Introduction

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Agency

Agency has often been discussed in relation to subjectification and repression or oppression, which means that at a descriptive level, it is not a new phenomenon. However, the scholarly attention and analytical approach has focussed as a result on the negative formulations or relations of agency. However, agency refers to a dynamic, multi-layered action undertaken by people. Following McNay,[1] this collection of papers will look at positive formulations of agency, as undertaken by Muslim women in a variety of contexts. A common notion is that the world is more fluid than it has ever been before. The actions people undertake are often fused with capitalist and neoliberal discourses.[2] The agencies of people are often studied with either a theoretical or empirical approach. Regarding the first notion, agency is a concept that allows for scholars to approach the field with a certain optic and, therewith, ordering it accordingly. The second position investigates the diverse kinds of actions undertaken by people. Examples may include authority in decision-making, leadership in the family, community and society, and advocacy.

The focus on agency is because it captures the connections between human action and societal discourses, therewith, brings structures,

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1   Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
2   Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell, "Gendered Mobilities: Towards an Holistic Understanding". In *Gendered Mobilities,* edited by Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell, 1-12 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

objects and humans together. The understanding of such relationships of people, objects and symbols, enhances our understanding of human action and interaction. Hence, the inclusiveness of the category of agency opens up the possibility of connecting Muslim women to a wide range of theoretical and empirical constructs.

Muslim Agency and Gender

Agency as a lens bridges human actions and analyses these in their embeddedness in meaning-making and power hierarchies. Structural factors, such as socio-political and economic circumstances and back-grounds, play huge roles when it comes to questions such as who can undertake what and at which particular historical time and why. With its specification of "Muslim" and gender, this special issue addresses the lives of Muslims, especially women, regarding the religious or spiritual backgrounds to, influences of, and reasons or motivations for their actions. The religious aspects relate to practices based on the religious precepts or understandings of the people involved. People do not only use their agency informed by religion when they decide to go on hajj (pilgrimage) or umrah ("small pilgrimage") but also for more mundane actions, which a person can see as getting closer to Allah or as acting in a fitting manner, for example.

Religion therefore is not only a theological or institutional expression of certain imaginations and ideologies but a specific engagement with social reality.[3] In turn, specific interpretations of reality are expressed in institutions (organizations), traditions (oral and material traditions such as symbols, songs, and scriptures) and social practices (prayers, moral behaviour). Religion therefore "offers a comprehensive worldview and, produces and projects meaning, forms identities, offers orientation for daily activities and legitimizes or delegitimizes power".[4] This special issue

3   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam, Islam in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006).
4   Viola Thimm, "Muslim Mobilities and Gender: An Introduction," *Social Sciences* 2018, 7(1), p.5.

deals with these different approaches to Islam and the ways Muslims live their life.

Therefore to enhance our understanding of Islam it is important to analyse its practices with other mutually constitutive practices that inform our understanding of everyday Muslims' lived reality. From this perspective the aim of this special issue has been to analyse Muslim agency in relation to its religious and/or gendered backgrounds and social structures. The issues' content shows complex, and diverse perspectives on the connections between Islam, gender and agency. I hope that the articles will inspire further research at the intersection of religion, gender, and agency to drive forward the analysis in this field.