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## National Case Study

# **WP 6 REPORT: GENDER, MIGRATION AND RELIGION**

Bulgaria

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## 1. Goal, Theory and Methods

### 1.1. Goal of the Research

The bulk of immigrants from non-European to European states is composed of people of prevalingly Muslim religion different from that of the host population. This reality triggers the interest on the part of academics to the religious practices of immigrants (Hunter, Sh. 2002, Kastoryano, R. 2007, Al-Hamarnah, A., J. Thielmann 2008). Since the 1980s the interest towards female migration that forms half of the general migration flow, has been on the rise (Krasteva 2010: 63). The integration of Muslim immigrant women in their host societies is the subject of numerous studies (Buijs, G. 1993, Anthias, F., G. Lazaridis 2000, Freedman, J., C. Tarr 2000, Knörr, J., B. Meier 2000, Erel, U. 2003, Salih, R. 2003, Killian, C. 2006, Pojmann, W. 2006). Considerable number of studies deals with immigrant women religiosity<sup>1</sup> (El Guindi, F. 1999, Leonard, K., A. Stepick, M. Vasquez, J. Holdaway 2005, Martin-Muñoz, G., A. Lopez-Sala 2005, Scott, J. 2007, Marranci, G. 2007, Gozdzia, E. 2008, Jouili, J. 2008, Schmidt, G. 2008, Joppke, Ch. 2009). Researchers of female migration identify processes of identity reconstruction that involve interactions between tradition and the new social and cultural environment of immigrants with diversification of the Islamic practices being the outcome (Martin-Muñoz, G., A. Lopez-Sala 2005: 137-140).

The goal of the present study is to investigate the relationship between migration, religion and gender in the case of Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria. The importance of such study in the context of Bulgaria is related to the specific position of the country with regard to migration. Located on the transit routes between Asia, Africa and the rest of Europe Bulgaria has become an entry gate to the European Union and gradually emerges as a new country of immigration. The study aims to investigate the process of negotiation of religious and gender identities in the context of migration and to analyze the role of religion in the adaptation of Muslim immigrant women in the secular society of Bulgaria. The study pays attention to the levels and types of change that occur in the realm of religious beliefs and practices and of gendered cultural norms in a host society of majority Orthodox Christian population and minority Muslim population, both with long established Orthodox and respectively Islamic religious institutions.

While local Islam in Bulgaria has been the focus of thoroughgoing and profound academic research, it has also been the subject of recurrent political instrumentalization among right wing political players. The public debate on the issue of local Islam occurs sporadically. It is usually prompted by political interests of the day that are justified by claims about the exceptionality of Islam and the “problems” and “threats” it poses to the “secular” and “national” character of the Bulgarian state. Researchers working in the field of Balkan and Bulgarian Islam have little voice in such debates that are built around distorted concepts of “difference”, “fundamentalism” and “radicalism”. In this context the issue of immigrant Islam is not the focus of public debates. So far Bulgarian public discourse identifies Islam with the local Muslim communities that are much bigger than those of the immigrants. The main immigrant related issues, subject to public debates include disputes over the capacity of the Bulgarian state to welcome refugees and immigrants, discussions over the scope of their rights and sporadic reports of incidents of racist violence directed mainly against immigrants of African states.

In such a context the accumulation of academic knowledge on immigrant Islam appears highly relevant. The study of the relationships between Islam and migration,

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship gender - religion see: Castelli, E. 2001.

immigrant and local Islam, gender and Islam and immigrant Islam and secularism in Bulgaria pursues knowledge within a field that is vulnerable to political manipulation.

## **1.2. Research Methods**

The present study is based on qualitative research methods and is conducted among immigrants from both denominations of Islam (Shia and Sunni) as well as among representatives of local Islamic institutions in Bulgaria. Female respondents come from countries of the Middle East and North Africa and are of different status (refugees or refugee applicants, temporary or permanent residents, citizens). The qualitative research is based on semi-standardized in-depth interviews and participant observation.

In depth interviews were conducted with a total of 18 respondents. Of them 14 are immigrants – 12 women and 2 men and 4 are representatives of relevant Islamic institutions (Central Mufti office, Sofia Mufti office and the Sofia mosque). Respondents were approached through three main channels of access: through immigrant institutions (The Iraqi Club in Sofia and the Council of Refugee Women), door keepers as well as researcher's personal contacts. Interviews with immigrants were conducted at the following sites: Council of Refugee Women (3); Humanitarian office of the Ethiopian Association (2); The office of the Bulgarian language courses for refugees (2); Respondent's private homes (3); IMIR Office (1); Migrant's personal office (1); a café (1). Twelve interviews were conducted in Bulgarian and six in Arabic with the help of translator.

Participant observation was conducted in the Sofia mosque, the Iraqi Club in Sofia, Migrants' homes, the Council of Refugee Women and the Humanitarian Office of the Ethiopian Association.

In-depth interviews were conducted along semi-standardized questionnaire of four sections and lasted 2 - 2.5 hours. The first section of the questionnaire focused on respondent's social and demographic profile, the second on respondent's social environment and interactions in the host country, the third on respondent's religious beliefs and practices and the fourth on their gender relations and identities in the context of migration and religion. The first two sections of the interview traced the relationship between home and host country social experiences of migrants and the levels of adaptation and the forms of integration in the Bulgarian society. These were analyzed through indicators such as migrant networks, professional surroundings, forms of socialization, information sources as well as free time routines of migrants. The third section of the questionnaire traced the relationship between religion, migration and gender. These relationships were investigated through questions examining migrants' religious practices (related to the life cycle and the religious calendar) and religious performance (in private and in public) demonstrated through clothing practices, visits to prayer homes and immigrant gathering. Another set of questions addressed respondents' perceptions about the changes in religious performance and profession they experience in migration. To better understand the complexities in negotiating religious and gender identities on the part of female migrants, particular questions traced religious practices with highly gendered implications. Finally, the section included questions examining the relationship between Muslim immigrants and local Islamic institutions. Questionnaire's fourth section investigated gender dynamics in the private and in the public sphere through indicators such as domestic work, employment, care for the children and family decision making. The analytical focus of the questions was placed on the investigation of the role of religion in negotiating gender identities and gender relations in migration.

Semi-standardized interviews with representatives of local Islamic institutions aimed to analyze their involvement with Muslim immigrants, their observations about the religious profession of immigrants and their view about the relationship between local and immigrant Islam.

### 1.3. Respondents' Profiles

Compared to Western Europe, immigration into Bulgaria occurred later and is of much smaller proportions (Кръстева, А. 2005). Muslim immigrant communities, originating from Arab countries, residing in Bulgaria are the outcome of two major migration waves. The first one took place during the socialist period (between the 1960s and 1980s) in the framework of official bilateral agreements between Bulgaria and different Arab states. According to these agreements Arab countries accepted Bulgarian specialists mainly in the health care and the construction sectors, while the Bulgarian state accepted foreign students in the country's major universities. This wave of immigrants was dominated by highly educated, prevailingly male immigrants. Many of them were secular oriented or atheist as they professed communist beliefs. Consequently significant number of Arab immigrant students formed mixed marriages with local Bulgarian women.

The second migration wave took place after 1989 to differ considerably from the first one in a number of respects. The absence of centralized state control over trans-border movements and migration and the changed geopolitical realities influenced diversification of the channels of migration and the profiles of immigrants. Arab immigrants were now refugees<sup>2</sup>, irregulars and transit migrants many of whom women. The post-1989 migration flow from Arab countries is composed of single men, whole families and female immigrants with children entering Bulgaria for family reunion. While the first immigration flow included mainly students and high university graduates, the second one is composed of self-employed entrepreneurs and traders as well as of immigrants of lower education and qualifications engaged in low-qualified sectors of the economy (Желязкова, А., В. Григоров, Д. Димитрова 2005). There are marked gender disproportions in the immigrant communities in the country with dominance of women in some (for example the Russian community) and dominance of men in other (for example the African and the Arab communities) (Krasteva, A. 2010: 67).

The present study was conducted among first generation immigrants who entered Bulgaria along the immigration waves of the pre- and post 1989 period. Study respondents originate from the following countries: Iraq (10); Lebanon (1), Albania (1), Palestine (2). Two of them are male and the rest (12) are female. The majority of respondents are Muslim with only two of them professing Christian religion. Female respondents are of rather diverse age profile with three of them in the age group of 19 - 29; three in the age group of 30 - 33; three in the age group of 40 - 45; two in the age group of 50 - 55 and one aged 68. Seven of the respondents are recognized refugees, three are refugee applicants, one has permanent residence permit and three are naturalized Bulgarian citizens. The educational profile of respondents is seemingly diverse. One is University graduate; two are university students upon leaving their origin country; one has incomplete university education; three have

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<sup>2</sup> On the refugees from Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq see: Кръстева, А. 2006.

graduated from semi-high universities or professional schools; four had secondary education and one respondent had finished basic school only. Six of the respondents work in Bulgaria being engaged in the following professions (cosmetician, two social workers, two teachers and service sector). Six of the respondents did not work at the time of the interview but three of them had professional qualifications as teacher, nurse and economist. Three of the interviewed women had no particular professional qualification.

Respondents have resided in the country for varying periods of time. Two of them for only 5-6 months; four for a period of 1 to 2, 5 years; three for a period of 6 to 10 years and five for period of 16 to 30 years.

The prevailing majority of female respondents are married and reside in Bulgaria with their husbands and families. One young woman from Albania is single, one is divorced and two other reside in Bulgaria as widows. Four entered Bulgaria along the framework of family reunion. With the exception of three respondents, all have children in Bulgaria with whom they arrived in the country. Two respondents gave birth to a child after arrival in Bulgaria.

#### **1.4. Basic Premises and Concepts**

The central approach adopted by the present study is the one that views identities – ethnic, national, cultural or religious – in terms of social interaction rather than content, as multiple and situationally defined rather than unified and centered, as the outcome of continuous process of negotiation among different actors, rather than as natural and self-perpetuating (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1996, 1997). In addition, the study treats the issue of migration as transnationality – as process of being here and there, as social existence combining symbolic and practical strategies that link migrants’ host and home countries, rather than require one-way processes of assimilation, marginalization or other.

The identities of female immigrants are perceived as coming into being in the process of transformation of social roles and positions. This complex and multidimensional process is conditioned by the power hierarchies of the host society and the respective adaptation strategies on the part of immigrants. The religious identity of the Muslim immigrant woman is approached as one among many facets of a complex personal identity that become reinvented and reconfigured in the process of migration. The question of the role of religion in the process of identity negotiation by female migrants is especially relevant in a context of a host society with religion different from that of the immigrants and with levels and forms of secularization different from those in immigrants’ host countries. The study pays major attention to the body that becomes the meeting point of religion, gender and power in the process of identity (trans)formation. The interaction between the body politics of the host society and the immigrant community becomes the pivot of construction of the (images of the) “self” and the “other”.

#### **1.5. Basic Questions**

The analysis of the present study is based on three interrelated questions that investigate the relationship between gender, migration and religion. The first question focuses on the role of religion in construction of identity and identity negotiation in the context of migration. The second concerns the gendered aspects of religious practices and the role of gender in maintaining and negotiating Muslim profession in the dominant secular context of Bulgaria. In particular the study is interested in the role played by Islam for

marginalisation, integration and claiming place in Bulgarian society. The third question posed by the study concerns the spaces of (religious) dialog and expression available to (female) migrants and the relationship between immigrant Islam and respectively - local Islam, local Orthodox Christianity and secularism.

## **2. Description of the work carried out**

### **2.1. Immigrant networks and accommodation patterns**

Social interactions of Muslim immigrant women in Bulgaria appear confined to co-national and co-immigrant networks that usually comprise limited circle of relatives and friends. In addition, their social routines are centered in the private sphere and they have very limited presence in the public sphere. These findings are confirmed by the analysis of a number of indicators such as: help upon arrival and support networks in migration, accommodation patterns, daily routines, sources of information and Bulgarian language proficiency, partaking in migrant affiliations.

Initial orientation and help after arrival is being provided to female migrants by very close relatives or by co-nationals who resided longer in the country. Female immigrants who entered Bulgaria along family reunion schemes reported to have been helped by respective members of their family: husband, father or son. Other respondents were closely guarded along all steps of the orientation and accommodation process by very close relatives. A refugee family from Iraq composed of a young couple, the wife's old parents and their two children were closely supported by their aunt who has spent almost 30 years in the country. The woman reported that her aunt supported the family throughout the refugee application process, the process of apartment search and renting, the job orientation and job finding. The core support for this respondent was provided within the extended family, that was composed of three nuclear families - the aunt's married son and daughter and their children and the newly arrived refugee family. Daily support regarding care for the children and health care for the old parents was assured through a tight family network. A third group of respondents who arrived in the country together with their husbands, with no former relatives in the country, reported to have been helped by members of their own community. Only one respondent said that she and her family were supported upon arrival by the existing immigrant support organizations in the country. In addition, job and employment for female immigrants and for their husbands appears to be provided prevalingly within co-ethnic or co-immigrant businesses.

Although migrants' social networks operate within their own co-national or co-immigrant communities, no process of compact immigrant settlements is observed. The dominant accommodation pattern among immigrants of Arab countries involves dispersed rented living throughout the suburban quarters of the capital within dominant Bulgarian

neighborhoods. Moreover, immigrant accommodation is rather unstable and immigrant families appear to change rented apartments and city quarters many times in the course of their residence in the country. The system of landowner-tenant relations in Bulgaria that favors the rights of the owners over those of tenants contributes to a dynamic market of rented accommodation and high level of tenant instability. This affects a rather mobile accommodation pattern of immigrants who change neighborhoods and living surroundings often.<sup>3</sup>

None of the study respondents reported to have any immigrant neighbors in their immediate living surroundings. Three of the respondents however, reported to have a close immigrant friend living in the same quarter. Immigrant women report to have rather limited contacts with their Bulgarian neighbors. Only one respondent reported to be in good relation with an old Bulgarian lady, living next door, who gives treats to her children and invites her occasionally for tea. Another female immigrant from Iraq (who has been in Bulgaria for 5 months only) reported to make conscious efforts to communicate with her neighbors (in order to work on her Bulgarian) and every early afternoon goes to the quarter park to communicate with the (mostly old) people there.

Muslim immigrant women report that migration effects significant changes with regard to the intensity of their social contacts. Lively and frequent social interactions within their extended families and friends in the home country are contrasted to rather secluded and “quiet” daily routines spent within severely reduced social circles. Female immigrants’ daily routines in Bulgaria are centered on their home and children. Major daily engagements reported by respondents include cooking, cleaning, shopping, care for the children and going to work for those who are employed. Divergence from this routine occurs for respondents who are enrolled in Bulgarian language courses. However, respondents reported to attend language courses irregularly. Although the uniform explanation given by immigrant women was that they cannot afford paying for daily public transportation, the reasons for the insufficient attendance of language courses should be more complex. Respondents report to spend their free time within their private homes, engaging in activities such as “watching TV”, “sleeping”, “talking with my mother”, “studying”, “knitting”, “and writing”. Muslim immigrant women tend to enter into the public sphere only to implement certain engagements: shopping at the local quarter market, visiting Bulgarian language course, going to work, visiting a doctor, contacting local immigrant support association for advice, financial help or other type of support. Female immigrants avoid free time activities outside their homes. Muslim women take walks in the city or the city parks, or visit cafes with their husbands only very rarely (usually on holidays). Respondents report to have none or only very few female friends (relatives and acquaintances from the Agency for Refugees or other immigrant support organizations), usually from their own community. They meet together only very rarely, more common is the practice to talk over the phone. There is no practice among Muslim immigrant women of meeting female friends in coffee houses or other public places. All interviewed respondents explained that with the fact that there is no coffee or sweet house “appropriate” for such meetings. Although there is a marked number of ethnic restaurants and fast food places around Sofia (Lebanese, Afghan, Turkish/ Kurdish and other), female immigrants insisted that there is no café house especially opened by and for members of their community. The preferred form of meetings among female friends is paying visits at home. Friends usually cook and share meals together. Shared cooking thus appears important form of socialization of women who use the occasions to share present problems and joys as well as common culture (women usually cook traditional dishes) and

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<sup>3</sup> A female respondent from Lebanon reported that her family has changed apartments and neighborhoods seven times during the 16 year long stay in the country.

memories. Only three respondents reported to have Bulgarian friends. The first has graduated from a secondary school in Bulgaria and reported to have wide social network of friends. However, her “best” friend was an immigrant as well coming from Ukraine. The second respondent was a teacher at the Palestinian school and considered two of her Bulgarian colleagues friends while the third reported to meet regularly with a young Bulgarian neighbor who was married to an Iraqi man.

Social interactions of Muslim immigrant women appear further obscured by the absence of formal or informal female immigrant associations in the country. The record of Muslim immigrant women gathering in Bulgaria includes only one active NGO (The Council of Refugee Women), one failed attempt for the establishment of a female social support organization and no participation in the existing national immigrant associations in the country.

Bulgarian immigrant communities have a number of associations such as those of the Syrians, the Iraqis, the Lebanese, the Afghan and other immigrants. All of these organizations however, are male dominated with female migrants playing no particular role in associations’ decision making or organizational life. None of the female respondents reported to have contacts with their respective national associations in Sofia. A widowed immigrant woman from Iraq who lived in Bulgaria for 30 years and used to be closely engaged with the Iraqi Club, reported to have withdrawn from any activities in the last several years. *“I cannot stay there if their way of thinking is different ... they think for example, that you go there to, and one of them said it to me once, to look for a man”*. Therefore she felt she better withdraws. The woman also disapproved of the activities conducted by the Club which she described as being oriented at giving lunch to immigrant men, serving as point of conversations (“in improper language”) with no cultural orientation or space for female presence. Her account was confirmed by our observations at the annual gathering of the Iraqi Club in Sofia (on the occasion of the national holiday of Iraq) when only Iraqi men were present. The few women present at the celebration were Bulgarian. Muslim immigrant women report to have no alternative forms of formal or informal gathering based on gender principle. Moreover, when attempts were made to establish female immigrant support association, they were countered by resistance on the part of immigrant women. In 2005 several migrant support NGOs in Sofia, attempted to trigger the establishment of organization of the Arab female immigrants – to be named “Anur” [“Light”]. The idea was that the organization develops support activities especially tailored for female immigrants. The official reason given by immigrant women who refused to take part in the organization, was that they did not have the time for this responsibility as they were very busy taking care for their families. Three different explanations were given by our respondents for the failure of this initiative. The understanding of Muslim immigrant women, invited to take part in the organization, was that it was meant to serve as a female club for informal gathering and socializing among Arab women. Soon after they realized that it will involve social support activities and responsibilities, they felt rather discouraged and withdraw. Immigrant women, active in the Council of Refugee women believed that the initiative failed as it was not supported by the men in the community. The resistance of immigrant men had two dimensions. First, the social activities to be conducted by the organization, such as help in contacting institutions, drafting and issuance of documents, were in fact the informal business of some immigrant men. Therefore, such organization was seen as potentially threatening their role and business within the community. Second, some men in the community opposed the organization as they believed that the opportunity to contact and work with institutions would empower their wives and make them more independent.

At the time of the field research only two organizations existed attracting a limited number of Muslim immigrant women. The Council of Refugee Women, an immigrant support organization hosted in the building of the Bulgarian Red Cross, attracted some female immigrant volunteer workers. The goal of the organization is to work for the empowerment of refugee women and to facilitate their integration into the Bulgarian society. The organization provides institutional orientation and advise to refugee applicants and refugees (both men and women, Muslim as well as Christian). In addition, it organizes excursions, trainings and holiday celebrations for immigrants. Immigrant women volunteering at the organization stated that their decision to join was directed by their desire to help – *“I like helping people”*. However, through participant observation we were able to observe that The Council of Refugee Women provided its female volunteers the opportunity to socialize, to engage and feel needed as well as to be closer to the support opportunities, provided by the organization and thus be helpful for their families.

The second organization attracting Muslim immigrant women was the Bulgarian branch of the Focolare Movement, founded by the Catholic Church in 1943 in Northern Italy. The major cause of the Movement is to maintain dialogue among all religions and for that purpose it welcomes members of different faiths. At present it has hundreds of thousands of members throughout the world. The Focolare movement was revived in Bulgaria in 1991 and at present is managed by four core Focolare representatives coming from Italy, Germany, Croatia and Slovenia. Our field study identified a number of Muslim immigrant women who were partaking in the activities by the movement that was popularized among them by the Chairwoman of the Council of Refugee Women who is an Orthodox Christian from Iraq. Focolares’ main activities in Bulgaria include: regular gatherings in Sofia at the Catholic church “St. Joseph”, the Uniate church near the “Ljulin planina” street in Sofia and in the Focolare’s headquarters. The major purpose of these meetings is socialization among members. In addition, Focolares organize annual meetings in chosen cities of the country that are called for the occasion “Mariapolis” (Maria’s city). Followers of the movement from all over the country gather in this city (women, men and children numbering to 100 people) and live “as one family” for three days.<sup>4</sup> Those present get information about the movement around the world while young people and kids are organized into groups of particular activities. Muslim immigrant women who attend the Focolare’s meetings and gatherings appear attracted by the chance to extend and diversify their social contacts in a friendly environment, which facilitates their integration. At Focolare meetings Muslim immigrant women and their children mix with Bulgarian families. They also find satisfaction in preparing national dishes or making presentations for the culture and traditions in their home countries for members of the movement.<sup>5</sup> Muslim immigrant women are impressed by the respect that the Focolares pay to their religion and culture as well as to their situation as refugees. Common meetings and visits are held on the occasion of religious holidays such as Christmas and Ramadan bayrami with congratulations and presents being exchanged.

The Bulgarian language proficiency of Muslim immigrant women and the sources of information they use, demonstrate that their social contacts are mostly oriented within co-immigrant networks. Only three of the eleven female respondents of the study were proficient in Bulgarian. They lived in the country for respectively 30, 15 and 6 years with one of them having graduated from Bulgarian secondary school. Another respondent knew relatively good Bulgarian but spoke the language with great insecurity, obviously having no regular practice. The rest of the respondents knew little or no Bulgarian. Thus it is not

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<sup>4</sup> The selected city for the years 2008 and 2009 was the city of Kazanlak.

<sup>5</sup> Respondents reported to have prepared sweets for 200 people for one of the big national meeting of the Movement held in the Red Cross Building in Sofia. During meetings women tell each other about their home places and show pictures from there.

surprising that all respondents reported Arab news and channels as their main sources of information. None of the respondents reported to follow Bulgarian TV channels or newspapers. Internet is used by many immigrants as a source of information and communication with relatives in other parts of the world.

The reduced social milieu of Muslim immigrant women in migration in both the private and the public sphere, is verified by respondents themselves in recurring references about the limited contacts they have and the feelings of “loneliness” they encounter in the host country.

## **2.2. Migration and Religion**

### **2.2.1. Muslim Immigrants and Local Islamic Institutions**

There is a well developed institutional framework assuring the Islamic profession in Bulgaria as 12% of country’s population is Muslim (including Turks, Muslim Bulgarians, Muslim Roma and Tatars). Most respondents however, do not know of the existence of local Muslim communities and those few who are aware of the fact reported to have no particular contacts with members of these communities. According to both immigrants and members of the local Islamic institutions, Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria have no official or informal mosques, places of prayer or Koranic schools. Muslim immigrants are expected to turn to the existing Islamic institutions.

Islamic institutions in Bulgaria such as the Central Mufti office and the Sofia Mufti office reported to have no particular policy towards the Muslim immigrant communities. The Central Mufti Office in Bulgaria was engaged with Muslim immigrants on very few occasions. The directorate on “Islamic profession” was responsible for the construction and furnishing of a prayer home in the Home for Accommodation of Foreigners in Busmancy, near Sofia. Later the same Directorate organized *Iftar* dinners for the fasting inmates of the Home, during Ramadan and granted them needed items such as bed sheets. While the first initiative was financed by the Bulgarian government (The Directorate of Confession at the Council of Ministers), the second was financed by the Mufti office. There is no official mufti for the Busmanci prayer home however, the prayers being conducted by an inmate from Senegal, a university graduate in philosophy from Bulgarian University.

Muslim immigrants themselves turn to the official Islamic institutions in cases of death, marriage or divorce (*termed “spiritual occasions”, by officials of the Central Mufti Office*). However, for purposes of circumcision or washing the deceased before burial, immigrants turn to members of their own communities. Some Muslim immigrants contact the Mufti Office to seek social support such as health care, purchase of medicine, help for return to the home country. The Mufti Office however, has no program or budget to satisfy such requests.

### **2.2.2. Immigrants and Islam: The private and the public sphere**

All interviewed women identify themselves as believers and consider women as more religious than men. They perceive religion as something one was born with – “*I was born with Muslim religion. My grandfather, my father, all are Muslims and I am a believer.*”, “*religion was born in man by inheritance, not by choice*”. Religion is understood and lived as a set of

universal moral norms that humble the individual. It is also perceived as a social mark signifying ones belonging to certain social group.

### Holidays

Upon migration the ritual system of Muslim immigrant women undergoes changes in two major directions: incorporation and celebration of local (Christian and secular holidays) and reduction of the number of traditional holidays that are celebrated rather modestly with a simplified cuisine.

All respondents indicate that in Bulgaria they started to celebrate the central local holidays – Christmas and Easter. A young Muslim woman says: *“We follow all that is marked as holiday. Whether Muslim or Christian – we regard it as a holiday and do it”*. Some of the women adopt Christian rituals such as dying of Easter eggs. Muslim women also visit Church at Easter day. One of the channels of incorporation of the new holiday system is the Council of Refugee Women. A female respondent said: *“they tell us when there is a holiday and we try to do it at home so that we integrate”*. *“Christmas is my favorite holiday”* says a Muslim female respondent who studied in Catholic school in Africa and whose mother, although she was *“a true Muslim”* was making the crèches of Jesus for Christmas.

The New Years’ Eve is another holiday that is celebrated by immigrants in their countries of origin and in Bulgaria. They decorate New Year’s Tree for that holiday. A new holiday that one of our respondents was celebrating is Saint George’s Day – one of the most popular in Bulgaria. A possible explanation of this decision is the fact that St. George’s day is associated with lamb offering which resembles the *kurban bayram*. Another holiday that is celebrated by our Muslim female respondents both in their countries of origin and in Bulgaria is the Woman’s Day – 8 March. The Council of Refugee Women organizes trips, concert, cinema or restaurant visits for immigrant women on this occasion. Only women, without the company of their husbands and children partake in these visits.

A popular holiday among the Arabs is the Mother’s Day (21 March). The custom requires that everyone visits his or her mother and brings her presents. Preferred are sweets and presents such as scarf, night gown or cloth. In Bulgaria however, due to financial restrictions, a respondent gifted her mother with only a cake on the occasion of this holiday.

Immigration effects changes in the celebration of traditional Muslim holidays. The rites associated with Kurban Bayrami and Ramadan Bayrami (the two major Muslim holidays) are reduced by Muslim immigrants in a number of ways. Severely reduced is the number of ritual offerings, simplified is the traditional cuisine prepared for the holidays and decreased is the number of guests. Immigrant women tend to explain this reduction with two reasons: deteriorated financial situation of their families in the country of immigration and the fact that the traditional Muslim holidays are no longer official holidays in the host country and therefore family members go to work.

Immigrants make ritual offering in Bulgaria only on rare occasions. A mixed immigrant family (a Lebanese wife and a Palestinian husband) who used to make ritual offerings every two years in their country of origin made an offering only once during the 16 year long stay in Bulgaria. Another Shiite female respondent from Irak made a ritual offering only once for the 9 years of stay in Bulgaria. She bought the meat from a Muslim meat salesman. He made a prayer to the animal and then slaughtered it. One third of the meat was given to her relatives and one third was given to the poor. The rest was retained for the woman herself. The part for the poor was given to the dormitory of the Agency for Refugees and was taken directly from the meat-salesman. This ritual offering is being made at the second day of *Kurban Bayrami* usually by people who have a recently deceased person in the family. The family of

one of our respondents prepare a special dish (tomatoes with chick-peas, meat and onion) when they have special request to God.

Special meals, such as rice, sweets and stuffed leaves are prepared for the holidays but the invited guests are fewer than in the country of origin – invited are only close friends or relatives. A practice of going to walks of the whole family at holidays was reported. Another religious holiday celebrated by immigrants is the Birth of the prophet Mohamed.

Most significant changes occur among the Shiites whose ritual system involves numerous holidays. These are official holidays in Iraq – some lasting up to 5 days free of work. In Bulgaria however, most of these holidays are no longer celebrated. The traditional big Shiite holiday marking the martyrdom of Huseyin that includes flagellation of the men is not practiced in Bulgaria. According to our respondents these customs are alive and are being performed in many other European countries hosting larger Shiite communities. There these customs are practiced in special ritual houses called *Hussainiya*. No *Hussainiya* exists in Bulgaria.

### **Performance of rites related to the life cycle**

Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria follow a simplified model with regard to religious rites related to the life cycle. The main reasons for this change are related to the deteriorated financial situation of immigrants, the reduced social circle of relatives and friends and the absence of own Islamic institutions.

Due to their relatively short stays in Bulgaria only limited number of respondents had had life cycle occasions to be noted by tradition. Three of the respondents had grandsons born in Bulgaria from mixed marriages (two Bulgarian mothers and one Bulgarian father). In only one of these families the young boy was circumcised at the age of two. In another family parents planned to circumcise their four year old son but no immediate actions were taken. Respondents reported that in their home countries circumcision is considered a big occasion, associated with big festivities and many guests. In Bulgaria however, respondents celebrate the circumcision of their kids very modestly. One of our respondents whose boy was born in Bulgaria, did not make particular celebration on the occasion of his circumcision. The occasion was marked very modestly within the family with no guests. Only chocolates were given to his colleagues at the Palestinian school on the occasion. Muslim immigrants do not turn to the official circumcision doctors certified by the Central Mufti office but use circumcision specialists from the immigrant community. A respondent reported that her son was circumscised by a Syrian circumsciber who used to spend six months a year in Bulgaria and the rest in Syria.

Only one of our respondents has given birth to a child in Bulgaria. Following tradition her son was whispered a prayer upon birth by his father. According to tradition prayer whisper is to be made by the oldest man in the extended family.

Muslim immigrants bury their deceased in Muslim or non-Muslim graveyards. The town of Sofia has a Muslim graveyard (in the quarter of Botounec) since only few years and before this period immigrants who insisted on having burials in Muslim cemetery, transported their dead to the town of Plovdiv. Others and especially immigrants of atheist beliefs chose to bury their dead in the Christian cemeteries of Sofia, without putting any cross on the graves. According to respondents burials are religious and conducted in the presence of an imam, irrespectively of the type of the cemetery – Muslim or Christian. However, officials at the Mufti office reported that some immigrants bury their dead without calling the imam. Some immigrants dress the deceased in clothes while others follow the tradition and cover them in a white cloth – “*the Islamic way*”. The act of washing the dead for burial is usually performed

by particular figures (male and female) within the Muslim immigrant community. They do not take money for this duty as they perceive it as benefaction.

Traditional rites related to marriage are also simplified. We were able to obtain information only about mixed marriages as all of our respondents with married children had them married with Bulgarians. For example brides do not prepare many different marriage dresses as is the tradition in their home countries. On the occasions of marriages in which the bride is Muslim immigrant the rite of symbolic henna dying of the hands is performed. We observed that in the occasions of mixed marriages with a Muslim husband – a religious marriage is conducted together with the civic one. Immigrants turn to the local Muslim institutions as religious marriage is the requirement in their home countries and they need the Mufti certificate as the document making their marriage legitimate at home. The grown up daughter and son of one of our Iraqi respondents however, did not make religious marriages.

All of our respondents reported to celebrate the birthdays of the family members and especially those of the children. We encountered only one family where traditions together with traditional clothing were strictly preserved, where no birthdays were celebrated but only that of the Prophet Mohamed.

### **Visits to prayer homes**

There is one mosque in Sofia which is located in the city centre and has a department for females in the second floor. Muslim immigrant men visit the Sofia mosque more frequently than women. The mosque is visited by men most massively during the Friday prayer when it accommodates up to few hundred Muslim men. As the first floor does not provide enough space for such a number of persons they often use also the female section and the outside ground of the mosque. According to the Chief Imam of the Sofia mosque, immigrant men form up to 5% of the believers, visiting the mosque. Sometimes men are accompanied for the Friday prayer by their wives who do not enter the mosque with them however, but wait in the near by vicinity. The Friday prayer is a “*fars*” (i.e. is not compulsory for women). Religious officials in the Mufti office and in the Sofia mosque verified that some immigrant families (from Syria and Afghanistan) send their children to the weekend Koranic courses, organized by the Sofia mosque.

The conducted interviews showed that the majority of Muslim female immigrants do not go to mosques. This has been confirmed by the stories of our respondents, by the interviewed representatives of official Muslim institutions in Sofia as well as by our observation of the Sofia mosque during the month of Ramadan. This is a practice inherited from immigrants’ home countries where they used to visit mosques only on the occasion of some holidays. Our female (*Shiite*) respondents reported to have visited certain holy places in their home countries such as Ali’s grave for example.

The minority of Muslim immigrant women who visit the mosque in Sofia tend to do it mainly during the Ramadan month. Only one of our respondents reported to have visited the mosque in Sofia (several years ago) about ten times for the evening prayers during the Ramadan fast. She explained her motivation with the free *iftar* dinner offered traditionally by the mosque, which she needed at the time as she was poor.

Our visit to the Sofia mosque during one of the Ramadan evenings revealed a meager number of seven Muslim women and three girls in the female section of the mosque that contrasted with the male section of the mosque which was full. Only one of them was an immigrant from Egypt and one of the girls was from a mixed family – a Moroccan father and a Bulgarian mother. The rest of the present women and girls were local Muslims.

The majority of the interviewed female immigrants go to the Bulgarian churches, where they pray and light candles. Visited are the central Churches of “St Alexander Nevski”, “St. Nedelya” and the Church located at the central market. Registered were also family visits to churches located in the quarters where immigrants live. A young Muslim who grew up in Bulgaria said *“I cannot say that I do everything like the other Muslims. I am said to be but what I am attracted to is something very different.... I believe in God but I like to go to Church. And I do it very often. At the same time I have not visited a mosque”*. The impressive practice of visiting Christian churches that was reported by the majority of our respondents appears to be rather a tradition conveyed from their origin countries (this applies especially for the Iraqi women) where they used to visit Christian churches as well. According to one of our Iraqi respondents *“in Iraq we are not so (religious). Because we have many Christians. We live together. We have many Churches in Iraq. And we are raised this way. There is no difference between Jesus and Mohamed. The Koran also speaks about Jesus.”* Our respondents comply with the rule of no-entrance to a temple for women in monthly cycle and they apply it also to the Christian Churches they visit in Bulgaria.

Thus the observed practice of visiting Christian churches by Muslim female immigrants in Bulgaria cannot be considered an innovation. What can be considered innovative with regard to this practice is the fact that in Bulgaria, although rarely, men also visit the church with their wives.

Female immigrants pray in the church for solving different health problems – eye operation, sterility. *“I believe only in God, I go to church, there I pray because this attracts me in some way, gives me strength and this is why I do it”*. The respondent who said that reported to pray in front of an icon of Virgin Mary that she keeps in her home and that was given to her as a present for her birthday. Some of the Iraqi immigrant women wear icons of Virgin Mary and turn to her with prayers for child birth. One of our respondents told us about a dream of hers. In her dream she entered a Church with the icon of Virgin Mary just in front of her. The woman started praying with a Christian prayer while Virgin Mary from the icon raised her finger and answered her with a Muslim prayer. This dream has occurred after a day when the respondent has visited and prayed in a Church located in the central market in Sofia. Her interpretation of the dream was the following: *“The God of us all is one... This is why I think she returned my prayer in the same way. I pray their prayer and she prays ours.”*

Local Christian churches appear to represent experiences that are familiar to migrants and part of their pre-migration lives. The openness and comfort demonstrated by Muslim female immigrants in approaching local Christian prayer indicate that they become elements that facilitate accommodation in the host society and ease practicing immigrants’ religiosity.

### **Religious duties and practices**

Prayers are the most strictly observed religious duties by the female immigrants.<sup>6</sup> Our respondents reported to have received religious education in the schools of their home countries and they know the basics of their religion as well as memorized texts of prayers. Most of the interviewees pray at home. One of our respondents said *“I have my mosque in my house, I don’t need to pay visits (to the mosque). When you pray somewhere – in a tram, in a bus, in the subway, in bed you can make the pray”*. As most of our female respondents do not work they have the opportunity to pray five times a day. The Shiite pray three times a day (in the morning, at lunch time and in the evening). At lunch time and in the evening they

<sup>6</sup> However, only one respondent made reference to a religious duty (the daily prayer) when she answered the question about her daily routine. None of the other respondents referred to religion or religious duties as part of their daily routines, although when later asked particularly about prayer habits, all of them reported to pray daily at home following the 5-time requirement.

make a double pray so that they make prayers reach the number of five. Muslim women buy religious calendars so that they know the exact hours of the pray. They allocate particular spaces for prayer in their homes. To follow the requirement for orientation towards Mecca they use the direction of the sun. Women pray alone. If the husband prays in the same room – the wife is doing the prayer either before or after him as they share the same prayer carpets. Most of the women have special *sedjadeh* (a long cover, usually white), that covers the whole body when in a squatting position. Sometimes a long skirt is put on for the prayer. One of our respondents reported to have no special clothing for the home prayers and to dress a nightgown especially allocated for this matter. Sick people combine two prayers in one. Compared to women, men pray more rarely (even if they are not occupied with work during the prayer hours). Prayers could be done outside the official prayer hours. One of our respondents said to pray when she feels weak and hopeless. Another said that she does not pray at home, but says a prayer in the bus when with her daughter upon the way to or back from her school. She is doing the prayer in a hope for good health for all in the family.

Transformations occur with regard to the traditional rites, observed on Friday. The interviewed Muslim women respect the Friday and they do not work on this day. Thus they follow the tradition in their home countries where the day was marked by the mosque visits on the part of their men. The family and relatives of one of our female respondent used to meet regularly for common lunch on Fridays in their country of origin (Iraq). At these lunches they were preparing special dishes (*dolma*, rice with various vegetables). As Friday is a regular working day in Bulgaria, the Friday special lunch has been moved by the family to Sundays when all the family members could gather together.

Most of the Muslim female immigrants observe the fast during the Ramadan month. Only older men and women with health problems do not observe it. The *zekyat* obligation for charity is more rarely observed with the argument that this is a religious duty required of people who have money and own home. One of our respondents reported to give *zekyat* occasionally to blind persons or women with children. She considered that even if one gives little this is a way of preventing many bad things from happening. Another respondent intended to do a *zekyat* during the Ramadan by giving money to her nephews who did not live in Bulgaria, without telling them that she was doing a *zekyat*.

All interviewees keep Koran at home, usually more than one. The mother of one of our respondents keeps a Koran in her handbag and her young daughter carries a written prayer, a present from her grandfather. The Koran, the *hijab*, the rosaries, the prayer carpets are objects related to the religious cult, which female immigrants report to carry with them in migration from their countries. One of our respondents showed us her collection of rosaries that were brought to her by friends from various places. In most of the cases the special prayer clothing is also brought from the country of origin or is gifted by close relatives. One of our respondents reported to have her prayer clothing bought while on a pilgrimage to Mecca. There she went with her sisters. As they visited Mecca during *omra* and not *hadj*, it was not necessary that they be accompanied with their husbands. Another respondent declared intention to make *hadj* together with her husband and her mother in law. A young woman from Iraq who declared herself “*not very religious*” showed us mobile phone picture of a mosque in her home town of *Kerbala*.

Most of the interviewed women dyed their hands with henna when they attended weddings in Iraq or Turkey. They cease practicing this ritual in Bulgaria to avoid attracting attention. Another practice typical for Muslim women – that of unhairing – is perceived by immigrant women as aesthetic rather than religious requirement. Unhairing of the girl in their home countries begins at the moment of sexual maturation and is transferred from mother to daughter.

Female immigrants continue to observe strictly the ban for eating pork. It is only among the immigrants who came to Bulgaria many years ago that there are people who do not observe this ban. All women said that their husbands and sons do not take alcoholic drinks. However, all respondents referred to other people in the community who do not observe the ban. Immigrants usually shop from open markets which are most cheap and where one can find Arabic shops. There they buy chicken, veil and lamb meat. As they are not sure if the meat salesmen say the prayer to the respective animals, their supposition is that they abuse their religious requirements. The cook of the Palestinian school in Sofia buys animals from the neighboring villages, he reads them a prayer and he himself slaughters and cooks them for the school canteen. Immigrants tend to buy meat, chocolates and waffles from Arab shops. In cases when they buy these products in regular shops respondents diligently read the product legends to identify whether they contain lard which they are obliged to avoid.

### **2.2.3. Immigrant women bodily performances**

Field research reveals a number of clothing strategies of Muslim female immigrants. The first tendency is related to different degrees of the transformation of the dress code: from mild changes (lighter dress with brighter colors with keeping the kerchief) to full removal of the veiling and appropriation of modern dress with open bodily parts. Transformations in the dress code are taken with the approval on the part of the respective leading male figure in the family. In some cases the approval of close relatives in the country of origin is also taken before the change takes place. The second tendency is associated with preservation of the dress code of the home country with very minor changes in the direction of liberation of the dress code. The third and most rare tendency is associated with veiling of immigrant women who did not use to veil in their home countries.

Most of our respondents used to wear long black dress and veil in their home countries. Those of the respondents who spent some time in Turkey on their way to Bulgaria, retained the traditional style of clothing there. Once in Bulgaria however, they find themselves in a very different environment to influence gradual change of their dress. All of our respondents reported to have made changes in their dress style. The long black dress, covering the whole body is replaced with a long skirt or with a suit of black trousers and longer coat, a blouse with long sleeves or a long jacket. After a time some women start wearing blouses with short sleeves, thus showing their hands and neck. The Iraqi immigrant women of Christian confession, who follow a free dress code in their home country, also reported to have liberated further their style of clothing in Bulgaria. According to their own comparison in Iraq those women used to dress like those Muslim immigrant women who unveiled in Bulgaria.

The stories of immigrant women from the older immigrant waves from Iraq stressed the more liberated dress code for women (both Christian and Muslim) in their country of origin till Saddam's raise to power in the late 1960s. Those women reported to have been used to wear miniskirts back in their home country 35 years ago. The new female Muslim immigrants reported distinctions in the dress code that they followed in their hometowns (for example compulsory long black dress in the town of Kerbala) and in Baghdad where they could wear jeans. Women working as teachers in the Arabic schools in Sofia (both immigrants and Bulgarians) are not allowed to wear open cloths "revealing parts of their body or without sleeves". Women who transformed their dress in Bulgaria return to traditional dress in black when they visit the mosque.

The transformation in the dress code of immigrant Muslim women (sometimes significant) is a gradual process. One of our respondents reported that first she took away the kerchief. Then she transformed her long black dress into a long skirt. After a time she shortened the skirt to a medium length. At the time of the interview she had changed the skirt with trousers and reported to feel “*safer, more at ease and more protected*” this way.

During the first months in migration Muslim women usually keep wearing the kerchief<sup>7</sup>. After a time some women decide to take it off<sup>8</sup>. They reported that the decision to unveil their hair/or face was very difficult. Very important and crucial in this respect appears to be the opinion and the stance of the man in the family (father, husband, brother, son). Most of our respondents who have taken away the veil/ kerchief reported to have had the approval of their husbands. However, a case has been reported of an immigrant man who insisted on keeping the traditional style of clothing for the women in the family but was not obeyed by his two younger sisters (who took away the “kerchiefs and everything” started dressing as “common Bulgarian girls”) and his mother (who changed her long black dress with trousers, long blouse and kerchief). Only his wife complied with his will, keeping the long dress and veil.

The motives to take off the kerchief are different. Some men give freedom to their wives in the decision whether to keep or take away their kerchiefs. Some women unveil as they are concerned that in the new liberal context of Bulgaria their husbands may start being attracted by other women. Many of our respondents reported to have felt very uncomfortable in the public transportation or on the street as they usually experienced curious or unfriendly glances on the part of the people around or were directly or indirectly insulted because of the way they were dressed. One of our respondents reported to have had her kerchief once pulled by a man who also hit her leg. In addition, once she was refused service in a shop because of her kerchief. A case was reported about an immigrant woman whose kerchief was taken away by a group of youths who then poured beer over her head. Although these cases are not the norm they appear to motivate some of immigrant men to agree with their wife’s decisions to unveil. The stories of our respondents make particular stress on the feeling of uneasiness that they experience as people use to stare upon them when they go out veiled.

In order to avoid this situation the female interviewees spoke of their attempts to become more invisible in the public sphere. Instead of kerchiefs some of them started wearing hats or hoods. One female respondent told us that she considered buying a wig to wear on the streets. Her intention was to buy a wig of synthetic hair different from her natural hair as Islam did not allow showing the own natural hair. Decisions about unveiling seem to be determined also by the national origin of the immigrant women. In Iraq for example veiling is not compulsory while in Iran it is. Immigrant women from Palestine prefer to keep the veiling after migration. Our respondents reported to easily recognize the origin country of immigrant Muslim women according by their veiling style.

We should note that most of the women have preserved the kerchief and they prefer to bear the inconvenience, caused by its wearing in a secular country. The decision of the woman to remain with her kerchief often leads to a greater isolation as she prefers to stay at her home. One of our respondents reported that she does not go out with her husband

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<sup>7</sup> The issue of veiling among Muslims in European countries has become in the focus of public debate at the end of the 1980s. On the issue see: El Guindi, F. 1999, Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000, Joppke, Ch. 2009. The veiling of the head plays the function of social code for the Muslims. It is being interpreted in different ways by those who practice it – as an instrument of (self)control, as a symbol of opposition to the dominating power (Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000: 75-78).

<sup>8</sup> Such tendency is observed among the new young Muslim immigrant women in Spain who take off their veils (Martin-Muñoz, G., A. Lopez-Sala 2005: 139).

because of her kerchief – “*Where I go I will be stared upon and will stick out so I prefer to not go out*”.

Many of our respondents although definitely seeing themselves as believers, termed themselves not religious enough because they were not dressed in full compliance with the religious canon. Others accept the change positively. A Shiite respondent said that she feels better with her new clothing because back in Iraq she was pressed to dress in certain ways and this was no longer the case in Bulgaria. This interpretation however, contradicted an earlier one made by her according to which she took off the kerchief because she was stared upon by the people. It seems that although her decision to take away the kerchief was determined by the new social context she encountered, she viewed the act as act of free will on her part. The same respondent told us that she will get executed if she goes back to her home country as other men have seen uncovered parts of her body, that are to be covered according to the tradition and seen only by woman’s husband.

In some cases immigrant families seek to keep tradition in the female clothing. An immigrant woman from Iraq initially keeps fully veiled in Bulgaria with her hands in gloves. After a time she is allowed by her husband only to take off the gloves but remains fully veiled. Later she takes the decision to veil her three young daughters. In addition, her husband uses eye pencil and has long hair-tail claiming that this is “*the Islamic tradition*”.

The observed changes in the bodily performances of Muslim immigrant women are the outcome of their encounter with new secular social environment in Bulgaria. The forms and degrees of this change depend on the social environments immigrants face in the different countries along their way in Bulgaria. Muslim immigrant women who spent time in Turkey on their way to Bulgaria – did not change their dressing style. The change is undertaken only after Muslim women arrive in Bulgaria and get in contact with new social environment dominated by secular (*state with*) Christian population.

Other changes in the outer appearance of the Muslim immigrant woman in Bulgaria concern the practices of using make up and hand nail that are not allowed in their home country of Iraq. In Iraq they were allowed to use black eye pencil only (*на техните сватби*) while in Syria they used richer make up the way they do also in Bulgaria. A middle aged woman who has grandchildren had no right to use hand nail or dress with bright clothes because of her status of grandmother. In Bulgaria however, this woman used hand nail in two colors and dressed with light-colored clothes. Although she herself decided to keep the kerchief, she reported that she would give her young daughter the freedom to decide on her own whether to wear kerchief in Bulgaria. If she were in Iraq however, she would be made put the kerchief and wear long sleeves as soon as she gets 14 years old.

The female immigrants’ clothing is situational. Women, who usually do not wear kerchiefs use to put them on when they visit the Agency for Refugees. Their explanation is that “*there are many of our people there who will look at us, Bulgarians do not look at us, but our (men) when they see a woman – the eyes are right after her*”. For this reason their husbands insist that they go there veiled. Other women call their relatives in their home country to tell them that they will be killed if they do not take away the kerchief. Then they get the consent of their father and brothers and they can take off their kerchiefs without worry. This is necessary because the information of the way women are dressed in the host country reaches easily native land through the network of relatives and acquaintances.

Sometimes transformations to traditional model of covering the hair take place. Thus, for example, a woman who did not wear kerchief in Iraq, veiled her head in Bulgaria. She made the change because of health problems that led her believe that she was punished by God. When she returned to Iraq after the political change took place in the country (2003), her relatives made her take off the kerchief again. Another respondent shared her feelings in

relation to her veiling in Bulgaria: *"Upon my arrival I was a bit scared because I did not see many veiled women and I felt to be the only one veiled and I changed - I put on a hat, took away the kerchief and put on a hat with a turtle-neck blouse. When the weather got warmer I took the kerchief back and saw that no one makes remarks on me, that there is no problem in the kerchief, that all is normal and I remained veiled"*.

The situational approach with regard to female clothing is practiced in other Arab countries. A respondent from Iraq who lived in Syria reported that she changed her clothing there - coming from Iraq with dark long dresses and skirts, she changed them with trousers in Syria.

Changes occur in the behavioral culture of female immigrants too. In their countries of origin Muslim women comply with a strict system that orders ways of speaking, ways of proper reactions, ways of hand keeping and sitting. *"There (in the home country) you should consider everything - how you move, how you react, everything - especially if you are a woman"*. The behavioral culture in Bulgaria is different and makes immigrant women feel more free with respect to the bodily codes inherited from their countries of origin - *"it is freedom here - you feel that you are free with yourself"*. One of our respondents reported to started crossing her legs while traveling with the bus and to feel very well as nobody reproved her. She also reported to have talked to unknown men in Bulgaria which was unthinkable in her home country. *"I feel freedom in Bulgaria, I am restricted in nothing"*.

#### **2.2.4. Migration, Religion and the second generation immigrants**

The second generation Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria appear to have different attitude to traditions and religion in comparison to their parents. However, a number of strategies have been identified in this regard. Some second generation immigrants use to pray, abstain from eating pork and speak well the language of their parents. Others fully accept the secular ways of life in Bulgaria. According to one of our respondents her son does not feel Iraqi but Bulgarian.

Second generation immigrants often enter mixed marriages with boys getting married to Bulgarian women which is allowed by Islam. Some mixed marriages of this type involve conversion to Islam of the Bulgarian wives. We registered a case of conversion by a young Bulgarian woman who married to a Lebanese/Palestinian man. Her decision to convert and veil was taken after the birth of her son and irrespectively of the fact that her Muslim/Lebanese mother-in-law has never veiled.

Registered were also opposite cases of conversions to Christianity of Muslim male immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Such conversions appear to be motivated by traumatic experiences on the part of immigrants such as executions of members of the family on religious grounds.

Registered were also opposite cases of increased interest to Christianity on the part of second generation immigrants. The 12 year old son of one of our respondents - a female Shiite from Iraq - is attracted by Christianity, likes going to the church and "does not like the mosque". His mother, though worried, does not discourage his interest - a decision that was eased by the fact that her husband was not used to visiting the mosque neither in Bulgaria, nor in Turkey nor in his home country. He however, was used to occasionally visit the Church. The boy does not want to study Koran and to pray in the Muslim manner but he is interested in the bible, having one of his own given to him as a present by a Christian Iraqi immigrant woman. They boy dreamed that his mother is giving him a cross while he is in the park. His family interpretation of this dream is that someday he might decide to convert to Christianity.

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<sup>9</sup> Reported by officials of the Islamic institutions in Sofia.

Female immigrants report to worry that their children see in Bulgaria a different way of life, especially when they study in Bulgarian schools. They worry that if some day their children have to return to their home countries they will not be able to adapt to the way of life there. One of our immigrant respondents from Albania who went to school in Turkey before coming to Bulgaria reported that she experienced a shock in her first day of school in Bulgaria as she observed a very liberated atmosphere. The very strict rules and discipline with regard to clothing and class behavior, that she was used to in Turkey, contrasted with the very liberal clothing, use of make up by students and the rather non-formal attitude to teachers in Bulgaria. She explained her adaptation in the school of Bulgaria in the following way: *“And when you start socializing you observe what is going on and you try, in order to enter their environment, you try and become like them (in terms of behavior). And in this way I also changed”*. Another marked change that occurs for migrants is the greater freedom of communication with the other gender that is impossible in the country of origin of migrants and especially for the young girls.

One of the strategies to avoid the potential conflict between traditional values and ways of behavior of the home country and these of the secular host country is to send their children to the private Arab schools in Sofia. Besides the basic subjects, taught in Arabic, these schools provide also training in Koran. The teacher in religion in the Palestinian school is a Muslim Bulgarian who studied in Jordan. As these schools are private, only migrants who can afford paying the tuition send their children there.

### **2.2.5. Migration, Religion and Gender**

The relationship between gender and religion is manifested in many practices and bodily performances of Muslim immigrant women. The mosque functions as predominantly male space, while the religious practices of the woman appear centered in the private sphere at home. The body and the clothing of the immigrant woman are subject to religious prescriptions, while the frame of compliance with these prescriptions is subject to male control in the family.

Our examination of immigrant women employment (considered important indicator in the study of gender) revealed considerable degree of female occupation outside the home. 50% of our respondents were employed. Half of those who did not work (three) were in working age and fit for work. The rest were retired (two) or had health problems (one). The majority of the unemployed respondents (five) demonstrated professional experience in the past and all of them declared desire to work in Bulgaria. The professional profile of the interviewed respondents included eight women with no previous working experience in their countries of origin and four with previous working experience in their countries of origin – as a teacher, chief accountant, in administration and in private family business. Three of the respondents who did not work in their home countries were two young to work. Another one started working in the first stopover on her migration route (Syria).

The six employed respondents were engaged in immigrant support association (2), cosmetics (1), education (2 respondents worked as teachers at the private Palestinian school), the service sector (1). All of the non-working respondents explained that the major reason for their unemployment is the lack of knowledge of Bulgarian. All of them were provided for by their husbands. Four of the respondents that had no work experience in origin

country work in Bulgaria. Three of those that do not work in Bulgaria have worked in origin country (2 of them retired). All of our non-working respondents declared a desire to work in professions considered typically female: cosmetics, hair dressing, sewing. These desires demonstrated considerable decrease within the scale of social prestige in comparison with the professions they practiced in their home country and search of a labor niche where there is no male competition. The reported desired professions require skills that respondents reported to have acquired within their families as common component of their upbringing in the Arab world. *"It was in my blood. Since I was young I like making hair cuts and make up. When I was still 13 I prepared a bride - hair cut, make up and shaving"*.

With regard to the issue of gender division of duties at home - domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, laundering, washing the dishes are perceived as a typical female work. The care for the children and the elderly is also considered female responsibility. In cases when the tradition is not observed and the man takes some of these duties, this is appraised with the words *"he is not ashamed to do the laundering and to hang the laundry"*, *"he does not care that he is washing the dishes"*. Introducing the category "shame" shows the clear gender distinction of certain household activities. This is relevant for some duties considered typically male - for example in some immigrant families the shopping is the duty of the man in the family. We observed many diversions from this rule however, as many of our respondents appeared to shop together with their husbands or to do the shopping on their own. Some of the women may freely dispose of the money given to them by their husbands. Others have to ask them and get their approval before making a particular purchase. A female immigrant from Iraq, who back in her home country had worked in a non-governmental organization in the field of women's rights, reported that that she needed her husband's permission to go out or to buy something for herself.

In most of the families decisions appear to be jointly made. In some of the cases however, this shared responsibility does not appear genuine. One of our respondents said *"he (the husband) pretends to respect my opinion but he is doing what he decides"*. We encountered families where women have the leading role in the decision making and appeared to perceive themselves as *"the boss"* in the family. And yet, in most of the families, the man is the one to take the final decision on a given matter.

All of our female respondents reported to have asked their husbands for permission to become volunteers in the Council of Refugee Women and to enroll in the Bulgarian language courses organized by the Council. One among the convincing arguments given to husbands in favor of Bulgarian language course attendance on the part of the Council was that women cannot go out without knowing Bulgarian *"as somebody might tell them something (bad) and they will not be able to defend themselves"*.

However, our empirical data indicates traditional family constellations that condition considerably powerful position on the part of the Muslim woman. Such power is traditionally being exerted in the relationship mother - son, the power being transferred over the son's family where his mother (now the mother in law) is considered strong factor. However, this traditional power constellation undergoes transformations in migration. Some of our respondents shared their pain and regret from the fact that they were not consulted and respected as they should in their sons' families. This development is especially visible in mixed families with Bulgarian daughters in law. In these cases cultural differences become reinforced by the emancipation of the young family from the old couple, the dependence of the old parents to the young, whose family is usually financially autonomous.

### 3. Main Results

Study's main results can be summarized to the following:

- Religion plays important role in the identity construction of Muslim immigrant women.
- The Islamic religion of Muslim immigrant women is open to communication with local Christianity. Visits to local Christian churches and the incorporation of some local Christian holidays, are practices that serve to confirm and reinforce immigrants' religiosity in a host society where Christianity is the official and dominant religion.
- Immigrants participation in the Christian movement of the Focolares appears to be serve as a strategy of negotiating ones accommodation into the host society.
- Immigrants' encounter with local secularism poses challenge at immigrant women religious manifestations and enacts varying accommodation strategies on their part.
- Religious profession of Muslim immigrant women is focused in the private sphere.
- Immigrant women evaluate that they are more religious than their men.
- Muslim immigrant women abstain from active presence in the public sphere. This is the outcome of two major reasons: the severely decreased social networks and deteriorated financial status of immigrants on the one hand and their visibility as Islamic believers in society where Islam symbolizes difference.
- Strategies with regard to traditional clothing of female migrants vary from appropriation of fully modern dress style to decisions of veiling on the part of originally unveiled migrants.
- The ritual system of Muslim immigrants undergoes a double process - of enrichment on the one hand (incorporation of holidays from the local holiday calendar - both secular and Christian) and of reduction on the other (decrease of the traditional holidays and more modest celebration).
- Immigrant women tend to be socially secluded. The prevailing strategies they resort to with regard to religious manifestations in public is of silent and unobtrusive presence.

### 4. Conclusions

The conducted study reveals a process of significant change in the social life, in the ritual system and the religious practices of Muslim immigrant women in Bulgaria.

Migration appears to effect significant reduction in immigrant women social networks and contacts both in the private and in the public sphere. The very limited presence of Muslim immigrant women in the public sphere has social and symbolic dimensions that relate to the limited levels of their social interactions on the one hand and to their visible corporal presence of believers, professing Islam, on the other. The absence of formal and informal associations of female immigrants, the abstention from spending free time in public spaces, the limited visits to mosques, are the outcome of a complex set of factors. Immigrants from Arab countries, still of small numbers in Bulgaria, form communities with weak infrastructures that follow dispersed accommodation model. The deteriorated financial status of post-1989

immigrants conditions very modest daily routines, focused on covering family's immediate needs and allowing very limited social interactions outside the family. In addition, the uncertainties of immigrants' status - often in process of legalization, temporary or depending on family reunion, determine the uncertain place of immigrant women in the host society. All these explain the marked effort on the part of immigrant women for unobtrusive presence in the host society.

These efforts however, appear triggered by immigrants' Islamic profession sharply visible in the secular and Christian dominated public space of the host society. The Bulgarian public discourse does not identify Muslim immigrants as "problem" for country's identity. However, Islam is still considered and approached as a "threat" by many political and public actors who identify it with local Islamic communities, much bigger than those of the immigrants. Although Muslim immigrants do not appear targets in heated public debates, the public context of suspicion and hostility to visible manifestations of Islam exerts influence over them. The predominant tendency is that Muslim immigrant women concentrate the religious profession in the private sphere and at home. In addition, some of them seek ways of making their Islamic identities "invisible" in the public sphere even at the expense of some Islamic requirements. "The different look" of veiled Muslim immigrant women contributes to feelings of uncertainty in public places that in turn makes some of them avoid public appearances and enact changes in their traditional clothing. Manifestations of religious belonging of immigrant women (through the clothing) in the public space are the outcome of negotiation between the woman and the man in the family - a negotiation that is the outcome of different accommodation strategies in the host country, taken by the family as a whole. The relationship between gender and migration in this context leads to diverse forms of manifestation of confessional belonging that are placed along the axis of visible - invisible.

Support with regard to employment, social orientation, accommodation and family subsistence is being provided within co-immigrant and co-national networks. This pattern of social realization of immigrants determines the household as the main occupational sphere of the Muslim immigrant woman.

The prevailing tendency of unemployment and financial dependence on male spouses reinforce traditional models of gender divisions within the family. Life of immigrant women professing Islam is limited within the family, especially in the first years of immigration and is marked by feelings of isolation and loneliness. Religious identity retains important constituent place in the complex personal identities of female migrants, however, it finds more "silent" and "careful" forms of expression.

## **5. Potential impact and use of the research**

Contemporary Muslim immigration in Bulgaria has not been the focus of systematic academic research with Muslim immigrant communities remaining understudied. The study of the relationship between migration, religion and gender in the case of Arab Muslim immigrant women in Bulgaria is the first in the fields of migration, minority-majority relations and religion. Thus the present academic research problematizes for the first time the place of immigrant Islam in Bulgaria and the role of immigrant women for the accommodation, reinforcement and transformation of religious profession.

The findings of the study with regard to immigrants' Islamic profession in the country bring light to a topic that is potentially vulnerable to political manipulation and heated public debates. In this context, the study's findings about the relationship between immigrant Islam and local secularism, local Christianity and local Islam bring in knowledge that has not been at hand to researchers, policy makers and the general public. Study findings point to new important avenues of research related to the integration dynamics of Muslim immigrant children, the intergenerational relations within Muslim immigrant communities, the impact of local and European-wide debates about Islam on immigrants' religiosity in Bulgaria.

The present research bears the potential to exert relevant policy impact. It can serve as basis for policy discussion among relevant actors about the role that Muslim immigrant women (can) play for the effective social integration of their families and communities. The findings can be communicated with relevant media to contribute to a more informed and balanced approach on the part of journalists to the topics of Muslim immigration and immigrant Islam.

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