

Women Converts to Islam in Europe: Challenges & Opportunities

Munazza Batool*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Religion, Faculty of Usuluddin (Islamic Studies),
International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan*

ABSTRACT

Keeping in view the increasing number of women converts to Islam in last two decades and the various ways in which these conversions have been approached and understood by their respective societies it is very important to consider the challenges that these women converts are facing in Europe and the way forward. This paper is an attempt to consider the issues and challenges faced by women converts to Islam in Europe particularly and Muslim Women Diaspora in general and the strategies they have used to deal with these problems. The paper seeks the answer to the questions like; how old is the history of Islam in Europe? How far the recent increase in number of converts to Islam is probed and discussed? What are the key concerns and issues faced by the converted women to Islam in Europe? How these women converts have attempted to meet these challenges in order to make their self statement as Muslim women in Europe. The methodology of the paper is discourse analysis mainly focusing on the literature produced by and on and by women converts to Islam in Europe during past two decades.

Keywords: *Conversion, Da'awah, Women Converts.*

*Corresponding author's email: munazza.batool@iiu.edu.pk



Introduction:

The history of Islamic *da'awah* in Europe starts with the expansion of Islamic territories, when Muslim armies started to spread their dominion in the Southwest Asia and North Africa.¹ These early encounters resulted in diverse relations between Islamic and European culture starting from armed clash to peaceful mutual interactions. These early contacts produced polemical literature by both Muslim and Christian which tells the richness of the mutual contacts between two civilizations. This early phase of Islam in Europe is known as a period of Islamic Spain and Muslim rule in Sicily and Southern Italy. Corollary of this period (between the eights and the fifteenth centuries), was an affluent cultural resurgence that had a considerable influence in the emergence of European Renaissance.²

After the fall of Grenada and the Spanish Reconquista when Muslim rule in the Western Europe came to an end politically however these early interactions left a deep imprint on the culture and society of the then controlled parts of Europe. The next phase of these interaction starts with the expansion of Ottomans into the Balkans and Central Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was during this second phase that a the considerable number of local population converted into Islam and from then onwards a significant number of Muslim populations continued to live in the European countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and others.³

At the present juncture Islamic resurgence in the European countries started after the World War II, and is still in progress. This resurgence and increase of Muslims in numbers is usually associated with two main factors:

- 1) The immigrants from the Muslim countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey among others.⁴ A great number of the Muslim population in various European countries comprises of the descendents of the early immigrants and settlers who came to Europe as traders, workers and settled here during the nineteenth and twentieth century.⁵
- 2) The converts, evidence suggest that Islam is the fastest growing religion⁶ and number of converts is increasing in the European countries.

Besides the expansion and demography of Muslims in Europe multiple studies on Islam and the Muslims in Europe have been undertaken by scholars during the past few decades. Scholars have significantly highlighted the social dynamics of Islamic communities in Europe. Some studies have tried to highlight the cooperation and conflict,⁷ while others have talked about the Muslims responses to the European thought and culture through various models of integrationism, isolationism and escapism.⁸ Detailed analysis and review of the situation of the Muslims in European states and mutual power play has been also a venture of such researches.⁹

Nevertheless it is the second factor that emerges as the most interesting aspects of

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the expansion of Islam in the Europe i.e. Conversion which has been a matter of great debate for those who convert to Islam and for those who want to explain this phenomenon from outside. Religious conversion is an extremely complex phenomenon and scholars have always sought different explanations of religious conversion in general¹⁰ and conversion to Islam in particular.¹¹

Different explanations are sought for the recent conversions of women to Islam like religious market, rational choice and so on.¹² Likewise different forms of *da'awah* have been studied in detail.¹³

In context of conversion of Native British women to Islam the assessment of the crises theories regarding pre conversion life experiences has been also undertaken that resultantly considers these are to be irrelevant in the case of Islam.¹⁴ Conversion stories and testimonies¹⁵ of converts are also another important mean of projecting and analyzing the conversion of women to Islam and it also play an important role in making the conversion phenomenon understandable to the predominantly Non Muslim states and societies.

As a matter of fact the stories and narratives of conversion that are recorded and studied by many scholars are simpler than the theoretical and philosophical explanations of conversion. Conversion according to these narratives necessarily follows some sort of interaction with Muslims. Particularly in case of Women converts to Islam many women convert to Islam following a marital relationship with a Muslim. Some convert after learning about Islam from their Muslim colleagues or friends, whereas some actively learn about Islam as a response to their inner call or in a search for meaning to their life experiences. In many cases the converts find themselves completely different than their Muslim informants in terms of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This contrast and contact itself provides them with the direct understanding of Islam as religion.¹⁶ Thus the conversion of women to Islam in Europe cannot be simply attributed to one pattern or motif rather there are variety of experiences and approaches.

Women Conversion to Islam in Europe and their Challenges:

It is interesting to note that despite the variety of explanations and approaches to conversion of women to Islam in the west almost all the narratives identify the same challenges that are being faced by women converts to Islam in Europe. The conversion of women to Islam not only appears as academic discussion it also has its social and cultural impact resulting in multifaceted issues and challenges for their day to day life as well as for their religious expressions as Muslim Women. Converted Muslim women are facing a lot of sensitivities today, by crossing their religious and social boundaries they have challenged a lot of conventions regarding Islam and Muslim women. Despite all the negative attitudes regarding Muslim Women and their status in Islam female converts to Islam are outnumbering their

male counterparts.¹⁷

Observance of *Hijāb* and *Niqāb*:

The most significant aspect related to the converted Muslim women has been the observance of *hijāb* and *niqāb* that has resulted in a kind of debate in the European countries. There are multiple studies on the phenomena of wearing *hijāb* by the converted Muslim women, particularly in France.¹⁸ It is observed that while the settler or migrated Muslim women are not observing *hijāb*, the converted Muslim Women have adopted it as their self statement and are asserting it as part of their freedom to practice their religion.¹⁹

The *burqa'* ban and *hijāb* controversies has been a hot debate and there are many legislations that follow the issue in the Western Europe.²⁰ While the legislation has been passed banning the headscarfs and *burqa'* in the public sphere or the workplaces in France, Belgium, some municipalities of Italy and Spain, in Switzerland and Netherlands Parliamentarian initiatives have been stopped to ban *hijāb*.²¹

Islamophobia:

After the 9/11 vibes of *Islamophobia* in the Western Europe Islam as a faith and Muslims as a whole have found themselves under something of a siege.²² Ironically this rise of Islamophobia has coincided with the phenomenon of the *mahjubāt* women wearing the scarf in the whole world and particularly in Europe. They are publicly expressing their Islam at a time when such a title can be threatening and potentially makes them vulnerable to open hostility. Their aspiration to belong to *Ummah* and to Islam while crossing all the ethnic, racial, geographical and political boundaries makes them accused of being 'a threat' to their culture, country and their national security. In this scenario they are suspected to be less honest to the values and norms of their respective societies in Europe.²³

Identity, Family Relations and Gender Role:

Another challenge for a women convert is the way she socializes after her conversion. Her family and gender roles are to be governed by the Islamic ideal that is sometimes at odd with her family practices in which she has been living since long. In this context it is pertinent to observe that the conversion of European women to Islam is an anomaly from the perspective of European states and societies and it raises a range of sensitivities for the converts who want to reveal or express their Islamic identities. The constructed boundaries between "Europeanness" and "Islam" are being challenged by these converts by belonging to both at the same time.²⁴ Especially when the convert is a woman her challenge of keeping these two binary identities becomes more complex as she has to deal with still another boundary of gender role.²⁵

Studies on the conversion of European women to Islam in current scenario show that the conversion of European women to Islam has far reaching aftereffects. A

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convert soon starts to distinguish herself from her early environment in ways of dressing, eating, socializing and interacting with the opposite sex. Such a differentiation questions that her belonging to her family and she is perceived as immigrant or sometimes she is even seen as traitor²⁶. Especially the female converts who practice veil or *Hijāb* are tabooed against in many such ways. Thus conversion to Islam results in questioning their national, cultural and ethnic belonging and loyalty.

Their conversion bears a lot many social consequences and challenges the most significant one is their “otherness” this otherness can result in losing their jobs, their family ties and their social circles. Thus by visibly identifying herself as Muslim by donning the *hijāb* a convert loses the prestige her Whiteness bestows on her”²⁷ and experiences “an unexpected sudden fall in her social status”. Thus conversion to Islam leads to a kind of social penalty by alienating the converts from their own social relations and circles.²⁸

Interestingly enough this barrier that is felt and erected by those around Muslim converts who often see a contradiction between their religious and national, cultural or ethnic identifications, converts themselves do not see such barrier. As conversion does not necessitate a radical break from one’s past however the community takes it so.²⁹ Conversion sometimes occurs as an undecided and ongoing process, as a converts is continuously engaged in negotiating and recreating her religious, cultural and social identities in relation to her society and to other Muslims.³⁰

Such a process or experience does not necessarily mean that a convert must move away from her cultural or social identification though the women converts make profound changes as a consequence of conversion but her experience of the self still demands some continuity which is not accorded to her anymore from her relatives and friends.³¹

From Challenges to Opportunities:

European Muslim Women have created a religious space for themselves in their respective societies and have engaged in effective manner in the Islamic organizations and institutes both privately and publicly. Thus converted Muslim women have emerged as active *da’awah* workers and teachers. As far as the private efforts are concerned there are manifold ways in which these women are contributing to the Islamic knowledge. In what follows a testy account of the efforts of the converted women to for spread of Islamic knowledge is presented:

One of the opportunity and advantage that the Muslim Women has won for them by striving hard for religious knowledge is the active women groups in mosques and Islamic Centers where they meet to learn Islam and also get involved in charitywork educational programs for children, other social activities and festivals.

Beside the social engagement they are also actively involved in the political and civil right activities all across Europe through the forums that are sometimes being

supported by the transnational Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brothers and the Jama'at Islami and sometimes by the other national parties like Turkish Justice and Development Party and Gulen Movement who inspire them through their contacts with the immigrants. Likewise they have active participation in various forums that work for the rights of Muslims across Europe such as European Forum of Muslim Women (EFMW), Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), VOEM-the Organization for the Development and Emancipation of Muslim. By actively joining and participating in these forums they are effectively campaigning against the discrimination and the taboos that they have to face in various forms i.e. the ethnic, the religious-based or Islamophobia. The European Muslim women of the European Union member states also fostered their own associations and organizations that provide the legal support and counseling for women who experienced violence, discrimination or the like. These associations have active immigrants and convert women members working for Muslim women in Europe. These forums are mostly established and run by the dominant immigrant ethnicities in the given European context for example the Italian association of Moroccan women ACMID, the Newham Asian Women's Project in London, the Southall Black Sisters, and the Women Resource Center.³²

The Muslim women in general and the converts among them in particular want to approach Islam cognitively. They show up in religious centers and groups for the acquisition of Islamic knowledge. Perhaps their self statement as *muslima* and their faith is the driving force in their zeal for Islamic learning. It is important to note that the search and struggle for acquiring the religious knowledge is the ideal of a good *muslima* who is committed to be a good mother and a good wife. Thus the search for Islamic knowledge, social roles and urge for becoming an active *da'awah* worker are the opportunities that the converted women as well as the Muslim immigrants have created out of their challenges.

The challenge of conversion and identity has been transformed into an opportunity of active and institutionalized *da'awah* work. Besides the formal organizations many informal and personal initiatives are set up by women themselves. Thus several independent women centers that are being run and governed by themselves have been established during the last ten years that cater the needs of women's Islamic learning and awareness. Thus *da'awah* work has become an institutionalized and organized form among the European Muslim women. These women are effectively working for and participating in the institutionalized *da'awah* in the European context.

Da'awah as an institutional or organized form has never been adopted in the past the way it has become a substantial constant factor of contemporary Islamic activism both in the Muslim majority societies and within the migrant and convert

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communities in the West. It has been rightly observed by the researchers that *da'awah* as a field and learning has emerged as a "conceptual resources grounded in a long tradition of Islamic practice and scholarly inquiry."³³ These conceptual and practical resources are being shaped by the contemporary minority situation of Muslims in Europe generally and the Muslim women particularly in a way that fulfills their needs.

Women converts to Islam in Europe are major stakeholders in more focused, targeted and institutionalized forms and activities for *da'awah*. There are various institutes and organizations in Europe where convert women enroll themselves to get acquainted with the Islamic beliefs and practices as well as to get training of *da'awah*. For example the *Institute of Islamology* in Cologne where converted Muslim women enroll to get trained as *da'wa* workers. It is significant to note that the Muslim women have changed their challenges into their opportunities and have been more steadfast for learning and imparting the knowledge of Islam. Beside the *da'awah* learning and working some religious political groups also have good number of women working under their umbrella among these are *Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Gorus* (IGMG)³⁴, the *Verein der Islamischen Kulturzentren* (VIKZ)³⁵ and *Anstalt fur Religion*³⁶ e.V./*Diyanet Isleri Turk Islam Birligi* (DITIB)³⁷ in Germany.

Like Germany the education of *da'awah* is being provided at some centers in France to name for instance; the IESH (*L'Institut Europeen des Sciences de l'Homme*) or the CERSI (*Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur l'Islam*), where special classes in *Fiqh ad-da'wa* are offered. Likewise the France *Jeunes Musulmans de France* (Young Muslims of France) *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur l'Islam* Study Center and Research on Islam are the places where Women are an integral part of Acedamic Islamic grooming activities. While the British Muslim society is more integrated with many transnational Muslim organizations and networks like Salafiyyah, Tablighi Jama 'at and the Jama'at Islami.

The converted Muslim women are trying to negotiate or say renegotiate the perception of Islam in the European Muslim and non-Muslim public alike through actively participating in the Mosque organizations and giving lectures on religious themes, contributing to monthly newsletters and transcribing their experiences of journey towards Islam. By engaging themselves in religious activities and in teaching of Islam they are assuming new roles both as converts and as active *da'iat* of Islam in Western Europe.

Conclusions

Islam is the fastest growing religion in many of the European states and women converts to Islam outnumber their male counterparts. This increase and gendered rise of conversion to Islam has become subject of many deliberations and debates resulting in multiple studies and surveys during past two decades. Muslim women

converts have a lot of challenges to face and deal with including the hijab and niqab bans, social and state discrimination and Islamophobia. Women converts to Islam have not only faced these challenges tactfully but also have transformed many of these challenges into their opportunities. They are more conscious, faith motivated and more organized in their efforts for acquiring and imparting the Islamic knowledge and practice. The women converts to Islam are learning Islam and training themselves in *da'awah* work in Europe. They appear are more enthusiastic, organized and motivated than many of the born Muslim women. Through the many different ways that they are trying to meet the challenges in their respective communities they have emerged as active *da'awah* workers who are well acquainted and determined to learn and spread the knowledge of Islam and about Islam.



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