

ON VOLUNTEERING AND THE ETHICAL TRAJECTORY: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS ON THE VOLUNTEERING PRACTICES OF MUSLIM BELGIAN WOMEN

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Organizations established by Turkish-Belgians have traditionally been male-dominated. The reasons for this goes back to labor migration when most workers arriving in Europe were men and the organizations were established to meet their needs. In this context the experiences of female volunteers have gone largely unnoticed. This paper critically investigates how Muslim women in Belgium take up volunteering as a way to enhance their pious ethical self and become active citizens. It interrogates modern liberal conceptions of volunteering as short-lived projects aimed to be coherent, effective, and well-managed. The findings of this research were obtained through the participant observation of activities organized by female volunteers in five associations in Belgium. Participant observation was complemented with in-depth interviews with association members. The main assertion of the

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<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/muslimphilanthropy>
DOI: 10.2979/muslphilcivisoc.5.2.03

paper is that the religious inspiration that motivates volunteering and the social expectation of Muslim women to demonstrate their value to society turns volunteering into a life-long, continuous, but less coherent commitment.

Introduction

"Yes, but what sort of volunteering are you talking about?" This is the question I am confronted with any time I talk about my interlocutors during conferences, presentations, and book talks. "We understand that they are volunteers, but not quite what exactly they do," is something I hear very often. Although I understand the question, I believe that the need to strictly frame the scope, content and methodology of my interlocutors' volunteering speaks to a very specific way volunteering is expected to be in Western societies.

It is not easy to describe the scope and content of my interlocutors' volunteering activities or the methodologies they follow in realizing their projects. The most important reason for this is that they do not have a clearly defined program or cause. The overarching themes of their events focus very generally on values such as dialogue, social cohesion, and community development. These values are articulated in a wide array of events and activities and most of them are short-term. The volunteers themselves do not have a clearly defined job description and channel their energies and skills to whatever is required from them during each specific event and program. Although the projects they organize are not consistent in scope and content, my interlocutor's commitment to volunteering is very consistent.

In modern societies where volunteering has come to be defined as an "industry" (Rochester, Paine & Howlett, 2010, p. 3), continuity to achieve a goal is very important. However, the division of labor is determined by the volunteer's skill and interests. This is described as the "dominant paradigm", wherein volunteering involves an organizational context, "professionally staffed and formally structured organizations" (Rochester et. al., 2010, p. 11). There is "an organized structure of action, which is unpaid, non-obligatory and takes places in an organized context" (Dekker and Halman, 2003; Wilson, 2000).

In addition to following a well-developed method with a certain degree of professionalism to achieve a goal, volunteer organizations and managers do not usually expect continued commitment from their members. Although active and ongoing members do exist, short-term or episodic volunteering is gaining increasing popularity (Cnaan et al.,

2021). Episodic volunteering entails assistance to a project that has a very clearly defined aim and scope (Dunn et al., 2016). In this type of volunteering, individuals can prepare meals at a charity, provide supplies for the homeless, or offer help at a disaster zone. This type of volunteering is especially handy for people who have busy lives and less free time. It benefits agencies that can mobilize a larger number of people for short time periods.

This article problematizes existing descriptions of volunteering in modern societies, by analyzing and comparing different forms of the practice that have emerged among Belgian Muslims in the recent years. By using qualitative ethnographic methods, it examines how Belgian Muslim female volunteers' volunteering practices are shaped by the Islamic tradition. Moreover, it shows how interactions with the Belgian society inform the content of volunteering. It examines how liberal notions core to modern volunteering such as agency, individualism, and professionalism have been rethought and practiced in relation to illiberal (orthodox) Islamic motivations. Ultimately, this article brings insight to how Islamic ethics factors into volunteering as a "form of civic engagement and manifestations of active citizenship in post-secular, (neo)liberal-democratic societies" (Peucker and Kayikci, 2020, p. 3).

This article not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also questions our conceptual understanding of volunteering, which is largely a civic-secular practice today (Peucker and Kayikci, 2020). Having said this, I do acknowledge that in many cases religion plays a significant role in motivating people to volunteer and Islam is not an exception. However, the focus in this article is not to understand how different religious traditions have inspired volunteering and benevolence. My aim is to understand how Muslim women negotiate their social interactions and daily conflicts through the platform of volunteering. For the Belgian Muslim volunteers, religion is at the very heart of the volunteering. Their events and programs are secular in form and content, however the motivation to volunteer comes largely from how they understand a good practicing Muslim should conduct herself in social propriety. I will discuss this in detail in the coming sections, however, to get a better comprehension of how these two entities—the societal and the religious—intersect through volunteering we need a better idea of the context in which the Muslim volunteers live and work.

Strikingly, relevant literature has neglected the experiences of European Muslim volunteers, especially how it informs their ethical subjectivation with regards to religion and society. Volunteering has been the bedrock of Western societies, and it is paradoxical that Muslims have been given relatively little empirical and theoretical attention in this

area, especially in studies emerging from Europe. One of the most common stereotypes projected on Muslims is “that they socially isolate themselves and avoid contact with non-Muslims” (Pew, 2017; Peucker, 2017, p. 7). Policymakers have regarded mosques and Islamic community centers as secluded spaces of worship that are disconnected from the larger society (Vertovec, 2010; Peucker, 2017). Therefore, the connection between Muslim community spaces (both religious and non-religious) and pro-social activities have been largely neglected.

The first section discusses the contours of volunteering as it has been conceptualized in existing academic studies. It sketches the personal and social dynamics that shape the form and content of volunteering in the West and the expected outcomes of volunteering. The following section elaborates on the context of my research and the brief history of Turkish organizations in Belgium. It illustrates their key features to clarify the means and motivations through which these organizations have been established. It then analyzes the ethical underpinnings of volunteering, the relationality of my participants' agency and how this inspires not only a long-term but life-long commitment to volunteering. The article then turns to the ethics of volunteering and the Islamic motivation behind a lifetime of devotion to social purposes. It problematizes the argument that Muslim ethical self-formation is an individualistic trajectory and asserts that it is relational. The relationality of ethics suggests that ethics are not only located in personal worship but transcend the boundaries of the body. The ethical, for my Muslim participants, is closely related to social norms and propriety. Finally, the article analyses how my research participants create a culture of volunteering that relies more on constant devotion and motivation than professionalism and organization. It links this culture of volunteering to a very specific demand they are expected to respond to, which is to prove themselves as good citizens. It then moves on to critically examine how social and political developments and discourses factor into my research participants' volunteering activities. Namely, the section seeks to answer how volunteering turns them into acceptable citizens and how this is interlinked to their religious subjectivation.

Discerning the contours of volunteering in modern society

The notion that volunteering is an organized set of actions carried out in a designated space and time, has prompted questions I mentioned earlier about the agenda of my research participants. Most people look for some sort of structure, a project, and a goal in volunteering. The success of any

project is measured through how well the volunteers are able to achieve that goal (Haski-Leventhal & Meijjs, 2010).

Despite these expectations, the definition of what constitutes volunteering has remained ambiguous. McCurley and Vesuvio have fairly pointed out that, "The only thing that can be said with any degree of certainty about the volunteer community is that it can never be described as monolithic" (1985, p. 14). The uncertainty and complexity around the definition of volunteering increases its scope but also makes it difficult to discern who can truly be considered a volunteer. Volunteering is closely associated with a strong civil society and has been a central topic of interest for policymakers (Dekker and Halman, 2003). Policymakers in and beyond Europe have encouraged volunteering as a way of active citizenship and developed policies to maintain the practice (Strickland, 2010).

While it is regarded as one of the most effective ways of active citizenship, volunteering as a practical outcome of activism and civic engagement is often closely related to the individuals' personal choice of how they want to allocate their free time and resources (Omoto, Snyder and Hackett, 2010). It is important to underline this matter of freeness *because* volunteering is quite separated from professionalism and professional life. Any time, money, or energy that is spent for the sake of volunteering must be extra and up to the individual to identify where and how they will use it (Wilson, 2000). Along similar lines, according to Silber, "volunteerism is a way for the individual to express themselves and become personally involved in a cause" (Silber, 2000, p. 393). Moreover, it is a matter of choice, not obligation (Dekker and Halman, 2003).

In addition to free will, contemporary volunteering is described as individualized and temporal. Lesley Hustinx (2001) draws our attention to a "post-modernized" and "individualized" flow of "new volunteers." This type of volunteer is less interested in continuous commitment and more interested in specific goals and projects (Hustinx, 2001). These goals and projects are usually determined by causes that seem to be in trend during that specific time. This is a point that comes to our attention repeatedly in the literature: volunteering seems to be highly individualized and short-lived. Dekker and Halman suggest that individualization and "decreasing organizational loyalty does not necessarily connote negativity in terms of commitments to the cause" (2003, p. 8). It does mean, however, that there is a certain flexibility whenever there is a new flow of volunteers replacing those who have completed their task. This makes "individualism a resource", and thus, "voluntary work does not have to react merely by assimilating; it has the

autonomy to attract different groups and to attract the same group with different images, ideals and incentives” (Dekker and Halman, 2003 p. 8).

Previous studies have discussed that the cause often precludes the volunteer, *as long as the job gets done*, so to speak (Dekker and Halman, 2003). In their cartography Rochester et. al. (2020) describe more informal methodologies of volunteering where the volunteer is emotionally invested in the cause, commits to long-term projects and takes on a variety of duties regardless of their training. While my participants' experiences overlap with this description, their understanding of volunteering is also fundamentally different in how they evaluate personal success and efficiency.

First, the volunteer is not another individual who is there to get the job done; her aim is not only to complete the task set by the volunteering managers but to also work on her ethical self-formation in the process. The trajectory of working on the cause, and the kind of performative, affective, and moral change such work inflicts on the volunteer, are as important, if not more, than the cause itself. Second, the trajectory of working on the course is ambiguous, and often loosely organized. This is not because the volunteers do not take their duties seriously, but because their agendas often depend on the changing social and political agenda.

Regardless of how social, political, and global developments inform Muslim civil society, the volunteering aspect of their daily lives has been significantly understudied. The bulk of work focusing on Muslim activism look at the negotiation between belonging in the west and religiosity (Van Es, 2016; Elshayyal, 2018; Peucker and Kayikci, 2020). Relationally, another line of studies has studied existing debates in the "culturalization of citizenship" and the importance of "demonstrating" belonging and loyalty through a commitment to social norms, values, and symbols (Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2016; Van Es 2019, 142). How Muslims mobilize their collective agency to challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions projected on their communities (Van Es, 2018; Van Es, 2019; Maira, 2020) has also become an important line of inquiry. Interestingly, volunteering does not appear as a case in these studies and empirical research exploring civil participation and volunteering beyond mosque networks and religious benevolence (e.g. charity) is even more scarce.

In doing so, it shifts the focus from mosque congregations and networks towards the ways Muslims establish their own (non-religious) organizations to create a space of self-representation within civil society.

Setting the Scene: Muslim Female Volunteers and their Associations

The research undertaken for this paper is a result of qualitative ethnographic research into five associations in Brussels and Flanders. From 2014 to 2018, I conducted participant observation in the associations, during which I observed the activities carried out and participated in the events organized by the volunteers. I conducted interviews with fifty women and casually spoke with many more female volunteers whose exact number is difficult to really determine. My research participants are all Belgian who are of Turkish descent.

Although I did not apply an age limit, my research participants were mainly under the age of forty. This was not a deliberated choice on my part but stemmed from the fact that the majority of women volunteering for the associations were young.

My research participants have established many different foundations in Brussels, and each has a different aim and scope. One focuses on youth issues, another on education, and one of them is a women's associations. While they all have a different focus, the members and administrators of each association help the others in every way possible when organizing an event. All the associations are interlinked because of their members' mobility, and all the associations are members of one larger umbrella association. I started out this research with the aim of studying 'women's associations', but early in my fieldwork I understood that it would not be possible. Although there are 'women's associations', there is literally no event limited to women, and women partner with other associations that are mixed gendered. This is why I decided to conduct my research with female volunteers without restricting my focus to one (women's) association.

For the sake of protecting my interlocutors' privacy, I have anonymized their names and used pseudonyms and I have anonymized the names of the associations. When I first started working on the project in January 2014, I started going to the events that were organized by the female associations in Brussels. I started attending any event I possibly could that was organized by my research participants, from cooking classes to roundtable debates to panels at the EU.

Throughout the research, I narrowed my focus to the female members because their entanglements with the larger society are in many ways different from men. They stand out as Muslims more apparently than most Turkish men, due to their headscarves and modest fashion. Even with some research participants who choose not to use the headscarf the pressure they feel as Muslims is more tangible than men,

and their urgency for community betterment has more specific reasons. Moreover, organizations established by Turkish-Belgians have been largely male dominated since the first migrants to Belgium were mainly male workers (Manço, 2000). Most studies that refer to Muslim organizations in Europe do not specify the proportion of female participants, their roles and duties (Sunier, 2003). In this context, the experiences of Turkish-Belgian female volunteers and the ways in which they address social problems through volunteering have escaped scholarly attention. This article will provide much needed insight into this phenomenon.

Before I go into my own ethnographic data, I believe it is necessary to discuss how these generations came to live in Brussels and Flanders. This is necessary to know, firstly in order to understand how Muslims became a populational reality in Europe. Second, it will navigate us into the discussion of how this population became an ‘issue’ on a societal and political level. I will also more specifically discuss the Turkish populations, and a phenomenon that is almost unique to them, which is their tendency to form associations. When we consider that Turkish ethnic and religious belongings manifest more through associations than through mosques, it becomes imperative to consider how this came to be part of their community reality.

“After the labor migration agreement (1964) between the Moroccan, Turkish, and Belgian governments, the new incoming population were distributed in the country’s coal mining areas until the end of the 1960s” (Manco and Kanmaz, 2005, p. 1107). These two populations were concentrated in Flanders and Brussels, rather than Wallonia, and they worked in blue-collar jobs, as they had very little by way of educational background (Lesthaeghe, 2000). “As soon as the need for labor reached its optimum point, the government stopped entries from countries that were not part of the European community” (Castles, 1986, p. 763). This cessation did not stop further migration; however, the migration changed form, and the influx continued. Workers, who could now stay permanently in the country, reunified with their families and settled (Wets 2006).

“As the first generation of immigrants settled and built families in Europe, they started realizing that their children were going to face realities that they as parents had not encountered in their home countries. The following generations were not only Muslim, but they were Belgian, Dutch, French, German, etc., and this called for special attention when developing a way for them to stay in touch with their religious and cultural background” (Yukleyen, 2009, p. 35). “Whereas the religious organizations of the first generation were very communal and segregated

from larger society, the second and following generations established their associations with the consciousness that they were part of the country, and these associations were not only for communal needs but also served as spaces to find recognition from the larger social and political body” (Yukleyen, 2009, p. 35).

Turks in Europe, and especially in Belgium, tend to have a strong tendency towards establishing associations, one of the most important reasons for this is that the networks and community ties they develop through these associations help them preserve their cultural and religious identities and provide a support system for the challenges they face as minorities (Manco, 1997). There are numerous associations established in Belgium by the Turkish community, and it is safe to say that most of these associations tend to be local centers of more transnational movements. These movements are mostly organized around religious or national values, and although most of them do uphold Turkish nationalist values, some of them are secular. Regardless of whether Islam is recognized in European countries as an official religion, communities can organize around associations based on religious principles and identifications (Soysal, 1997).

According to previous studies civic communities and ethnic networks provide a catalyst for immigrant’s feelings of trust and their political participation in the host country (Fennema and Tillie, 1999). This is a significant point of discussion, as the Turkish community, including my research participants, are highly organized in Belgium, at least when it comes to associations. Despite high organizational levels among the Turkish level, they seem to be relatively underrepresented in comparison to other minority communities such as the Moroccans. One of the primary reasons for this is that since most Turkish movements and associations that are present in Belgium – and Europe – are off-shoots from Turkey, they seem to be more directly involved in Turkish politics and social movements (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Departing from these examples, my research participants' associations are not connected to any organization in Turkey. Their local associations specifically target local issues and detach from country-of-origin issues. Even the use of language is strictly limited to Dutch and French in the associations and during the events. There are several reasons for this.

First, the founders of the associations are second generation Turks. Although this does not necessarily mean that they should detach from their country of origin, the sense of being born and raised in Belgium repositions their ideas of home and belonging. The people who founded these associations were people who had the material means to do so, hence they were somewhat wealthy. These people had investments

and businesses in Belgium, and, thus, their social and political concerns were oriented towards Belgium more than Turkey. This being said, their events and agenda nearly always address issues pertaining to diversity and especially the Turkish (and frequently Moroccan) minorities (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Second, these associations do not have a political party or ideology that represent them in Turkey. The diversity among the members makes it very difficult for the associations to turn into a hub of ideology, ethnicity, or kinship. The members come from different ideological backgrounds, different hometowns, and even different ethnic groups. This diversity makes it increasingly difficult to define the associations in the framework of one representative body (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Third, Belgium is a political complex. The federal structure of the country – the EU and the linguistic divides – ensures there is often a ministry for each region and linguistic group. This results in the inevitable reality that Belgium is a haven for politicians. The high numbers of politicians make them more accessible to the public in comparison to other countries. My research participants, who directly aim for political contributions to their program, utilize this easy accessibility. These contributions may not exactly be financial, or even open support, but involves the participation of politicians in their events, including giving speeches. This is, of course, a dual benefit, in that the volunteers find recognition for their cause and get attention for their events, whilst the politicians expand their voter base. This recognition and attention at the political level is a motivating force for my research participants, stimulating their belief that their struggles are not in vain. It also incorporates them further into their local setting (Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

God and society, the ethics of giving

When we do ibada, it is our personal worship to Allah. It is a farz, and there is no chance of not doing it. It is what we do for ourselves, to show gratitude for what Allah has given us, ward off the evil, and ultimately [prepare] for judgment day. Ibada is what we do for ourselves. But Allah will ask us, “what did you do for me?” For Allah we need to devote all that he has given to us, for him, and we must guide people along the moral codes he set. Whatever we do for society, we have done for Allah.

This quote is from Elif, a woman in her late thirties who lived in Brussels and worked as a teacher. Sitting in the dining hall of the association we talked about what it meant to strive more than *ibada*. The Belgian Muslim women started volunteering with the idea that a faithful Muslim should go beyond regular religious obligations. They wanted to do more than praying, fasting, and the occasional alms giving. They wanted to do something for God. "You cannot pray five times a day and expect repentance," was a saying that would be repeated frequently among the volunteers. It means that personal worship constitutes only one aspect of the pious trajectory.

According to Elif, volunteering constitutes the pious trajectory of the volunteer, just like individual worship does. One is not more important than another, but my research participants reflect on each trajectory differently. *Ibada* has its own sphere: the mosque, home, or a room where one can pray. The body is its boundaries; a person performs the prayer five times a day, they fast with their body, they read and study the Quran for knowledge to be a better Muslim; they go for pilgrimage to experience the holy lands and fulfil an obligation of Islam; they give zakat, similarly to fulfil an obligation, for it is *their* money that they are giving – and *their* good deed. However, a faithful Muslim needs to surpass the limits of their body if they truly want to achieve an ethical self. This is where society comes in the picture, because a commitment for the well-being of other people is where the pious subject surpasses her body. My research participants call their volunteering *infaq*, which literally means "spending" or "giving" in Arabic. In essence they describe volunteering as a constant form of giving to society, where the transaction is not only material (e.g. money) but also spiritual. The time, effort, labour, skill, and finances channelled to volunteering informs the pious subjects' ethical self, making them depend on society as much as those in need depend on them.

This relational aspect of ethical self-formation has been studied only marginally (Mittermaier, 2013). The ethical turn in the anthropology of Islam has been concerned with how bodily practices inform inner spiritual strength and sincerity (Mahmood, 2005; Gade, 2004; Fadil, 2009; Schielke, 2010; Jouili, 2015). Subjects concern modern pious reflect on religious tenets, actively seek knowledge and deliberate (Mahmood, 2005). These new modes of reflection are transferred onto the micro practices constituting the pious (disciplinary) self-formation. In light of the discussion above, these disciplinary practices are willingly taken up by the pious women and reiterated for the sake of "perfectly" enhancing those norms (Mahmood, 2005). Pierre Hadot refers to the embodiment of these practices as "spiritual", as they

bring under control bodily and emotional spontaneities (Mahmood, 2005; Mahmood, 2001). What is interesting about the concept of spiritual exercises is that they are meant to be *lifelong*. The trajectory of the ethical self requires constant conscious work, and as Schielke describes "a perfectionist project of self-discipline" (Schielke, 2009, p. 24 ; see also Mahmood, 2005; Lambek, 2010). This notion is central to my research participants' experience, as "the whole notion surrounding volunteering is that it is a lifelong commitment, not bound to temporal restrictions" (Schielke, 2009, p. 24). The ethical relationship with God is meant to be maintained as long as the subject lives, consequentially does their desire to volunteer, which becomes an added factor to why their volunteering life is never meant to be short term or concise.

The ethical turn in the anthropology of Islam laid the grounds for another line of studies that would come later and argue that modern Muslims—especially in Western contexts—are individualized and we were witnessing an individualization of ethics (Cesari, 2004). The overarching argument that is apparent in this line of research is that modern, informed Muslims practice religion for their self and not due to social expectations or norms (Mahmood, 2005). This assertion has neglected to understand how society has a direct impact on the ways in which religious practices and devotions take shape. Even when discussing how ethical deliberations are immersed in social, political and historical developments, relevant literature neglects how these trajectories take shape for Muslims living in non-Muslim societies. The ethical is always a challenge, an effort, and sometimes even a conflict. What is more, this strife is focused on the individual, and his/her endeavor to correspond to *become* ethical (Asad, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006). In the following section I turn to this compelling issue and discuss how volunteering—as an Islamically inspired ethical practice—is embedded in personal interactions, social propriety and contextual dynamics. I unpack how this informs a specific culture of volunteering that overlaps but at many key points diverges from conventional volunteering.

On the Culture of Doing Everything

"Oh, you need to be willing and ready to do everything if you're in this association," said Tuba, a young woman in her early thirties. A mother of two and a molecular biology scientist, Tuba would not come as a woman to be busy decorating cakes on a Wednesday evening. But there we were, sitting in the association's large, hyper-equipped kitchen smothering chocolate icing over a four-layer cake. Well, Tuba was the

one handling the icing, as she was adamant that I touch nothing and, in her words, "destroy" anything. "What do you mean anything?" I asked her simply. "Well, I never knew how to bake or decorate or even had the interest. But then, now I have to do these things because the labor is needed and I have to step up," she said.

Josephat parked right in front of a busy road. The association would attract a lot of people during the sunny weekend and my research participants were hoping to raise a decent amount of money. The money would then be channeled to sponsor other more large-scale events. According to Tuba, if you were volunteering at the association, there was no such thing as "I cannot do," as you needed to be prepared to learn anything if the association needed the service. This is essentially what volunteering is about for my research participants; being ready to take up duties and labors that they probably would not in any other entity of life. As I was sitting next to Tuba, now watching her pipe tiny flowers in darker chocolate on the cake, my memory took me to another moment where a different volunteer told me in the very same kitchen how she had learned to make Albanian dishes just for one event. The volunteers' skills, however, are not limited to food-making, as these are merely two examples of a continuous devotion to learn more skills and successfully carry out a wide variety of tasks.

The fundamental understanding that motivates women like Tuba to push their comfort zones is to be able to step up when needed. A limited number of women volunteer for the association, but their agenda is stretched to include events from panels and symposiums, to bake sales and kite making with children. These events serve a core purpose; namely, to reach out to as many people as possible and invite them to their events. The idea is that the more people come to their events and get to know them, the more they will realize that Muslim women are properly functioning actors of the Belgian society, and not a mere "problem". It is for this reason that they feel compelled to reach out to people from as many different backgrounds as possible, and hence keep their activities very diverse so they appeal to different types of people.

There are two different lines of experience that inspires this need to reach out. The first is rooted in social expectations and suspicions that Muslim women are a liability to society entrapped in their own cultural constraints. Muslim immigrants and minorities are often regarded as difficult to integrate (Field, 2007), and Muslim women the victim of oppression (Kunst, Tajamal, Sam & Ulleberg, 2012). Muslims are also presented as problem citizens, uninterested in education or progress (Kunst et. al., 2012). The second is in embedded in more religious understanding keep the well-being of others as a priority. My

research participants' daily volunteering activities are entangled in both motivations, which are often in conversation with one another.

Flemish Education minister Hilde Crevits made a very controversial claim in March 2017, saying parents of ethnic minority children were not involved enough in their children's education. According to Crevits this was the primary reason why children did not do well in schools (De Morgen 2017). By adding that schools were ready to tackle these problems, and that it was the passiveness of parents that hinders this process, the minister attracted a lot of critical attention. Although there is no scientific data to back Crevits' remarks, the low educational levels of minority children has been a problem in the Belgian education system. Turkish and Moroccan students have been failing their exams and dropping out of school at a higher percentage than their peers (Phalet and Swyngedouw, 2003). The OECD PISA studies suggest that Turkish and Moroccan children show the highest gap in their mathematical and reading abilities among other OECD countries.

Stereotypes and problems associated with minority communities and especially Muslims have prompted my research participants to take matters into their own hands and find solutions. In their events, the volunteers usually target social problems and reflect on issues like unemployment, educational problems, radicalization, and in general the problem of 'integration', or indeed the lack of it. Elif reflected on this point over a coffee in her home. "We need to show that Islam is not like they (the non-Muslim) think it is: backward and closed to development. Or Muslims are not like they see on the media," she said grimly. The volunteers' daily endeavors mainly consist of thinking of ways to prove they are not "those kind of Muslims," she told me. This becomes actualized through volunteering in a very general framework.

The general expectation from volunteering in most societies is that it contributes to social cohesion and addresses social needs (Rochester et. al., 2010). It is not only the volunteers who expect a tangible result from their work but also policymakers and government actors. As expectations from volunteering rise, so do standards that determine its effectivity and impact. Volunteering has had a prominent place, especially in Western societies, for the last few decades giving way to what some have referred to a "volunteering industry". As the practice becomes an industry, "specialist profession has been underlined by the development of quality standards, training for those who manage the work of volunteers, and the establishment of a professional body for volunteer managers," (Rochester et.al., 2010, p. 3). The structure and organization that are aimed in volunteering do not fit the needs and aims of my research participants. Working with limited budget, limited

numbers of people and an agenda that changes depending on the political climate, my research participants constantly reflect on their priorities in weekly meetings and allocate their resources accordingly. While this may seem to be common sense, it also indicates very clearly that the benefits many voluntary organizations reap from professional and well-structured management simply does not apply for organizations run by minorities such as the Muslim women. The foremost aim of professionally trained managers, quality standards and performance measures are to improve the quality of volunteering experience (Manetti, Bellucci, Como and Bagnoli 2015), but what determines this experience when the volunteers are minorities who are challenged by social and political stigma is still an ambiguous and unanswered question.

In late 2016, my research participants started applying for grants made available by local administrations and the European Commission. Most of the grants they applied for concerned countering violent extremism (CVE). Although such grants were available before 2016 (Jaminé and Fadil, 2019) this newly found interest of my research participants towards CVE was based on a very important development, the March 22 terror attacks that took place in Brussels city and the airport. Over time, we discussed with the volunteer women about what CVE meant to them, young, urban, Turkish women who had never come across extremist actors in their own community. I was interested to know how they would reach out to those individuals who were described as extremist or actors with the potential to resort to violence. I was also very interested to know what kind of methodology they developed to counter extremism.

The scope of this paper does not include a detail about CVE projects the Muslim volunteers developed, but what I am trying to point out here is how deep a countries' agenda impacts the volunteers' sense of responsibility and social commitment. Indeed, my research participants were awarded with several grants from the city and also the European Commission. The overarching themes of these projects were to counter extremism through dialogue. As broad as this may seem, their methodologies consisted of organizing book clubs for community youth, spring festivals where adolescents could meet and make friends in safe spaces, and roundtables with policy-makers and academics. A year later when I asked my research participants if they were happy with the outcome of their project, they admitted it had been a learning curve. They explained their problems reaching out to non-Turkish (and especially Moroccan youth), and really being able to measure the impact of their events and programs. Nevertheless, nearly five years after the attacks the

volunteers continue with 'countering violent extremism with dialogue' programs at an increasing pace.

Margaretha van Es (2019) writes about how Muslims are expected to denounce extremism, an expectation that is exacerbated after every terrorist attack. By openly and loudly condemning extremism Muslims will be once again demonstrating their loyalty to the social contract and common social values, like freedom, gender-equality, respect to homosexuals (De Waal, 2017). Speaking from the Dutch context, Van Es points out that "Muslims' belonging to the Netherlands is conditional and depends on their constant pledge of loyalty" (2019, p. 146). Quite similarly, their volunteering activities are my research participants' pledge of loyalty and not just to clarify they do not support violence but explicitly show they are modern accomplished women. Elif's statement that they want to show *they are not like Muslims they see on the media* echoes in my head as I think about how the women push themselves to work more efficiently, reach out to as many people as possible and take on more duties at the association often after very long working hours. The need and expectation to prove themselves over and over again creates a culture of doing everything among the volunteers. This culture is not only a bar they set for themselves but also what their audience expect. Political actors, local administration, media, and the people who attend their events want to see a pro-active, efficient Muslim woman.

Littleton stated, "feminist scholars have discussed for decades the burdens many women in modern society face because of the demand that they have successful careers and functioning family lives" (Littleton, 1986, p. 1043). For Muslim women these burdens are also entangled with their religious identity and the compelling need to overcome negative stereotypes pushed on them and tackle all kinds of exclusion and discrimination they face (Göle, 2003). "*Our visibility is always questioned*," said Esra a twenty-five-year-old young woman working as the secretary of the association. "People want to see us at the forefront of the events, like if we are organizing a panel or symposium, they want to see us sitting by male volunteers. Even if you are not interested in the topic or really learned in it, you take part because then the next question is *'are the female volunteers only interested in bake sales and cooking?'*" Esra continued to explain the social pressure of always being seen and being efficient. She told me that many volunteers would not mind cooking or doing dishes, as they were also an important part of volunteering, but there was always the agenda to be seen and heard. When I asked them if their endeavors to be publicly active had made any visible changes in the perceptions of the larger society and policy-makers

towards them, the answer was always the same: "*they tell us that we are not like other Muslim women, we are exemplary*". The volunteers often convey this to me as an accomplishment on their part, often choosing not to discuss what this meant for those *other* Muslims who had not manifested tangible contributions to social welfare. On the one hand, the volunteers' contributions to society are appreciated and recognized. On the other hand, the idea that Muslims are active contributors to society is conditional, in that they visibly and continuously perform their contributions. This is an expectation directed to Muslim women maybe more than other active citizens, because as we have discussed before, their acceptance is based on their ability to demonstrate belonging.

Conclusion

This article started with the assertion that volunteering in modern societies is presumed to have a well-defined goal and methodology, and that volunteering organizations are managed similarly to companies. They give trainings, take on people specifically for the job, and have a system for human resources. This in some way sets a precedent for what volunteering should look like and when I discuss my research participants' volunteering activities there seems to be the lingering questions of *so what exactly do they do?* Throughout this article, I seek to critically interrogate the concept of volunteering and what it means for those whose agenda is not as clearly defined as conventional volunteers, and those who are also inspired by orthodox traditions. What does it mean to volunteer, when one of the essential guiding ethical parameters is religion? How are religious and social commitments entangled in a context where Islam and Muslims are confronted with compelling issues on a daily basis?

I start with unpacking the relationality of ethics. While most of the existing literature in the anthropology of Islam is concerned with the individualization of ethics, I suggest that society has a much more direct significance on the pious subject's ethical formation than is given credit for. Volunteering itself is the Islamic tradition of *infaq* rethought in relation to modern giving. It is a form of giving that can be appreciated and understood by the Western audience. In turn, it allows my research participants to address problems pertaining to their community. The more they are devoted to solving those problems the better Muslims they become and also take a step closer to becoming acceptable citizens. Yet, this has a profound effect on the way they construct volunteering. Having limited number of volunteers and such a wide agenda, my research participants establish a culture of doing everything where the volunteer

needs to prepared to be versatile. The agenda changes very quickly and accordingly, the volunteers need to adapt in terms of time management, labor investment and even learning new skills. This is far from professional management and can be described better in terms of "learning in the field". In many ways, this can negatively affect the process and outcome but what matters on an ethical level to the volunteers is that they addressed the problem on the table. In many ways this is also what society expects of them. Most of the time the outcome of a program or event weighs less for local administrators, and politicians than the fact that Muslims owned the responsibility of a specific issue pertaining to their communities. In this case, the impact of a program may be greater than its actual effectiveness on the ground. The impact it has for the volunteers is immeasurable, as they say *Allahu a'lem*.¹ it is ultimately God who will determine the true value of doing something for society.

¹ God Knows.

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