

Gender perspectives in the Italian Muslim family. Education, taboos, conflicts, and intergenerational transformations.

Martina Crescenti, PhD
University of Bologna, Italy

Abstract

This article presents research on the dialogue between second-generation Muslim parents and children in the Italian context regarding gender identity, sexual identity, and gender education. Through the testimonies of young people (18-30 years of age), the nature of intergenerational dialogue and parental position toward the relational transformations that their children are experiencing is analysed within the Italian cultural context. For this purpose, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2021 with boys and girls aged 18–30 years and belonging to Italian Islamic associations. Moreover, 24 young people were divided into 4 focus groups to conduct an in-depth exploration of gender perspectives on these topics; these young people are active members of the *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (Association of Young Italian Muslims). A strongly taboo dialogue emerges from the data; however, this does not hinder young people's search for greater openness to different forms of relationality and sexuality, both in their current lives and their future families.

Keywords: second-generation Muslims; Italy; gender taboos; patriarchy; gender identity.

Introduction

The migration phenomenon entails profound transformations within migrant communities from relational, cultural and, gender perspectives (Timmerman et al. 2018; Bélanger and Linh 2011; Robinson 2007). Contact with the arrival context changes among the first generations of immigrants in terms of the frames of meaning within which, until then, the family, the male–female relationship, and any relationship of a physical and sentimental nature was hitherto organised (Runganga and Aggleton 1998; Choubak 2014). In particular, second generations experience more conflicts and transformations with respect to these issues due to their specific generational position: on the one hand, they are raised in a family that has experienced gender education filtered through Islamic principles; on the other hand, they are schooled and included (although not always legally) in the Western context of immigration in which a gender education without religious filters is transmitted (Karimi et al. 2019; Maliepaard and Alba 2016). This is the case of young Muslims born and raised in Italy, which is the group that we focused our investigation on to

understand the nature of the main gender issues that develop at the intergenerational level.

In search of their own identity as Muslim-Italians with a foreign background (Crescenti 2021; Ricucci 2016; Cigliuti and Acocella 2016), second-generation Muslim youths experience numerous conflicts in the family environment as they attempt to define their own social position which, also due to their contact with Italian society, is different and occasionally contrasting with the one conceived by their parents (Frisina 2007; Scheible and Fleischmann 2013; Abo-Zena 2019). Indeed, the hopes of the family and the minority fall on the children, who can only rely on them to be able to transmit their cultural memory (Hervieu-Léger 1996), thereby avoiding an assimilation. Therefore, in gender-related choices ranging from sexual orientation (which can also be a self-imposed choice) to engagement with the opposite sex, young people are influenced by the aspirations, plans, and taboos of their family of origin. A particularly delicate and controversial topic concerns—for example, marriage, a decisive event in the transmission of family wealth, but which is also, and above all, a way of controlling sexuality. According to Islamic tradition, marriage legitimises sexual relations between spouses — who must only be persons of the opposite sex—as it avoids adultery and favours procreation (Vercellin 2002; Adamczyk and Hayes 2012). Based on this concept, it is virtuous and honourable for a young Muslim female to marry a young Muslim male of the same ethnicity, less honourable to marry a young Muslim male of a different ethnicity, and rather inappropriate to marry a non-Muslim male or an atheist (Frisina 2007; Karlsson Minganti 2010).

In the Italian context, personal intentions are easily shattered, where it is not always possible to meet a person with whom to build a romantic relationship and who can satisfy family requirements (e.g., opposite sex, Islamic faith, same Islamic legal school, and same cultural origin). In particular, girls—who are more inclined than boys to seek their own position of freedom from the family (Diehl, et al. 2009)—face family resistance as well as patriarchal and conservative structures of Islamic society that tend to require women to be mothers and wives, religiously modest and pure, angels of the hearth, educators of their children, and the main transmitters of religious values (Acocella and Pepicelli 2015; Velayati 2016). Such female role models, which also imply binary male–female relationships, prove to be limiting for girls in comparison with their non-Muslim peers. Thus, young women who perceive the inadequacy of such limitations find themselves having to practise day-to-day strategies of defining and negotiating their identity with family members and adult members of the community (imams and religious teachers). Indeed, some research reveals that first-generation immigrant Muslims in Europe tend to generally hold conservative views on gender more strongly than other religious minorities (Steinbach 2009), because

binary male–female relationships are prescribed and encouraged by religious interpretations (Inglehart and Norris 2004).

Based on these theoretical and contextual premises, this article presents research on the dialogue between second-generation Muslim parents and children in the Italian context with regard to gender, sexual identity, and the gender bias in education. The analysis of these aspects is fundamental, if not necessary, for understanding the manner in which the new generations are developing methods and strategies of constructing their social and gender identity by integrating themselves into the Italian context. In particular, the type of dialogue with parents on these topics and the different perspectives on gender education experienced in the family by boys and girls are analysed. To perform the research, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and August 2021 with 28 boys and girls between the ages of 18 and 30 years and belonging to several national and local Italian Islamic associations. In addition, four focus groups, 2 of which were mixed and 2 divided by gender, were created with 12 Muslim boys and 12 Muslim girls (18–30 years of age) who are active members of the *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (Association of Young Italian Muslims) in order to explore gender perspectives on these topics in greater depth.

Gender, Sexuality, and Islam: Relational and Educational Transformations in Italy

As the literature amply demonstrates, the relationship among gender, sexuality, and Islam has been consolidated in a patriarchal system based on the male interpretation of the sacred texts—the Qur'an and Sunna—which has shaped the sexual and affective lives of Muslim men and women (Syed et al. 2014). Two controversial aspects of the Qur'an that have been instrumentalised in such an interpretation concern certain Qur'anic verses, such as verse IV (34), which can be interpreted as “men are in charge of women, because God has chosen some beings over others,” or verse II (228), which can be interpreted as “they act with their husbands as their husbands act with them, with kindness; yet men are a step above,” as well as numerous phrases that allude to the care of offspring (Vercellin 2002; Velayati 2016). Through the male interpretation of such verses, not only is the construction of the patriarchal system corroborated but also the role of women as the angels of the hearth that confines them to the domestic space is legitimised.

According to the official (*male*) tradition, the only permissible relationship is the heteronormative one between man and woman (implicitly, therefore, between cisgender identities), which must be sealed by a marriage contract through which sexual activity for procreation, physical health, and personal fulfilment is sanctioned and even encouraged (Jaafar-Mohammad and Lehmann 2011; Gutiérrez 2012). Although officially illicit, male premarital sexuality is less socially repressed than female premarital sexuality (Dialmy 2010; El-Ali 2022), which on the contrary is controlled by the family and

community network. In fact, a woman's virginity is an asset owned by the entire family unit and their social respectability depends on this (González-López 2005). All other forms of non-binary relationality and sexuality outside marriage are severely punished. Homosexuality, lesbianism, transsexuality, queer, etc.—understood, here, according to modern Western terminologies and categories—constitute deviant affective and sexual relationships that add an element of profanity in the sanctity of marriage (Franke 2012). A feature of the patriarchal system is the oppositionality of men and women, two binary categories that are mutually exclusive, even conflictual (Digby 2013). The oppression and high degree of normativity of *hegemonic and systemic masculinity* have not only damaged the living conditions of women but also those of men themselves, including those who do not identify with a cisgender identity.

Although these prescriptions are still in force, the patriarchal system—and thus the relationship among gender, sexuality, and Islam—has been transformed and continues to change due to multiple contemporary phenomena. Globalisation, migration, and digital networks have led Muslims to learn about, deepen, and question traditional values systems in a more significant and articulate manner. Related literature on the subject in the last 20 years (Brouwer 2004; Marcotte 2010; Linjakumpu 2016; Setiyawan et al. 2022; Sirri 2020; El-Oqlah 2021; Golriz 2021) reveals how Muslims have been strongly influenced by LGBTQ+ communities, Western feminist movements, ethnoreligious minority associationism, as well as by the various forms of cybersexuality (pornography, hotlines, etc.) in both Islamic and Western countries: associations, information web pages, and discussion forums are particularly active among second-generation Muslims, particularly in immigration countries. The oppositionality of the binary gender is also challenged by undermining the stereotyping of the male chauvinist man and the feminist woman: it is possible to be a feminist man if one treats women's issues primarily as a socio-political problem and not a question of empowerment (Digby 2013). As noted from the literature, these social transformations take place in a double reflection and experience: the need to express one's gender and sexual identity even in contravention of principles and the need for family and community acceptance of this identity redefinition.

Within the framework of these deep changes in identity and gender, the transformation of both family and community educational practices with regard to gender takes on a specific relevance. The manner in which these experiences and Western influences redefine the limits and possibilities of constructing affective and sexual relationships leads to the redesigning of new forms of socialisation in terms of gender. However, before exploring these forms, one must always take a step back to what (*male*) tradition prescribes. The traditional religious education of young people does not present any gender differences, since the Qur'an exhorts all its believers to religious knowledge (Vercellin 2002). As evidenced in the literature (Bargerón 2015; Al Zbon and Smadi 2017), in mosques and Qur'anic schools, at a theoretical level, teachers and imams do

not differentiate between males and females. The educational goals regarding the Islamic religion are the same: boys and girls learn to grow morally and spiritually to build a personal relationship with God and act as good Muslims toward the Islamic community (Douglas and Shaikh 2004). However, there is an age limit, which is traditionally seven years, when the boy is circumcised and enters the adult male world; in contrast, the girl, depending on the arrival of her first period, is veiled (not always) and officially enters the female world.

It is at this stage that the child/girl begins to be restricted in her expressive, personal, and relational freedoms: she should wear the veil in order to maintain her modesty in public; she can only pray in a mosque in a certain permitted space; she cannot go to the mosque during her menstrual cycle as she is considered impure; she cannot sing in front of a man as it would distract him from worshipping God; and, most importantly in our investigation, she cannot have physical contact (handshake, hug, caress, etc.) with the opposite sex outside of marriage. For this reason, her parents begin to educate her to be a Muslim woman, conscious of the family's identity heritage, whose conduct in public spaces is indicative of the degree of morality and religiosity of those close to her (González-López 2005). Thus, as Rivera (2010) argues, it is evident that it is not the morphological differences between men and women that have produced the genders, but it is the relations of power and domination (in this case filtered through the masculine interpretation of religion) that have arbitrarily determined the distinctive features of the *dominant* and *dominated sexes*. Therefore, the construction of gender and body-related practices are culturally and historically situated, thereby shaping themselves according to the contexts and life stages of the subjects (Gribaldo and Ribeiro Corossacz 2010). In the contemporary context, such distinctions are reworked by families based on numerous factors, such as the need for work that affects all members regardless of gender, thereby altering the traditional work-family balance (Ali et al. 2017).

From this theoretical and sociocultural framework, it is possible to understand how socialising/educational forms of gender, thus also related to gender and sexual identity issues, are transformed in contemporary contexts. The case study of this article focuses on third-generation Islamic immigrant communities in Italy. It was observed of this minority that, since the research in the 1990s, gender education had to be entrusted to the family (particularly the mother) and, slightly lesser in importance, to the Qur'anic school and the Islamic association (Saint-Blancat 1999), due to the lack of public educational services designed to teach Islamic values. Thus, a conservative view of education had emerged, which, in our opinion, is indicative of a tendency towards the process of inclusion in the social fabric. The family hinders social inclusion by maintaining a defensive and protective attitude of the son/daughter towards the Italian society permeated by a lifestyle that contradicts Islamic morals (individualism,

consumerism, commodification of the body, drug and alcohol consumption, etc.) (Acocella and Pepicelli 2015). According to Frisina's most recent analysis (2007), the factors underlying this intransigent attitude consist of the parents' conception of the myth of returning to the country of origin, whose hope hinders the process of integration into local society; the parents' sense of inadequacy towards their children who are more integrated than them in various aspects of daily life; and the fear that their children may go astray in society by breaking the values of Islam.

On education, gender, and sexual identity, the literature is rather scarce and generally treats the subject marginally. Acocella and Pepicelli (2015) have found, confirming the results of previous studies (Saint-Blancat 1999; Acocella and Pepicelli 2015; Frisina 2007), that the negative parental view of Italian life is mainly determined by the presence of illicit practices—including drinking, smoking, and sex—which conditions the manner in which fathers and mothers educate their children to a strong gender *conservatism*. In that research, the reflexivity of the girls interviewed reveals a slow, deep path of maturation in the double paradigm of *heredity* and *subjectification*, which manifests itself in intergenerational family conflicts. The few studies surveyed are concerned with investigating the female condition as a litmus test of the level of social inclusion in Italy, excluding the male perspective, which, instead, should be taken into consideration. As mentioned earlier, *systemic masculinity* also affects and conditions the world of young Muslim boys in their multiple non-binary identities. In this regard, Fedele's (2015) study highlights precisely how Muslim masculinities in Europe correspond to multiple subjectivities constructed as a result of personal and familial conflictual processes. These subjectivities are the outcome of interactions between the models of masculinity in the country of origin and those in the country of immigration (and birth for second generations), between the experience of migration (also inherited as symbolic imagery) and the specific conditions of the socio-cultural context of life. However, this is the case for Muslim femininities, which are constructed by oscillating between several experiences, conflicts, and transformations. Therefore, there are numerous factors that define the intergenerational parent-child dialogue and the youth's perspective on the issues of gender, sexuality, and gender education/socialisation (Regalia and Giuliani 2012).

A Qualitative Survey

Conducted between January and August 2021, as part of a three-year doctoral research project, the survey took as its analysis sample second-generation young boys and girls, born in Italy or abroad but living in Italy at the time of the survey. The particularity of the sample concerns the living condition, which oscillates between the family culture of origin (Muslim, with a foreign ethnic background) and the Italian culture (Western and widely Catholic), which constructs and defines multiple and articulated identities (Acocella and Pepicelli, 2015; Crescenti 2021; Frisina 2005). In order to analyse

the manner in which the relationships between genders are transformed in the family and beyond, they were taken as research subjects in our case study.

In total, the sample involved 52 young people (mostly Moroccan, but also Egyptian), of whom 24 were girls and 28 were boys aged between 18 and 30 years and residing mainly in central-northern Italy. They were selected from among several national and local Islamic youth associations that were the most present and numerous in this geographical area. These associations include *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, *Islamic Relief*, *Giovani Guide Musulmane*, *Giovani della Confederazione Islamica Italiana*, *Giovani di Partecipazione e Spiritualità Musulmana*, *Primus*, *Giovani per il Bene*, *Generazioni Responsabili*, and *Firdeus*. The decision to select the interviewees from these associations was dictated by the need to have a sample that was easier to access and more willing to discuss such topics, given that a few associations are active in organising spaces for dialogue and reflection with families to discuss such issues (Frisina 2007; Riccio and Russo 2010; Crescenti 2023). Moreover, conflict dynamics and intergenerational tensions emerge within associations, because adults' interpretations of society and the manner in which religion is lived are often considered by young members of these organizations as *obsolete, rigid, and conservative* (Frisina 2007).

The research focused on the following questions:

Q1 What kind of dialogue is there between second-generation young people and parents of the Islamic faith on the subject of relationships and sexuality?

Q2 How do the Italian context and culture influence young Muslims' perspectives on the issue of gender education compared to their parents' perspectives?

To conduct the research, a mixed qualitative methodology was employed with the use of individual semi-structured interview and focus groups, as the subject matter was particularly complex and needed to be articulated in depth (McKim 2017). Twenty-eight interviews were conducted, 12 with girls and 15 with boys, who were considered as privileged witnesses in our research due to their activism as section coordinators and national-level association leaders. The interviews, which lasted on average for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes each, took place online on the Zoom platform (with the camera switched on) due to the national travel COVID-19 restrictions that were still in place between January 2021 and August 2021. Although in-person interviews were possible in the last few months of the mentioned period, we decided to keep the online mode to proceed with the research in a consistent interview and observation mode. In addition, as these were particularly sensitive and intimate topics, we assumed that physical presence could create a strong bias in the interview conditions. Therefore, we decided to anonymise the names of the interviewees by using pseudonyms, while preserving the age and gender.

Further, four focus groups were conducted on Zoom; these groups were divided into two types: two mixed, which included three boys and three girls per focus; and two divided by gender, which included six female and six male participants. While the semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people belonging to all the associations listed above, the focus groups involved only young members of the association *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (GMI), as it boasted a larger number of members interested in participating in our research (Frisina 2007; Crescenti 2023). The recordings of the interviews and focus groups were analysed using Nvivo analysis software.

Gender, Sexuality, and Morality: A Family Dialogue on Stand-By

The first research question revealed, both in the interviews and in the focus groups, the presence of a family dialogue that we can define as on *standby*, which does not leave the possibility of confrontation and in which the parents exclusively conceive of a couple and sexuality based on patriarchy (Jaafar-Mohammad and Lehmann 2011; Gutiérrez 2012). In other words, parents only support a heterosexual couple, in which physical contact (from hugging to sexual intercourse) can occur as a result of the legitimisation provided by the marriage contract. As is well known, in this condition, the man enjoys greater freedom than the woman. While, on the one hand, the young people interviewed affirm the authenticity of the Qur'anic prescription of the heterosexual couple, on the other hand, they harshly criticise male hierarchisation.

In my opinion, religion does not place these differences, but they are culturally placed. You have to distinguish tradition from religion. The challenge of society [understood here as Islamic community] today is to distinguish one from the other. (Ahmed, 20-year-old boy)

According to the boys' testimonies, male dominance is not rooted in Islam as the parental generation would claim—for which, only then, it would constitute an inescapable constraint that must be respected—but in the cultural reworking of Islamic principles, which have been subject to male interpretation. The first generation, in fact, bases its conceptions, attitudes, and forms of socialisation to gender and couple in a more or less intentional manner on the teachings and experiences in the country of origin, which in their eyes is Islamic tradition; however, according to the interviewees, this is only a cultural custom (Crescenti 2021). According to young people, the *distinction* between *Islam* and (*male*) *culture* would be of crucial importance, as it would open the standard concept of the patriarchal couple bound by marriage to other forms of relationality, affectivity, and sexuality. However, young people say that this does not happen because parents are strongly anchored to their own customs.

My father came here [Italy] when I was not yet born. My mother came later, and I was born in Rome. It's just that after all these years, their attitude hasn't changed... they think as if they were still living in Morocco. (Yasmine, 27-year-old girl)

Compared to Frisina's (2007) study, the parents' vision appears to not have changed even though approximately 15 years had elapsed between the two research studies. It is conceivable that for the first generation, there is a greater desire and attachment to return to the country of origin than an adaptation to the context of residence where, despite their conservatism, their children are growing up and building their sentimental lives. Thus, as noted, exacerbating intergenerational dialogue in the family is a patriarchal vision of the Islamic social system, which limits and conditions young people, particularly girls, in their affective life. It is particularly the female interviewees who go into detail about the limitations and constraints that their families impose on them, thereby distinguishing male freedoms from their own in public space. On the other hand, this aspect is crucial: it is precisely female behaviour in the public sphere that indicates the degree of morality and religiosity of the family; thus, the greater the level of modesty, the greater the social respectability (González-López 2005).

I know many stories of boys fighting with their parents because their parents do not want their sons to go out with women, and the other way around. This applies to boys as well as girls. The situation is the same but then it plays out differently because, unfortunately, there is no denying it, but the Arab culture is a little more sexist. Perhaps it is more acceptable for a male to go out with a girl, for a girl a little less. (Leyla, 23-year-old girl)

Leyla's testimony again reflects the fact that social and relational restrictions stem from a culture she describes as "sexist." In fact, the example she cites does not explicitly mention a sexual experience—which is indeed forbidden by the Qur'an before marriage for both sexes—but only dating between men and women. A dating culture that, in her experience, restricts girls more than boys. Thus, from the presence of prohibitions, misunderstandings, and doubts, intergenerational familial (vertical) problems emerge, which are grafted with intragenerational (horizontal) problems beyond the Muslim peer circle—that is, with young native Italians. In their interactions with this group, girls and boys face dynamics that often contrast with those of the family—for example, friendly and sentimental relationships in which physical contact is involved, beginning with a hug and a handshake. The interviewees, predominantly boys (who are less constrained, according to Leyla, because of the presence of a "sexist" culture), report that they question what their parents passed on to them and do not entirely respect the imposition of physical contact with the opposite sex.

We, who are born here, behave differently towards women than men do towards women in their countries of origin. In the Islamic religion, there can be no contact between a man and a woman, so even a simple handshake is often a strong cause for doubt: can I do it or not? Many times, it is done, but there are questions about whether it is permissible. Even a hug between friends and two friendly kisses on the cheek is theoretically not permitted. (Noa, 25-year-old boy)

In this brief testimony, it is interesting to note that it is precisely the boys—perhaps because they are more aware that they are freer than the girls—who openly testify regarding occasions when they have not allowed themselves to be conditioned by family rules. Not only could this be due to the fact that they are aware that they have a privileged position but also that parental impositions on them in everyday life are more labile and ductile than those on their female counterparts. This is evident in Mohamed’s testimony:

On my birthday, I happened to hug my friend a few times after she gave me a present. My parents reacted by saying, “no, you should not have done that.” There are these problems because their mentality is completely different. Actually, from an Islamic perspective, you are not permitted to do so. So you understand that the issue is quite difficult. They are probably right. I am not permitted to hug a girl, and life here imposes this. (Mohamed, 28-year-old-boy)

If, as Mohamed states, “life here imposes it [on you],” the transformations in the relationship between the genders probably arose from being part of the Italian culture in which there is a greater physical manifestation of mutual affection between peers. Both boys, Noa and Mohamed, do not deny the existence of a religious aspect underlying this relational aspect, but they appear to be more inclined to follow their own affective and friendship needs. Thus, the immigration context appears to profoundly influence youth relational dynamics, tending towards a generational conformation. There is a greater drive and interest in the transformation of family regulatory structures for deeper social inclusion than in the maintenance of religious rules, which would constitute daily constraints.

An additional aspect noted concerns intergenerational dialogue regarding sexuality, which—although fundamental for the construction of the institution of family and the preservation of the cultural heritage—is limited to the unidirectional and imposing transmission of the rules derived only from Islam and the culture of origin.

Put brutally, I am 20 years old and with my parents I have never spoken about sexuality, never. There’s always this modesty, to deflect, to get away from it. I have to say that I’m embarrassed too, but I’m interested in facing it... I hope so... Sooner or later we’ll get to the point, though. (Wassim, 20-years-old boy)

In Islam, in the male-female relationship, you must be a bit careful. Maybe in the first generation you can’t talk about homosexuals at all because they wouldn’t understand it; in the second generation, on the other hand, as you go through it, living there, there is more openness and understanding of what you are going through. I understand more than my parents. I would say to talk about it, my father would say not to talk about it at all. But maybe things can change, they have to! (Asmaa, 24-year-old girl)

Wassim and Asmaa's testimonies paint a picture in which intergenerational dialogue on the issue of sexuality is suspended, silenced, and often shunned. From these and other interviews, the issue of homosexuality emerges as a completely tabooed aspect of youth and adult life ("you can't talk about homosexuals at all", states Asmaa). This parental unwillingness fits in with the attitude of a proportion of the Muslim population that, as noted by Dialmy (2010), implements a greater repression of gender and sexual models that differ from the binary. Therefore, an authoritarian educational model appears to be present. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Asmaa cites the father rather than the mother as the person who would "say not to talk about it at all." This confirms the fact that, regardless of the gender of the young people, it is the mother-son/daughter dyad that is preferred in the dialogue on sexuality (Masullo and Iovine 2016). The reaction of the young people when questioned regarding the impossibility of dialogue and communication on topics that, even to themselves, create embarrassment and anxiety is nevertheless a positive challenge, as Wassim states that "sooner or later we'll get to the point, though." For the younger generation, the need to address these aspects and openly express their gender and sexual identity as well as their emotional and physical relationships is stronger than developing avoidance and concealment strategies vis-à-vis their parents.

Gender Discriminations: From Exclusive to Inclusive Family Education

With regard to the second research question, a generational discrepancy between parental and youth educational views on gender, relationships, and sexuality was observed. The visions, occasionally conflicting and creating rifts in relationships, change with different ways in which Italian society is perceived. These visions indicate two opposing trends with respect to the inclusion process in the country. If, as already observed, from the parents' perspective, adaptation in Italian society is not a goal given the hope of returning to the country of origin sooner or later (Frisina 2007); from the children's perspective, inclusion is necessary for both men and women as well as evidence of the mere fact of being born and raised in Italy.

A general criticism of parental upbringing, which discriminates against females because of the patriarchal system prevalent in the countries of origin, emerges from the testimonies of both boys and girls. Compared to their fathers' and mothers' generations, the young people are able to distinguish cultural aspects, norms, and customs from purely Islamic ones—that is, they are able to implement the *distinction*, already highlighted, between *religion* and *culture*. This is possible due to their *cultural distance* or, rather, their *third perspective*, which places a more objective and conscious gaze on the differentiation between Islam and culture. In addition to being the result of their multiple identities, this awareness has matured through the process of schooling in the Italian context and through in-depth knowledge of Islamic content.

It is clear that, for me, being born here and being aware of more cultures than my parents, it is easier to differentiate religion from culture. Then, well, I document myself compared to them because many things they do not know, they take them for granted... I often ask them to explain, but they know nothing. And so, it is you who must understand, weigh... resolve doubts. [...] On education, I have no doubts, at the level of education it's always the same rule, but there are no gender differences. (Mohamed, 19-year-old boy)

What for parents is certain and taken for granted (*cultural custom*), becomes a source of doubt for young people, a stimulus towards the search for religious and cultural information that can answer and define their own cultural, gender, and sexual identity. It is in this search that they make a *distinction* between *Islam* and *culture* (or the *male* tradition). Thus, living in the Italian context profoundly influences young people's perspectives on these issues, including the issue of education. In this regard, the interviewees argue that there should be no difference in education based on gender because, as Mohamed explains, "at the level of education it is always the same rule," even though they have experienced different levels and quality of education depending on their family culture of origin.

From a strictly religious point of view, there should be no difference between the education of boys and girls, but at the level of the Moroccan mentality, there is a difference. For example, a girl cannot do whatever she wants. (Amina, 24-year-old girl)

Moreover, the interviewees also speak of an additional difference between the education received in the family (vertical) and that received in the mosque (vertical)—that is, two forms of intergenerational socialisation, the former informal and the latter formal and institutional.

In the mosque since I was a child, I remember there were both boys and girls and they said the same things to both of them. (Abdul, 27-year-old boy)

I think there is quite a big gap between me and my sister, because from a young age my parents always took me to school; they were inclined to take me out and have teachers and imams from the mosque teach me. Whereas as far as my sister is concerned, it is a bit more limited because they are culturally seen as weaker and more fragile. (Iyad, 26-year-old boy)

In the first testimony, Abdul positively reports the presence of boys and girls during the religious lessons in the mosque, thereby confirming what is theoretically prescribed (Barger 2015; Al Zbon and Smadi 2017); Iyad's experience clearly shows a gender gap. In his case, the family discriminated between the male son and the female daughter, precluding the latter's education in the mosque (or in Qur'anic school). Not surprisingly, Iyad speaks of "limitation" with respect to the parental treatment of his sister. He, as well as the interviewees whose testimonies follow, associate

their parents' behaviour with a cultural conception of women as weak and fragile subjects, to be protected, which in fact—in the patriarchal vision of the Islamic system (Vercellin 2002; Velayati 2016)—controls and restricts women's access to other forms of education and sociality.

Maybe they think the female is weaker and... you tend to leave the male freer. They tend to defend the female as if behind a shield. (Saloua, 23-year-old girl)

Maybe there is a difference in freedom. As a child, I was much freer to go out than my sister. Well, actually even now...when I think about it. (Wassim, 27-year-old boy)

Boys are guaranteed more socialising freedoms and not merely religious freedoms in the mosque, such as multiple courses on Islamic contents; they are also allowed to come home late at night, to hang out with friends without giving too much information where they are and what they are doing; these are aspects linked to parental governance that orient educational practices to cultural customs rather than Islamic sources. In this regard, the male interviewees emphasised (as if burdened with a *guilt* of being the male gender) the need for a different perspective of women who should be valued and not restricted. Although one cannot speak of an explicit masculine feminism (Digby 2013), one should note the poignancy of the statements among men born and raised at the family level in a system defined by patriarchy, particularly a patriarchy erected on the basis of Islamic principles. To support the need for a change in values at a collective level, the boys cited a few historical female characters—famous for their wisdom, ability, and intelligence (academics, believers, warriors)—who played a decisive role in the spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula during the time of Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-8 June 632 CE).

In my opinion, religion does not make these differences; indeed, there are many excellent figures in the history of Islam that have been women. For example, in the life of the Prophet, there was the wife of Abu Bakr, who did things like react courageously against an entire state. (Abdul, 25-year-old boy)

In this perspective, girls and boys also expressed rather precise ideas about the family model they aspire to in their future lives. Beginning from a clear deconstruction of stereotypes and cultural stigmatisations about gender, they aim to build an open and positive family model in which children are educated to respect all forms of relationality, gender, and sexual identity. Looking to the future, the interviewees doubt, as Mohammad reports below, that their parents (future grandparents) will be able to understand this change; however, they believe that it is necessary to implement it for “equality between men and women.” In fact, a central element of common reflection concerns education, which must consider the plurality of gender and sexual identities.

If I have to think about the family I would like, even that I imagine right now, I see it as completely different from my parents... surely with a daughter I would behave

differently by giving her more possibilities, even in her education, and telling her that she is as strong as a man. Enough of the idea of the weak woman! Equality between men and women is important. (Sarah, 21-year-old girl)

If I had a homosexual son or daughter, it would be no problem for me... maybe his grandparents, I mean my parents, I don't know... maybe they wouldn't take it well. (Mohammad, 22-years-old boy)

Thus, a deep generational awareness emerges with respect to the influences that the Italian context has brought into their lives: the strong *gap of values* created at the intergenerational level; the need for greater equality between genders; the need to build friendship and sentimental relationships that overcome religious and ethnic specificities; and the need to have open dialogues and obtain complete acceptance and parental recognition of their gender and sexual identity, which, however, remains essential for these young people in their life. The comparison with the Italian context has fostered greater generational conformity of young Muslims with their native Italian peers, thereby allowing the former to re-evaluate the education they received from parents, specifically the models of gender and sexuality filtered through a mix of Islamic principles and traditional customs.

Being in Italy changes your outlook on things, friendships, and even engagement. For me, right now it's early... and then I haven't found anyone, but if I find someone, I will decide. Then I don't want to stay at home like my mother. I want to do my work. As I told you, I study political science and I want to have a career, I don't want my future husband to lock me at home. It's important to be independent, if you think about it, just economically. (Maryam, 22-year-old girl)

I think that in the future generations of us Muslims, many things will change... well, for girls especially—the way of relating between males and females has changed. I have fewer problems with my Muslim friends than my parents. I think girls are more fearful. [...] Honestly, I feel more like my Italian friends... I mean, we go out with girls without problems, we hug... I think it's normal here in Italy but then it's also fairer than what our parents do. We don't do anything bad against Islam. We have to overcome these oppressive mentalities. (Yusuf, 24-year-old boy)

In these last two testimonies, Maryam and Yusuf portray a future personal and family situation of rupture with respect to the manner in which they were brought up by their families (“in the future generations of us Muslims many things will change...,” states Yusuf), in which the woman has the same possibilities for personal and professional success as the man (“I want to have a career, I don't want my future husband to lock me at home. It is important to be independent,” states Maryam), in which the “oppressive mentality” Yusuf speaks of—that is, the patriarchal system—is overcome with new forms of equal relationships. This, it appears, also implies partially not following certain Islamic principles entirely, which would be a prescription to live one's social, affective and, not least, sexual life in a more spontaneous and inclusive manner.

Final Reflections

This article analysed the nature of intergenerational dialogue on the issues of gender and sexual identity as well as gender education between parents and second-generation Muslim children in the Italian context. The perspective of young Muslims on the gender education issue experienced in the family of origin was investigated and then the future perspective of family socialisation was analysed, noting possible intergenerational transformations in the process.

This research outlined a picture that still partially corresponds to those that emerged from previous research, in which parents belonging to the first generation have a defensive and closed attitude that hinders adaptation to the Italian cultural context of the entire family nucleus, thereby slowing down the process of inclusion of their children. Family conservatism still appears to be very much present and in fact limits the affective life of young people by educating them in a heteronormative patriarchal model of relationships. It is young girls who are most affected by such a conception through limitations and constraints, which are mainly imposed in the public sphere. They are not only restricted from hanging out with their peers in their free time but also (occasionally) from being educated in mosques. Indeed, even the boys themselves testify to this female condition by claiming to have greater educational and social freedoms, but above all by recounting their transgressions of family rules (kissing and hugging with the opposite sex) which indicate, in our opinion, a greater cultural flexibility towards men in general.

With regard to sexuality and sexual orientation, a dialogue between parents and children is particularly taboo. While young people seek confrontation, an opening up of the traditional model of male–female relationships (homosexuality, for example, emerges in the interviews), parents appear to reject dialogue and propose the traditional patriarchal view of relationships as the only permissible one. Parental resistance is largely present in the lives of the interviewees and suggests a deep attachment to the cultural values of the country of origin, a difficulty in understanding boys' new needs, perhaps—as previous studies have noted—because they still hope to return to their country of birth. Boys and girls respond to such resistance by seeking confrontation, which is often avoided by their parents, and rediscovering a conformity of views in their relationships with their peers. In fact, they feel the need to implement a transformation both, as far as possible, of the conception of gender and sexual identity in the dialogue with their family of origin and, clearly, in the one they will build in their family of choice. It is in this intergenerational transition that a deep change appears to be taking place in the children's conception of their identity, beginning from an equality for genders in terms of educational opportunities.

Therefore, it can be said that experiencing Italian culture has deeply influenced the projects and aspirations of young people, who indicate that they are radically

convinced of the need for a transformation with respect to the position of women in society, towards the creation of a social system that recognises and supports gender equality, and of the education of their children by deconstructing gender stereotypes, despite the resistance from their parents who will be grandparents in the foreseeable future.

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