that there was a relatively equal representation of both sexes to determine whether gender influenced the answers to some of our questions. Lastly, we expanded the type of venues in which we conducted interviews from youth centres, schools, tutoring-oriented structures, more 'community-based' organisations, to mosques and more informal places of conversation. However, despite this diversification effort in the collection of data, a significant number of the youngsters we met share certain characteristics. Firstly, most of participants are of Moroccan descent. This reflects the historical but also the actual demographic conditions. Secondly, the vast majority of our respondents is second and third generation.

In fact, an overwhelming share of them have dual citizenship. Finally, the bulk of the young people we met live in neighbourhoods in the 'Poor Crescent' (the 'Croissant Pauvre') of Brussels, an area which is itself located in the heart of the city.

The quantitative data were gathered by the DEBEST program (Democratic Empowerment for Brussels Education, Schools and Teachers) of the Universitaire Associatie Brussel that focuses on pupils aged between 15 and 17 years old in Brussels. To this end, the researchers surveyed all pupils in grade 10 (4th year of Secondary Education) from 12 Flemish-speaking and 12 French-speaking schools. Out of final 1873 questionnaires, 905 young people have a link with a country where Islam is the dominant religion.

Regarding our results we are able to show that:

• Although the majority of young Muslims do not report any individual experience of discrimination, a careful analysis of their life trajectory demonstrates that discrimination is part of the mental map of the young people we interviewed, whether because of personal or family experiences, or as a result of identifying with a group whose fundamental freedoms are perceived to be violated, in particular the free public exercise of their religion. This collective identification process is as crucial as individual discrimination.

Methods, approaches and results

• Many of them identified themselves as being from Brussels, as Belgians or as having a particular attachment to their neighbourhood. However, the vast majority of them also asserted their identity as Muslims, and for some of them this was the only identity they could identify with. For most of them, a strong, important and proud Muslim identity is in no way framed as being in opposition to or in conflict with that of others, nor is it exclusive of other simultaneously claimed identities. However, for a minority it clearly stands as a reactive identity.

• We show that religious salience and religious pride can be, at least partially, dislocated from religious practices and normativity. Indeed, we also highlight the existence of individualization and reflexive processes towards religious practices and norms among our young Muslim respondents who still strongly identify with Islam. These different processes of identification and individuation are not without their tensions and contradictions, calling for further reflection on the strategies of presentation and negotiation of the 'self', which must continuously consider the complex and constant intersection of the weight of family legacies, group injunctions, wider societal dynamics, the effects of public debate, and the individual's own capacities of appropriation.

• As stated above, most of the young Muslims interviewed, identify themselves with their neighbourhood, with Brussels as a multi-ethnic city they are proud to belong to, and to Belgium. The link with the country of origin of their (grand)parents is perpetuated through short periods of holidays and (obviously) certain cultural practices. However, for a minority of them, the country of origin remains the only way they identify themselves.

Conclusions

In this report, we draw a complex and nuanced picture of Muslim youths in Brussels, considering their aspirations and the way they identify themselves in a society that often sees them as a potential problem rather than a resource. In many public debates, young Muslims often occupy a form of media visibility as a homogenous group whose identity is problematised in the public space (delinquency, riots, terrorism, failure to respect the rules of confinement). However, we show that discrimination is part of the mental map of the young people we interviewed, whether it is due to personal or family experiences or whether it results from identification with a group perceived as having its fundamental freedoms violated, in particular the free public exercise of its religion. Our data also show a strong identification of these young persons as Muslims, which is not exclusive of other types of identification simultaneously claimed. Finally, we highlight the processes of reflexivity, appropriation, and individualisation of belief as well as the negotiation of certain religious norms that are taking place among Brussels' Muslim youth.

Policy recommendations

1.   Polarizing public discourses

Discourses can be apprehended as institutions producing effects on individuals, especially if they are repeated routinely and almost daily. Regarding identification processes of cultural and religious minorities in Europe, a much-discussed hypothesis in academic literature is that of the existence of reactive religiosities. This suggests that, in a context of very tense public debate on issues related to the incorporation of Islam into Western societies, the religiosity of Muslims tends to increase, both in identification and in the level of religious practice. The community of Muslims is thought to provide a space of identification beyond national affiliations, a dematerialized homeland. The theory of reactive religiosity is an extension of the theory of reactive ethnicity. The latter emerged in the early 1990s in the United States when the classical theory of the Chicago School argued that 'assimilation' and the consequent erasure of cultural differences was the ultimate stage of immigration and inter-ethnic relations. And yet, prominent scholars demonstrated that bonds of ethnic solidarity had been maintained, and even revived, among immigrant populations, particularly those of European descent. Our data show that processes of reactive religiosity do exist. To avoid the acceleration of these processes and the rise in polarization of public representations between Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other,

it is crucial to avoid, mitigate, and combat alienating and polarizing public discourses. To achieve this, one must in the first instance be aware that "young people" and therefore "young Muslims" are not a homogeneous group. In the public forum, one should be wary of such homogenising (and therefore potentially stereotyping) approaches. Moreover, it seems crucial to amplify positive Muslim public figures and the positive role and impact of Muslims in our society when they contribute to humanitarian actions, democratic political involvement, social welfare activities, entrepreneurship, etc.

2.   Discrimination

The perception of discrimination is very strong among the young Muslims. It is crucial to realise that the young people themselves do not have to have experienced discrimination, but that it is about the perception of discrimination towards acquaintances, or people with whom they identify. Experiences of discrimination seem to flow through public debates, the media (see previous point), but also through first line services, such as schools and the police. Such experiences can be minimised and managed by programming and enhancing diversity training for people working in front line services. Moreover, the symbolic forms of perceived discrimination refer mainly to discussions about the headscarf. This topic was raised by both male and female respondents. Among the latter,

Policy recommendations

those who wore the headscarf mentioned the stigmatisation they suffered. Others, who are considering wearing it one day, anticipate the difficulties they will face, particularly at work. Those who did not seem to be thinking of wearing it, expressed a strong sense of solidarity with those who did, and were joined in this by the young men, who also shared the difficulties faced by their mothers, sisters, and friends. This is indeed a social fact that mobilises the discourse of the vast majority of the young people we met. We never spontaneously directed the discussions towards this specific question during the interviews but it systematically came up as a point they wanted to raise. In Belgium as elsewhere, the headscarf is one of the main stumbling blocks in the public debate around the inclusion of Islam and its visible symbols. Young people emphasise the extent to which society reflects back to women who wear the headscarf the image of a space in which they are excluded and their identity denied. The statements we collected on this topic bear witness to the different rationales behind the wearing of the headscarf, ranging from a family heritage, an act of faith, a sign of differentiation, a distinction from other believers in one's own religious community, or even from one's parents, or on the contrary, a sign of community loyalty in a non-Muslim society,

a passport to a wider social life because it is a sign of rigour and piety, and a symbol of purity, as many complexities that the current debate negates. It seems clear that a public debate should take place over the places and modalities where this is possible or not, without falling into Manicheism. On the issue of the veil in particular, unlike their first-generation parents whose attitude was reserved towards the majority group, public authorities should be aware that most young people we met are increasingly positioning themselves in the transition from "politeness" to "politics", with the adoption of more contentious positions and a stronger self-assertion in the public space.

3.   Ties with Brussels

It seems crucial to us that there is a shared narrative about Brussels where each of these young people can find a place. The bond with Brussels seems to offer ample social bondage to achieve a common future. In addition to actions that promote Brussels' multilingual character (we refer here to the newly created Council for Multilingualism), analogous actions can be set up to manage and promote Brussels region that is proud to be super-diverse.

Policy recommendations

4.   Voice

Based on our conclusions, it would seem appropriate to propose and even systematise the possibility of expressing different voices for these young people. Young people in general, and Muslim youth in particular, lack legitimate and recognised channels of communication. This makes it more difficult to see and understand their problems, difficulties, aspirations and, more generally, their perceived reality. Thus, our fieldwork and many exchanges with these young people highlighted their desire to be both better and more heard. Insofar as they perceived the research as an opportunity for them to speak out and to feel that their words were legitimised and then passed on, it would certainly be appropriate to increase the number of initiatives of this type. In addition, other initiatives such as "Parlons Jeunes" (see details in the research report) should also be valued and encouraged. All these spaces allow them to express themselves on the issues that mobilise them, outside from their usual channels (such as the associations they frequent, for example) and not only among their peers. More generally, other means, associations, or contexts should be able to represent their voice, in particular in traditional media (TV, radio, general press, etc.) and the political sphere (debates, citizen participation, etc.).

List of publications

Corinne Torrekens, Nawal Bensaïd, Dimokritos Kavadias, *« Être jeunes, musulmans et bruxellois : identités, croyances religieuses et pratiques d'une catégorie ostracisée par le débat public »*, *Cultures et Conflits*, (à paraître).

Corinne Torrekens (2021), *« The Non-Impact of Religious Practices on the Process of Inclusion and Participation of Belgian Muslims »*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 41:1, 141-156, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2021.1894384

Torrekens, Corinne, 2020, *Islams de Belgique*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Mansoury Babhoutak Elham, Dimokritos Kavadias, Nohemi Echeverria Vicente. 2020. *« Exclusion and Antisystem Attitudes: The Impact of Perceived Discrimination in Attitudes towards Democracy and the Willingness to Use Violence among Adolescents in Brussels. »* Social Sciences 9 (10), 175.

Sacco, Muriel, Wendy Smits, Dimo Kavadias, Bram Spruyt, and Caroline d'Andrimont. 2016. *« Jeunesses bruxelloises : entre diversité et précarité. Note de synthèse. »* Brussels Studies 98.

About

The author & project

Corinne Torrekens is professor of political science at the Université libre de Bruxelles where she heads the Research Group on Ethnic Relations, Migration and Equality (GERME). Her research focuses on the accommodation of Islam in Belgium and the public debates surrounding it, as well as on the religious practices and dynamics of political participation of Muslim populations. Corinne.torrekens@ulb.be

Nawal Bensaïd is a doctor in political and social sciences at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her current research focuses on the practices and representations of Muslim youth in Brussels. She has previously worked on issues of conjugality in a migratory context.

Dimokritos Kavadias is professor of political science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is the director of the Brussels Informatie, Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum (BRIO). His research focuses on education and civic literacy, the social polarisation of young people in Brussels, and education policy in Flanders.

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