



## ***Islamophobia and Sexism: Muslim Women in the Western Mass Media***

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on the role of mass media in the social reproduction of one form of racism: Islamophobia. Firstly, the article focus on the dominant representations of “Muslim women” in the western media in general and in Spanish media in particular, in order to highlight the specific characteristics of the image of the female Muslim “other” and, likewise, in order to analyse— from a gender perspective—the symbolic mechanisms legitimising certain Islamophobic thoughts and practices. To this end, the author gathers the results of many researches which prove how dominant representations transmitted in the hegemonic media discourse in Spain reinforce today many stereotypes about Muslim women in general and migrant Muslim women particularly. In the second part, the article looks specifically at the treatment of *l’affaire du voile* (“the veil affair”) by the French media. Through the analysis of the origin and social implications of this law and its media treatment, the author tries to demonstrate how the defence of “women’s rights” was instrumentalised in the public debate and how claims identifying the racist aspects of the law were ignored by the majority of media and politicians, in spite of the fact that this law affected mainly the Muslim community—thus fuelling division and discrimination. In short, these issues reflect specially on the mechanics behind the “interlinking” of sexism and racism, from a material standpoint and, above all, from a discursive and symbolic point of view.

### **INTRODUCTION**

By claiming to champion objectivity and report “real” news, the informative discourse of the mass media conceals their important role as “builders of realities”<sup>1</sup> and, consequently, their key role in the pro-

cesses of imagination—and social construction—of the communities to which they

<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth examination of the theoretical perspective according to which the *mass media* participate in the construction and reproduction of social images of reality, see Patrick Champagne (1993).

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belong (either national<sup>2</sup> or transnational<sup>3</sup>). This article analyses knowledge of these processes, the discursive strategies that reveal ethnic differences and, in particular, the different representations of Muslims in the Western mass media.

While depending on the ideological color of the government in power it is possible to observe changes in the way the media construct certain events related with Islam and the Arab world<sup>4</sup>, there exist a continuum in the media representations about “what is taking place in the world” that transcend the interests of any political party in power. This situation may be defined—to quote Deputy Commander Marcos—as “a monologue with various voices.” This paper analyses this dominant monologue, without addressing other minority or “minoritorised” discourses that undoubtedly exist, and that constitute a less distorted and stereotyped vision than that examined in this article.

Different authors have studied the media discourse in news on Arabs and Muslims<sup>5</sup>, including most notably Saddek Rabah (1998), Vincent Geisser (2003) and Thomas Deltombe (2005) in France. In Spain, pioneering studies have been carried out on this subject, such as *El Mundo Árabe y su Imagen en los Medios* (“The Arab World and its Image in the Media”<sup>6</sup>), and more recently the work by Eloy Martín Corrales (2002), Laura Navarro (2007, 2008b) and Pablo López et al. (2010), the articles by Gema Martín Muñoz (1994, 2000) and Teun A. Dijk (2008) and, finally, doctoral theses such as the one by Mohamed El Maataoui (2005). However, the most studies on this subject have been published in English. Noteworthy examples include the work by

<sup>2</sup> See Benedict Anderson (1983).

<sup>3</sup> See Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou (2003).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the change of perception in information presented on TVE’s newscasts about the Iraq war that took place soon after the PSOE came to power after their victory at the 2004 General Elections.

Edward W. Said (1997), Mohammad A. Siddiqi (1997), Karim H. Karim (2000), Elisabeth Poole (2002) and John E. Richardson (2004).

Practically all these studies highlight the “otherisation” caused by establishing “us and them” oppositions, assigning positive elements to “us” and negative elements to “them,” as well as treatment in the media that instead of facilitating better knowledge of “others,” exacerbates feelings of rejection and incomprehension. Many of the abovementioned authors have also studied in depth the relationship between discourse and power. For example, Edward W. Said examined how and why the mass media (especially in the US, Great Britain and Israel) constantly reduce Islam and Muslims to a series of stereotypes and generalisations that merely portray this religion as monolithic, as a threat and danger to the West, as a violent and irrational religion. Gema Martín Muñoz has highlighted the persistence of an “agreed cultural paradigm” that western societies have forged on the Arab and Muslim “Orient” “based on a culturalist inter-

<sup>5</sup> Authors who have studied the media discourse in fiction (especially in film) include, most notably, Eloy Martín Corrales (2000), “Árabes y musulmanes en el cine español de la democracia (1979-2000)”, *Mugak*, April-June 2000, nº 11; Bernabé López García (1999), “El cine y las relaciones hispano-marroquíes: de la imagen del protegido al del inmigrado”, *Cuadernos Africanos de la Asociación de Africanistas*, nº 4, pp. 43-52; Isabel Santaolalla (2005), *Los “Otros”. Etnicidad y “raza” en el cine español contemporáneo*, Zaragoza and Madrid, Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza and Ocho y Medio. In terms of the English media, noteworthy studies include those carried out by Jack G. Shaheen (2003), “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, nº 588, pp. 171-193; and in French media, Pascal Bauchard, “Les représentations de l’Arabe dans le cinéma français: des ‘salopards’ aux beurs,” available at: <http://educine.chez-alice.fr/analyses/esquivearabe.htm> (consulted on 8-6-2009).

<sup>6</sup> A collective work published by José Bodas and Adriana Dragoevich (1994).

pretation of Islamic societies explained from an essentialist and ethnocentric perspective, thus preventing the comprehension of much more plural and changing political and social realities than what normally seems to be the case" (2005: 206). In two of my studies (2007, 2008b), I have also underlined the important role played by this Orientalist discourse in the legitimisation of hegemonic military policies (applied for many years in the Middle East), as well as in the legitimisation of police and military immigration policies, which have largely been responsible for the deaths of thousands of people on geostrategic borders, such as the southern US border and the southern European border.

Nevertheless, although these studies have contributed to research on the social reproduction of racism, most of these studies also have the same shortcoming: the space dedicated to the image of the "other woman." Virtually all these studies focus on the image of Muslim *men* and ignore the specific representations of Muslim *women*. This paper examines in detail these images which have been studied less. To this end, I will first focus on the dominant representations of "Muslim woman"<sup>7</sup> in the western media in general in order to highlight the specific characteristics of the image of the female Muslim "other" and analyse, from a gender perspective, the symbolic mechanisms legitimising certain Islamophobic thoughts and practices. To conclude, I will look specifically at the treatment of *l'affaire du voile* ("the veil affair") by the French media in order to introduce an analytical perspective adopted in the latest *Gender Studies* and which consists in not losing sight of the "overlapping" or "interlinking"

<sup>7</sup> I have indicated this in inverted commas because I am referring to the social categorisation of the "Muslim woman," and not to its real sociological meaning. In other words, I am referring to the category-object of "Muslim woman" (within the scope of collective representations) and not to its sociological concept.

of sexism, racism and classism.<sup>8</sup>

These analyses are also based on two premises: the notion that audiences are able to actively appropriate media texts (D. Morley and K. H. Chen, 1996); and that the media do not construct representations on their own but instead belong to the mechanisms that maintain the existing hegemony<sup>9</sup>, i.e., institutions that participate in the economy, culture, public opinion and social mobilisation and that, according to Antonio Gramsci's thesis, allow to intellectually, morally and politically manage society without having to resort to physical violence to obtain the consensus of the majority. This complex system of building social consensus—through which dominant images are also constructed of "other men" and "other women"—is a fundamental explanatory factor for understanding the social and cognitive processes that allow us to unconsciously absorb racist, classist and/or sexist representations (and even thoughts and practices). These collective images are neither the same in all geographical contexts nor fixed or immutable because they change over time as a result of specific historical and social experiences, education, institutional policies, as well as the cultural industry and public discourses (including the media discourse).

In Spanish society, for example, histor-

<sup>8</sup> Perspective analyzed in the Chapter 6 "Intersections" by Laure Bereni *et al.*, 2008, pp. 191-222.

<sup>9</sup> According to Antonio Gramsci, for whom constructing hegemony was equivalent "to creating a social process of persuasion and generation of active consensus allowing social groups to join a cultural and/or political project [...]. Compared with systems of domination through coercion and force, hegemony entails creating social power through proposals that generate the active establishment of population masses, since it is based on the premise that all directionless domination reveals a profound weakness that will sooner or later produce a crisis." Definition quoted from the *Diccionario de Sociología* (2004) by Salvador Giner, Emilio Lamo de Espinosa and Cristóbal Torres (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, p. 349).

ical conflicts with Muslims, especially Moroccans, have been decisive in the social reproduction of racist stereotypes and prejudices regarding Islam and the Arab world (E. Martín Corrales, 2002). Likewise, fears (J. Delumeau, 2002), the disproportionate need for security and lack of communication (M. A. Vázquez, 2004) can exacerbate such distorted visions of the “other,” as do culturalist visions of history and the politics of Arab and Muslim societies, mainly transmitted through the education system (G. Martín Muñoz *et al.*, 1998) and also, as will be discussed later, through the dominant mass media discourse. Thus, today different converging factors imbue the dominant Spanish collective image of Islam and the Arab world with essentially negative characteristics, many of which are not new, e.g., the laziness, cruelty, lechery, male chauvinism and fanaticism of Muslim men.

### **MUSLIM WOMEN: VICTIMS OF THEIR OWN CULTURE AND A THREAT TO OURS**

Are the characteristics historically used to describe Muslim women the same as those applied to Muslim men? Eloy Martín Corrales (2002), despite not focusing specifically on this aspect, mentions some characteristics that have been historically attributed to Moroccan women in particular and to Muslim women in general. These include ignorance and submission, but also—albeit with different levels of intensity according to the historical period—sensuality.

This sensual image of Muslim women is, to a certain extent, a continuation of the thesis put forward by Mary Nash (1984). Since the first mass media institutions appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women of other cultures have been represented, according to Nash, as exotic and sexually active women (in postcards, labels on alcoholic beverages, etc.), in contrast to the

bourgeois model of the *domestic angel*. Later, this conception was transferred to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since, as described by Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins<sup>10</sup> in their analysis of numerous articles published in the middle of last century in the magazine *National Geographic*, women of other cultures were almost absent from politics and were only portrayed as mothers and nice consumable objects, a perception accentuated by nude images of women (since, at that time, this was the only way to see naked women because pornographic magazines were still uncommon). Later, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, Lutz and Collins observed that these women were still shown as the refuge of the cultural tradition of the country through images in which they wore traditional clothing while men copied the Western model. Thus, progress was identified as something masculine and tradition as something feminine.

As regards the stereotypes of ignorance and submission associated with Muslim women and prevalent in the Spanish social imaginary, if we take into account the dominant representations transmitted in the hegemonic media discourse, today these stereotypes seem to have been reinforced. The main characteristics of these representations are presented based on the results of the analysis of the sample studied in my doctoral thesis (Navarro, 2007), on the representation of this collective on the television news programmes on the national public channel TVE1, broadcast at 3 p.m. and 9 p.m. during the week from August 9 to August 16, 2004<sup>11</sup>, as well as on the results of an in-depth study on the subject, the conclusions of which were presented in an article by Gema Martín Muñoz (2005). This second study is one of the first carried out in this country to research the image of

<sup>10</sup> Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins (2002), “The color of sex: postwar photographic histories of race and gender”. Reference mentioned in Estela Rodríguez García (2005).

Muslim women in the Spanish media<sup>12</sup>. Although this study was written in 1997—before important events such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and March 11, 2004—its main conclusions are particularly relevant, not only due to the rigour and strength of many of these conclusions, but because this is one of the few research studies currently available on this subject.

### *Predominance of Culturalist Perceptions*

Firstly, according to Gema Martín Muñoz, news on Muslim women “is dominated by the culturalist presentation and interpretation of Islam” (2005: 208). In fact, the discrimination of these women (an issue that attracts special media attention) tends to be explained almost exclusively according to theories on Islamic culture. For example, when referring to “the rights of Muslim women,” the news discourse tends to focus on symbolic and religious issues such as the veil or Islam, thus eluding more important matters relating to the equality of these women, such as rights to education or public freedoms.

This dominant culturalist perception of Islam also leads to “ethnocentric perceptions that make it very difficult to under-

stand dynamics that do not reproduce our construction of modernity and our feminist secular model” (2005: 209). These are biased visions also hindered by the fact that many experiences of women in non-Muslim countries during long periods are considered to be exclusive to Arab countries. In fact, until the 1960s in Spain, if a father or husband murdered his daughter or wife for reasons of adultery or for having sexual relations before marriage, this was considered an attenuating circumstance in the penal code. Moreover, the *Sección Femenina* (Women’s Section) of the Spanish Falange was not suppressed until 1977<sup>13</sup>. In short, and as in the case of the dominant media representations of “Muslim man,” the situations and processes reported in the news are largely explained as a consequence of Islam itself, rather than the result of specific political or socio-economic situations.

Martín Muñoz also considers that these visions are far removed from reality because they fail to take into account the conscious and deliberate adherence of millions of women to their Islamic identity. In fact, they are not differentiated according to the criterion of Islamic women (with veil) = traditional and mentally retarded women vs. Westernised women = modern women, which is the image the mass media appear to transmit. On the contrary, the sociological reality shows that although a distinction is made between traditional and modern women, “the latter are distributed between Islamist and non-Islamist women. And the factor distinguishing traditional women from modern women is not the veil [...],

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<sup>11</sup> Of the 269 news stories that were broadcast in that period on that channel, 45 referred—more or less explicitly—to Islam and the Arab world. The analysis of the representations was based on the study of different semiotic aspects of the discourse, such as the following: 1) thematic selection; 2) the actors in the news stories; 3) the language used; 4) the selection of the information sources; and 5) the visual aspect of the news.

<sup>12</sup> Supervised by Gema Martín Muñoz, Julia Hernández Juberías and M<sup>a</sup> Ángeles López Plaza, carried out in 1997 within the framework of the Institute of University Studies on Women’s Affairs of the Autonomous University of Madrid, on *The image of Muslim women in the Spanish media*, and based on a sample of 417 articles published in the Spanish press between 1995 and 1997.

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<sup>13</sup> Created in 1934 as the Women’s Section of the Spanish “Falange”. Their slogan was “the essential purpose of women, in their human function, is to provide a perfect complement to men, forming with them, individually or collectively, a perfect social unit.” See the *Women in Blue* exhibition organised by the Documentary Centre on Historical Memory of the Ministry of Culture, from 28 April to 28 June 2009: [http://gl.www.mcu.es/novedades/2009/novedades\\_Mujeres\\_de\\_Azul.html](http://gl.www.mcu.es/novedades/2009/novedades_Mujeres_de_Azul.html)

but whether or not they have had access to education” (2005: 210<sup>14</sup>). Nevertheless, these modern Islamist women are largely absent from the mass media.

Bearing in mind that much of the textual strategy in ideological production is not dictated by what is really said but by what it is not said, it is important to highlight the type of information and images that tend to be omitted. The mass media not only exclude modern Islamist women but also, in general, the socially and culturally diverse communities of Muslim women living in Spain. These women are not only housewives, mothers and Muslims (the simplified image transmitted by the media) but also students, researchers, entrepreneurs, domestic workers, artists, politicians, volunteers, activists, etc. In this respect, it is also not accidental that the media do not report on the evolution of pro-human rights movements (including women’s rights and freedoms movements) that exist in some Arab countries, such as Egypt and Morocco. Although the concept of the sexual emancipation of women has not reached these countries in the same way that in Europe, changes are taking place, fuelled mainly by women’s associations and NGOs<sup>15</sup>.

### *Dominant Representations: Passivity, Victimisation and the Veil*

Continuing with the research carried out by Martín Muñoz (2005), the newspaper articles studied mainly present Muslims women in three ways: as passive women, as victims and as veiled women. Their passivity stems from the fact that

<sup>14</sup> See Gema Martín Muñoz, 1996 (pp. 45-59) and 1997 (pp. 75-90).

<sup>15</sup> Social changes that, as Martín Muñoz (1997) explains, often appeared within Islam itself, especially within reformist Islamist movements, due largely to new generations’ disappointment with previous experiences inspired by European models—the liberal and socialist models—that had ended in failure.

they are not portrayed as individuals who work or seek media attention but as “victims, in family relations or illustrating a specific cultural landscape” (often linked to Islam), “instead of as a source of information on important events in their communities.” In short, they are portrayed as “observers rather than as active participants in their community” (2005: 210).

Their role as victims is basically reflected through the recurrence of news stories describing conflicts (e.g., the Afghan or Algerian conflicts in which women are clearly victims), and through news stories on the veil, the imprisonment or exclusion of these women, all symbols of “the relations and limitations of women in the lands of Islam” (2005: 211).

In my research (2008b: 231), I also observed that most news stories mentioning Muslim women tend to refer to violence against women (outside and inside our borders), focusing mainly on issues such as stoning, ablation of the clitoris or polygamy. The repetition of, and the way of informing about, these themes exacerbates victimisation and associates the practice of Islam with the discrimination of and physical violence against women. In fact, most television news and reports on these issues do not usually explain the political, economic and educational factors that fuel intolerable practices, such as stoning or ablation, consequently fostering—as mentioned before—the perception that Islam is ultimately responsible for this situation, as well as the perception of Muslim countries as uniformly intolerant and anti-democratic.

Another strategy that accentuated the stereotype of Muslim women as passive and submissive women is that whenever the issue of “women in Islam” is discussed or reported, women are hardly ever given the chance to express their opinions; hence, they are deprived of preferential access to this discourse, a source of power comparable to social resources as important as

wealth, knowledge and education. Sometimes, as highlighted by Gema Martín Muñoz, when Muslim women appear as active sources of information, they are normally “Westernised” women (who do not wear veils) and they almost never belong to Islamist movements. Interestingly, this practice contrasts with the general tendency to choose photographs of “anonymous and passive veiled women interpreted from a culturalist and traditionalist perspective” to accompany information on Muslim women (2005: 213).

As regards the third dominant representation—veiled women—the monolithic interpretation of this garment is striking: “as a sign of mystery (Orientalist historical interpretations), of submission and oppression (traditionalist interpretations)” (2005: 211). In fact, women who wear veils are normally portrayed as “lacking individual or personal attributes.” In contrast, whenever “Westernised” Muslim women are represented, “similarities with Western culture are emphasized and their individual professional status is mentioned,” suggesting that women who wear veils have no responsibilities or professional affiliations (2005: 211).

Thus, the dominant informative discourse tends to represent the veil as the ultimate symbol of the exclusion of women but also not normally reflect its multidimensional character. It should be remembered that there are different types of veil—ranging from veils that cover the whole body to small headscarves—and that they are used for different reasons; some are imposed by national law or by the family while others are used simply due to the inertia of tradition. Veils are also actively used both consciously and politically as a symbol of identity and/or political vindication<sup>16</sup>. They can even be used by women to optimise their scarce resources and thus achieve a certain level of prestige or a better marriage, or as a means of social mobility. Or simply because they believe in God<sup>17</sup>.

Alima Boumedienne (2007) describes an interesting example of how the French mass media tend to present the veil as an absolute “scarecrow” in terms of ghosts and stereotypes of Islam:

In August 2006, when the British authorities decided to keep aeroplanes grounded at Heathrow airport in order to dismantle a series of terrorist attempts. [...] *liberación.fr* [the web page of the French newspaper “*Libération*”] announced “attempted attacks” which it described as Islamist [...] and could not find anything better to illustrate its article than the photograph of a veiled woman with one hand pushing her baby’s pram and the other carrying a small child in the corridors of Heathrow airport.

The fact that many educated and working Muslim women have started wearing veils voluntarily in recent years “is not only difficult for the West to accept, but even irritates it because it undermines the traditional interpretation that it clings to so acrimoniously” and, therefore, the mass media conceal this fact or simply ignore it (Martín

<sup>16</sup> As indicated by Aïcha Touati (2006), after studying the emergence of Muslim feminists in Arab countries and in the countries of immigrants from the North, feminist struggles were determined by the socio-political context and the veil or headscarf does not have the same meaning for women who wear it (or refuse to wear it) in different contexts.

<sup>17</sup> As described by Gema Martín Muñoz (2005), different sociological studies and surveys carried out with women who wear veils or headscarves voluntarily have shown that, among the various arguments used by these women in favour of the use of the *hijab* (professionals, feminists, nationalists or anti-imperialists), “religious reasons *stricto sensu* are almost never mentioned alone nor are they the main reasons in the discourse of these women” (2005: 212). Noteworthy studies include those by Hinde Taarji (1991), Nilüfer Göle (1993) and F. Adelhkah (1996).

Muñoz, 2005: 211). Thus, women associated with having a Muslim identity or directly involved in Islamist militancy are largely absent from news on “women in Islam.”

### *Invisibilization and Stereotyped Representation of “Immigrant Woman”*

Since many Spaniard citizens associate “Moroccans” with “immigrants,”<sup>18</sup> it is also important to analyse the way immigration is collectively represented. According to a CIRES report (1997: 264-291), the Spaniards interviewed considered the presence of immigrants to be “advantageous” for “our” culture, but qualified their opinion in the case of “Arab” and “black” immigrants, considering that their sociocultural integration was more “problematic” than that of “Latin Americans” and “East Europeans.” In 2002, a CIS barometer prepared a type of “sympathy” list, in which “North African immigrants” were ranked last<sup>19</sup>. However, if these surveys had also asked the interviewees about “women”—i.e. “Arab women,” “black women,” “Latin American women” and “European women,”—would the answers have been similar? When most participants identified “Moroccans” with “immigrants,” were they also referring to “immigrant women”?

The CIS (Sociological Research Centre) surveys on “the social perception of immigrants” do not normally take into account the gender variable in these questions. It is therefore difficult to determine whether

Moroccan immigrant women enjoy the same “sympathy” as their male compatriots in Spanish society. The general failure of these surveys to take into account the gender perspective is encompassed within a context characterised by a lack of interest on the part of social scientists in the study of immigrant women in our country. The same occurs in the field of information and communication sciences and although many studies have been published in recent years on the image of “immigrants” in the media (particularly in journalistic discourse), it is striking that very few have examined the specific representations of immigrant women in the media in our country.<sup>20</sup>

One of these studies is the research carried out by Estela Rodríguez (2005<sup>21</sup>), which confirmed that today news stories do not integrate a gender perspective when addressing immigration issues. On the one hand, she describes the “insufficient visibilization of migrant women, who are often seen as victims, and associated with tradition and cultural underdevelopment”. On the other, she observes that “initiatives carried out by these women, self-management, political action, research or education, have not been covered in daily news reports and articles in the last seven years” (2005: 177). Rodríguez offers two very representative examples of this: the lack of coverage of the different ways of life of Moroccan women and the different conceptions of Islam; and the “almost non-existent” coverage of the sit-in by immigrant

<sup>18</sup> According to a research study carried out by the *Fundación de las Cajas de Ahorros* (FUNCAS—Savings Banks Foundation), 77% of the Spaniards interviewed thought of “Moroccan” when “immigrants” were mentioned. Percentage published in *El País* on 22-1-04.

<sup>19</sup> At the top of the list were Western Europeans (6.7 out of 10), followed by Latin Americans (6.5), North Americans (5.4), Sub-Saharan Africans (5.5) and, finally, North Africans (4.9).

<sup>20</sup> Publications on the fictional discourse are equally scarce. Noteworthy examples include those by Rosabel Argote (2003, 2006), Jo Labanyi (1999) and Isabel Santaolalla (2006).

<sup>21</sup> A study carried out within the framework of the R&D project subsidized by the Women’s Institute (Ministry of Social Affairs) called *Rethinking the images of Others: immigrants and other cultures in the Spanish press*, incorporating a gender perspective in the analysis of newspaper articles, after it was detected that no stories were published on immigrant women.



women at the Sant Pau del Camp Church in Barcelona in 2001 at a time when there were many sit-ins in churches. As the above-mentioned author explains:

their analysis in the media was completely biased because no explanations were given of the specific demands of immigrant women, thus an opportunity was lost to demonstrate many differences in the plans of immigrant women and highlight their importance given the number of immigrant women in our country. (2005: 182).

This lack of visibilization contrasts with their actual demographic presence. In fact, immigrant women in Spain represent 47% of the total foreign population, according to data in the 2004 municipal census carried out by the INE (National Statistics Institute). Ecuadorian women account for 17% of the total, followed by Moroccan and Colombian women (9.9% of the total), and Rumanian women (6.5%). However, as indicated by Mary Nash, this is not the collective perception, which is dominated by the prevailing traditional model, i.e., dependent women excluded from society. This image distorts the real sociological profile of immigrant women as dynamic individuals with a high level of education and who seek employment.

Other studies, such as those by Faviola Calvo (2001) and Clara Perez (2003) which both analyse the press, also conclude that newspapers provide insufficient information in this respect and highlight the distorted and inaccurate manner in which the social reality of migrant women is portrayed. The most recent study on this subject, carried out by Erika Masanet Ripoll and Carolina Ripoll Arcacia (2008<sup>22</sup>), also emphasizes the invisibility of immigrant women in the press (where immigrant men are more present) and the fact that the

media only reflect the reality of a specific group of women: the most marginalized.

The only research to examine the media representation of immigrant women on television is the study carried out by Asunción Bernárdez Rodal (2007<sup>23</sup>). One conclusion drawn by this author—beyond variations according to the socio-political context at each moment in time and the specific characteristics of the nationality or place of origin of immigrant women—was that whenever “immigrants” are mentioned in television newscasts “they are normally reports on and with men, as if immigration was a purely “masculine” phenomenon, when official data and the latest research show that this is not the case”<sup>24</sup> (2007: 106).

Furthermore, the latter study also corroborates the failure to recognise immigrant women as social individuals. This lack of recognition is evident if we analyse leading stories in which immigrant women are the protagonists. According to Bernárdez Rodal, there are four possible types of news reports: 1) stories that report violence against women in which only their first name or nickname is mentioned, with special emphasis on their nationality and attributing less importance to their lives (their past or present, the factors that have caused them to be abused or/and murdered by their partners or ex-partners, etc.); 2) stories that describe the daily lives and customs of immigrant women, in which they are responsible for describing or illustrating the different characteristics of

<sup>22</sup> Within the scope of the “Representation of immigrant woman in the national press” project, financed by the Center for Women’s Studies (CEM) of the University of Alicante in 2005. Based on the qualitative analysis of articles appearing during 2004 in *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*.

<sup>23</sup> The body of work of this research consisted of three samples of television news programmes during a period of one month each in 2004, on the national channels TVE-1, La-2, Antena 3 and Tele 5.

<sup>24</sup> See C. Gregorio (1997) and L. Oso (1998).

“immigrants,” without speaking as immigrant women but instead as part of the cultural or religious group to which they belong; 3) stories about prostitution which are normally the ones that present a more consistent representation, among other reasons because immigrant women are almost the only protagonists of these news stories (this exclusivity is not shared with immigrant men or, in most cases, non-immigrant women); 4) stories on the arrival of small duck boats (*pateras*) which only focus on women who are mothers or if they are the exception among a majority of men.

Finally, although immigrant women of all origins portrayed in the media that were analysed are collectively represented as poor, Bernárdez Rodal highlights a series of specific stereotypes depending on their origin. It is important to distinguish that “Muslim immigrant women” do not appear in the four stories described above, as the analysis shows. Specifically, they do not appear in reports on prostitution or the arrival of duck boats, or in news stories on Muslims congregating in public acts in the street. In most cases, these women are “recognised” by their veils and gowns and normally appear walking along a street in their neighbourhood with a shopping bag or trolley, “simply to illustrate news stories on any subject relating to immigration or terrorism” or “to explain customs, in their homes”:

In both spaces, they are represented as traditional women associated with religion and family life [...] They are classified according to the stereotype of “traditional” women due to their education, culture and religion, more inclined to be submissive and more exposed to male violence (they share this feature with Latin-American women and low-working classes women). (2007: 137-138)

In contrast, “Latin American women” are mainly associated with certain places (discotheques, queues at police stations, markets) and certain jobs (looking after elderly people, domestic work, prostitution). Although they are also poor and appear as mothers or victims of abuse from their partners (men), they are also characterised as exuberant and do not appear in news stories on religion. They also speak more (compared with Muslim or Sub-Saharan women) (2007: 137). “Sub-Saharan women” normally appear in news stories on arrivals of small duck boats:

... [a]ssociated with the stereotype of poor and unfortunate mothers, emphasizing their poverty and vulnerability, as well as their irresponsible character by deciding to risk their lives and those of their innocent children on such ventures. Although the women are characterized as mothers or future mothers, the stories never mention that fathers also travel or arrive on duck boats. Nor is there ever any mention of the presence of couples or families. (2007: 138<sup>25</sup>)

### *The “Integrated Immigrant”*

These dominant images are accompanied by another less visible image that sometimes appears in the media, namely the image of the “successful immigrant.” Although this type of image is normally very present in most printed media targeted specifically at immigrants<sup>26</sup>, this is

<sup>25</sup> The sample selected by Bernárdez Rodal does not include the recognizable stereotype of East European women. This is probably because the sharp increases in the number of immigrants from these countries had not yet started in 2004, or perhaps also because the distinctness of these women (but not men) may be more blurred in dominant perceptions of these groups.

<sup>26</sup> See Laura Navarro (2008a) and Jéssica Retis (2008).

not true in the case of the mass media in which the aforementioned image prevails. Mathieu Rigouste has studied media representations of “successful immigrants” in the French press and carried out a revealing analysis of the transversal economic and political interests inherent in these apparently positive images. In his article entitled “Immigrant, but successful” (2005), Rigouste described several representative examples of a discourse that, since the first case concerning the use of the Islamic veil in 1989, is becoming increasingly common in all the main French daily newspapers. This discourse consists of associating successful integration with the socio-economic status achieved by immigrants and presenting this success, first and foremost, as the result of essentially personal motivations. Here are two examples of articles “reporting” on “two successful immigrants”:

Article 1: “Karim, wearing a Lead grey suit, blue-striped shirt with matching yellow tie, hair combed back, born 24 years ago in Mantes-la-Jolie, has just left his well-paid job as a sales technician to set up his own business.”<sup>27</sup> Article 2: “The owner of the premises [an Arab restaurant], Najia el-Mouna Cifi, aged 46, looks like she’s come straight out of an Afflelou advert. Short hair, black rectangular glasses, dark sweater and perfect makeup, this social worker who looks after elderly people contrasts dramatically with the image portrayed in *A thousand and one nights*.”<sup>28</sup>

This discursive technique, based on the

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<sup>27</sup> Quote taken from the article “Grâce aux injustices, je me suis forgé un caractère,” 28-1-2004, p. 13, published in the newspaper *Le Parisien* as part of a series of 6 articles entitled *Muslims who managed to integrate*.

idea that the exception confirms the rule, would by opposition define a person who has failed to integrate, i.e., the poor or excluded. According to Rigouste (2005), the inferred message would be as follows: “a person who really wants to integrate can do so, while others choose or accept failure.” However, in addition to the media figure of the entrepreneurial immigrant, “successful immigrants” also include teachers, prefects, technicians or bureaucrats. All these images of “integrated immigrants” are “manipulated by the mass media like so many other anti-racist guarantees and compensatory measures against a rhetoric of threat.”

Since 1995, Rigouste has also observed an increase in the media presence of images of singers, comedians (e.g. Djamel Debouze) or sportspersons (e.g. Zinedine Zidane). These consolidate “the image of immigrants valued for their spectacular performances, often as self-sacrificing, courageous, servile and especially competitive individuals.” According to Rigouste, this “positive” representation of integrated immigrants has been imposed “as the most common way of portraying immigration in a favourable light, prompting the general relegation of the group.” In short:

The figures perceived as a threat are based on the generation of a desire for security and successful figures on a mimetic desire that operates like a compelling force toward likeness. The images of successful immigrants are not a sign of progress in the representation of visible minorities: they are used to justify and promote a message of security. (2005)

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<sup>28</sup> Quote taken from the article “Je n’ai jamais été montré du doigt...,” 29-1-2004, p. 11, published in the newspaper *Le Parisien* as part of a series of 6 articles entitled *Muslims who managed to integrate*.

These “positive” images of “integrated immigrant men and women” may be accompanied by a more specific image of women that is particularly visible in the French media: the image of “liberated and rebellious Muslim women.” According to Alina Boumediene (2007), “the mass media, and the French media in particular, are full of surveys, articles and reports that portray the archetypal woman of Muslim faith or culture who has managed to escape from the *carcan* (straightjacket) of religion, customs and parents and older brothers.” According to Boumediene, in France these women, often classified as *beurettes* (female Muslim immigrants), are normally presented in a positive and favourable light. They are presented as “fighters,” as “women who have been successful” *in spite of*. And once more, every positive description of these women that appears in the media is accompanied by other negative references to Islam, the mother of all evil, and to Muslim men in particular. In summary, according to Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (2004), the stereotype of the liberated *beurette* is the counterpoint to the stereotype of Arab youths of *voleur, violeur et maintenant voileur* (“thieves, rapists and now veilers”), who thus also end up as victims of an imaginary construction. We will now look more closely at this counterpoint referred to by Guénif-Souilamas.

### THE ANTI-VEIL LAW: SEXISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA INTERLINKED

After France approved the law prohibiting the use of “ostensive” religious signs in state schools (better known as the “anti-veil law”), French feminists, anti-racist militants, as well as the political parties and civil society actors take a stance and two points of view quickly emerged: on the one hand, the defence of women’s rights and gender equality was used to justify the law (an argument supported first by political

groups and later by associations and feminists); and on the other hand, the denunciation of discriminatory aspects of the law and opposition to the exclusion of girls from schools prompted opposition of the law (from anti-racist militants and also feminists).

According to the analysis presented in the issue of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* entitled “Sexism and racism: the French case” (2006), the dominant point of view in the public debate and media in France was the first point of view described above, which justified the law based on the defence of “women’s rights,” ignoring claims identifying the racist aspects of the law and in spite of the fact that, as indicated by the author (2006: 4), this law affected—and continues to affect—mainly the Muslim community (comprising principally immigrant men and women from Maghreb countries and Sub-Saharan Africa, former French colonies, as well as their children born in France), with clear racial implications fuelling division and discrimination. I will later examine the origin and social implications of this law, in order to analyse in greater depth the mechanics behind the “interlinking”<sup>29</sup> of sexism and racism, from both a material standpoint and, above all, in terms of its discursive and symbolic dimension by analysing the political and media treatment of this law.

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<sup>29</sup> This term refers to the idea that persons may belong to various disadvantaged groups (for example, women belonging to ethnic minorities). This situation may entail more serious and specific forms of discrimination. This idea was acknowledged and initially defined as “intersectional” discrimination in the late 1980s by some feminist Afro-American teachers in the US. One of the most representative was Kimberly Crenshaw (1989). For more information on this theory, also known as *interseccionalité* or *consustancialité*, see Laure Bereni *et al.* (2008: 191-222) and Danièle Kergoat (2008).

### *Genesis of the Law*

As shown by the authors of the above-mentioned issue of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (2006: 5-6), the promulgation of the French anti-veil law (in March 2004) was the result of a long and complex process that started in France in 1989, when the use of headscarves by secondary school girls was starting to become a “problem”:

- 1) September 1989: three girls were temporarily expelled from a school in Creil (Oise) after it was considered that their headscarves represented an alleged “attack on secularism.” The French Minister of Education at the time, Lionel Jospin, closed the debate by reminding the French Council of State of legislation in force at the time. The Council responded as follows: “female students enjoy ‘freedom of conscience’ and therefore the ‘right to carry religious signs,’” “only proselytism and the interruption of school activities are grounds for expulsion,” and headmasters are invited to “evaluate the situation on a case-by-case basis.”
- 2) September 1994: controversy reared its head following a circular by François Bayrou—the new French Minister of Education—aimed at school headmasters, defining the headscarf as an “conspicuous sign in itself” that reveals a “proselytist attitude” (unlike the Christian cross or the Jewish kipa). The circular invited headmasters to prohibit the use of headscarves in state schools.
- 3) July 1995: after being asked to declare on the exclusion of 18 pupils in Strasbourg, the French Council of State concluded that girls wearing Islamic veils or headscarves cannot be prohibited from doing so or automatically

expelled. Once again, the Council ruled that no sign can be considered “conspicuous” by nature and that, pursuant to the 1905 law on the separation of Church and State (popularly known as the “Law on secularism”), no religious sign may in itself be in opposition to secularism.<sup>30</sup>

- 4) However, the position adopted by the French Council of State was harshly criticised by the defenders of secularism, which they considered to be under threat; they did not so much oppose the proselytism of certain girls as the presence of any girl wearing a headscarf in state schools, regardless of their attitude. The only way the opponents of headscarves could avoid the Council of State’s interpretation was to pass another law through Parliament. To do so, in 2003 they reminded the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (UOIF) that headscarves could not be worn in identity card photographs. Consequently, the pro-law (or “secular”) lobby rekindled the debate, launching a campaign mainly advocating women’s rights. The new law was eventually approved in 2004, restricting the freedoms guaranteed by the 1905 Law.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> At this point, it is worthwhile mentioning, in line with the authors, that the arguments put forward by the French Council of State coincided with those guiding the doctrine of the majority of international conventions and tribunals on this subject: Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Man (1948), Article 9 of the European Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Man and Fundamental Freedoms, Article 18 of the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and in education, Article 2 of the First Additional Protocol to the European Convention and Article 14 of the Convention on Children’s Rights (1989). See Fabienne Brion, “L’inscription du débat français en Belgique: pudeurs laïques et monnaie de singe,” pp. 121-147, in F. Lorcerie (dir.) (2005).

### *The discourse legitimising the law*

While the law was being drafted, a public discourse began in favour of the law and gradually became the dominant discourse (Natalie Benelli *et al.* (Eds.), 2006: 6). In this process, male politicians suddenly discovered that they were staunch feminists and that the arguments postulated by militants who already supported the new law were accompanied by criticism of the oppression suffered by young women in the *quartiers*<sup>32</sup> (neighbourhoods). I will now examine how the use of headscarves by female secondary school students gradually became a problem.

Firstly, as from January 2001 media coverage of collective transgressions (referred to as *tournantes*) committed in these neighbourhoods intensified. In 2002, after the so-called “March by women from the *quartiers*” (organised by *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* to denounce violence in these neighbourhoods), the spokeswomen of this association began to receive coverage in the media and greater political support. At the same time, other instruments were launched to prepare this law. On the one hand, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* joined the pro-law lobby (prohibition of headscarves) of the Socialist Party and the government (which financed them). On the other hand, Jacques Chirac set up a commission “to apply the principle of secularism,” presided by Bernard Stasi. In September 2003, the Stasi Commission began its public hearings and soon declared that:

“Equality between men and women [...] is an important element of the republican pact” and

<sup>31</sup> See Françoise Lorcerie, “À l’assaut de l’agenda public. La politisation du voile islamique en 2003-2004,” pp. 11-36, in F. Lorcerie (dir.) (2005).

<sup>32</sup> Term used to refer to generally marginal neighbourhoods in the suburbs of large French cities.

“the State cannot remain impassive if this principle is attacked.”<sup>33</sup> The commission also declared that young women living in the *quartiers* suffer “harassment from political-religious groups” that would incite them to wear clothes in accordance with their religious principles, and that they suffer “verbal, psychological or physical violence” from young men who force them to “lower their eyes on seeing a man” and wear “clothes that are concealing and asexual,” adding “forced marriages, polygamy, female genital mutilation.”<sup>34</sup>

In short, although the Stasi Commission recognized the exclusion, unemployment and racial discrimination suffered by French descendants of migrants originally from Maghreb countries, it considered that the main problem was the visibility of Islam. According to Natalie Benelli *et al.* (2006: 7), “the denunciation of the place of women in Islam and in the *quartiers* will hereinafter be at the core of arguments in favour of the law.” Rémy Schwartz, one of the main authors of the Stasi Commission, even criticised “actions *against* secularism [...], which are increasingly numerous, especially in the public sphere,” referring to women who wear headscarves in public (Lorcerie, 2005). Thus, women wearing headscarves become gradually, in the French social imaginary, like the evils that threatened the Republic and its values. Moreover, the public discourse has gradually legitimised the need for a law to reduce the visibility of this “sexist” Islam, in the only place in which international conventions permit such restrictions: state schools.

As regards media coverage of this pro-

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Stasi (dir.) (2004), Rapport de la Commission de réflexion sur l’application de laïcité dans la République, Paris, La Documentation française, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Stasi (2004: 101-105).

cess, the arguments of opponents of the law did not receive the same amount of coverage in the mass media. Firstly, the opinions of girls wearing headscarves were largely ignored. Little attention was given to the voice of political, trade union and associative representatives, secular organisations and associations that opposed the law, or feminists who emphasized the need to support young women who wore headscarves at state schools *at all cost*. The media gave much more coverage to men and women who invoked the dignity of women to justify the exclusion of such women. In contrast, while the few conflicts in schools received excessive media coverage, situations of “peaceful coexistence” among teachers and female students wearing headscarves went unreported by the main media (press, TV and radio<sup>35</sup>).

In short, most media focused on the civilization problem (through debates on “religion vs. secularism” or “Islam vs. West”), without addressing the real challenges of the debate, such as the specific problem caused by the presence of female students wearing headscarves in class and the consequences for students expelled from school.

### *The Instrumentalisation of Women’s Rights*

Many academic studies have been written about this controversial issue. Some authors, like Emmanuel Terray (2004) and Saïd Bouamama (2004), have interpreted it as the result of a specifically French form of Islamophobia. Feminists have expressed their fear that social mobil-

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<sup>35</sup> At this point, it is important to indicate that this law was not a feminist initiative (feminists had other priorities, although many let themselves be influenced in that sense) nor an initiative of male or female students or teachers who, in the immense majority of cases, did not consider the veil to be a problem before the campaign to promote the law (P. Tévanian, 2005).

isation would focus on racism rather than on male chauvinism, thus conferring the oppression of women, once again,<sup>36</sup> secondary importance.

I would especially draw attention to the theory presented by the female authors of the article in *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* because they try to overcome these fears (which are, nevertheless, very legitimate) by analysing the “interlinking” of both forms of oppression: sexist oppression; and racist oppression. Christine Delphy (2006) examined this interlinking, claiming that the feminist discourse on “women’s rights” was instrumentalised by the supporters of the law for racist purposes because although the law refers to “conspicuous religious signs in general,” in practice it affects a specific sector of the population: the Muslim community resident in France, formed mainly by immigrant men and women from Maghreb countries and Sub-Saharan Africa, former French colonies, as well as their children born in France.

Also, the strategy of addressing sexism present in the homes of “others”—in this case, Arabs, Muslims—has two implications: a clearly Islamophobic implication because this strategy helps consolidate belief in the existence of racial differences (as demonstrated by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas since 2000) and, more specifically, plays a key role in the construction of the violent and abusive “essence” of Muslims; and a sexist implication because it relativises and even conceals masculine domination in “our” home, as well as elements present in the entire patriarchal system.

The above-mentioned authors concluded that the (re)emergence of the social figure of “Islamic women” (silent, manipulated victims) in the debate on the use of

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<sup>36</sup> In reference to the marginalisation of feminist issues by left-wing movements that, during the sixties and seventies, eventually prioritised mobilisation against “class” oppression.

headscarves in state schools is neither the product of chance nor the reflection of a particular obsession of France. The social figure of “Muslim women” (rooted deeply in the history of power struggles between neighbouring civilizations) underpins a dual system of oppression: the system that classifies persons as inferior due to their “race”; and the system that condemns them as inferior for reasons of gender. These authors asked the following question: “Which elements would underpin one or several forms of feminism that refuse to choose between anti-sexism and anti-racism and oppose one more justifiably than the other?” (Natalie Benelli *et al.* (Eds.), 2006: 9).

Houria Bouteldja, a member of the feminist collective *Blédardes* and the movement of the *Indigènes de la République*, provides certain clues to answer this question. In an interview with Christelle Hamel and Christine Delpy in the same issue of the magazine *Nouvelles Questions Feministes* (2006: 122-135), she describes her career as a politically active feminist and anti-racist, emphasizing her experience of both sexism and racism, as well as the way in which this experience had influenced her feminism. She describes her feminism as “paradoxical” because she has to protect “Arab women” from real sexism in her community (and sexism on the part of French society) and, at the same time, defend “Arab men” from racism when they are accused of being sexist by nature. She supports a type of feminism encompassed within the emancipation movements that fought for independence and decolonisation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Western mass media tend to construct an image of Muslim women using a discourse dominated by the notions of passiveness and victimisation. The same media, albeit in a minority of cases, also

portray a seemingly positive image of “liberated Muslim women”, closely linked to their “Western-style clothes” and/or their economic success. This reductionist construction on the part of the mass media tends to erode the social, cultural and economic diversity of Muslim women. Many women of Muslim culture or faith, like Alima Boumediene (2007), emphatically reject this:

I, a woman of Muslim culture and/or faith, and many people like me refuse to be prisoners of either of these stereotypes. We are who we decide to be and not what the mass media want to us to be!

## *Islamophobia and Market Journalism*

The media representations studied promote a reductionist perception of Muslim women as victims of “the male chauvinistic violence of Islam” or Islamic fundamentalism. This vision—which is very widespread in Western societies—tends to hinder the acceptance of other more complex perceptions than would help us understand, for example, that refusal of the right to voluntarily wear headscarves may also be a manifestation of intolerance. These Orientalist representations also fuel prejudices such as considering that women are submissive simply because they wear an Islamic veil (when this really depends on their use of this garment because, as we have seen, this can be very diverse) or only recognising Muslim women who copy our culture or dress codes as valid intermediaries (thus hindering comprehension of this extremely complex cultural reality).

Journalists’ responsibility not to exacerbate these simplistic perceptions that hinder comprehension and intercultural coexistence acquires greater importance if we acknowledge that stereotypes regarding the discrimination of Arab-Muslim women is today one of the most effective



instrument for demonising their societies and also an extremely forceful instrument for legitimising culturalist theories such as those that claim that Islam and modernity are incompatible, or those that argue that Muslim immigrants, due to their religion, cannot “join” European societies. In order not to favour culturalist explanations of the discrimination of Muslim women, journalists should give more consideration to other (legal, educational, political and economic) aspects when reporting on the situation of these women. As Martin Muñoz concludes:

Why is it not reasonable to think that in Muslim societies, as has occurred in most European countries, social change and the deterioration of patriarchal structures is due more to democratisation, development and the possibility that these societies have to define themselves without having to be defined by the West? (2005: 214-215).

In spite of the foregoing, I am not suggesting that we should ignore these intolerable situations of tremendous injustice that exist in many of these countries. However, it is important to highlight the pernicious effect of only emphasizing, dramatising, almost always generalizing and failing to contextualise the catastrophic and negative aspects of the situation of these women, because the reality is multiple and diverse.

So many converging factors influence the construction of essentialist representations of Muslim women that this Islamophobic discourse cannot only be changed by ensuring journalists are responsible when reporting. In fact, these factors include not only interests and the journalistic ethics of news professionals, their ideology and their training on subjects such as Islam, the Arab world and immigration, but also dominant journalistic practices

such as available time, the news agenda, the prevalence of emotion over explanation, the preference for institutional sources of information, the political and economic interests of media companies, etc.<sup>37</sup> Structural factors closely linked to the globalisation of communications and its subsequent effects on information and on informative procedures are also extremely important.<sup>38</sup>

In short, structural factors are so complex that, as reported by Chiara Saez (2008: 4), the wide variety of discourses on the media system in general is less dependant on changes in traditional media discourse than on identifying the necessary conditions to ensure that the discourses of other social collectives have an equivalent presence in the public arena. Hence, the importance of supporting the access of immigrant women (and especially Muslim women) not only to the mass media but also to so-called Third Sector<sup>39</sup> media, and also of somehow counteracting the US monopoly on film distribution circuits and news agencies.

### *Islamophobia and Sexism*

Finally, I would like to highlight that the media discourse analysed in this study is inextricably linked to one of the most important forms of Islamophobia in Spain and France today, a discourse that is based on the imagination and construction of the social figure of the “Muslim woman.” In other words, to quote Ángeles Ramírez (2006), “neocolonial sexism” is the “best resource” available to fuel Islamophobia. This sexism is similar to what was known

<sup>37</sup> Each of these factors is examined in more detail in the paragraph “Hegemonic media: the (re)production of Orientalism,” pp. 338-367 of my doctoral thesis (see Navarro, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu (2000) and Manuel Castells (1997).

<sup>39</sup> These media, also referred to as community, free or alternative media, do not belong to either the commercial media sector or the public media sector.

as “colonial feminism” in the colonial period (19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) when the condition of colonised women was used to make colonised men primitive and, in short, confirm the basic idea that Muslim women were submissive and weak and that Muslim men were authoritarian and aggressive. Islamophobia today appears to still be based largely on the perception of the women of “other men” and is especially visible in the criticism of the situation of Muslim women who wear headscarves and who seem to be in need of salvation.

However, this particular racist discourse does not occur only in the West. According to a comparative analysis of Western and Eastern political and media discourses carried out by Laura Nader (2006: 9), the assessment of the intentionally favourable treatment reserved for women in the group to which they belong, is accompanied by a devalued interpretation of the way in which “other men” treat “their women.” Thus, while headscarves are seen in the West as a sign of the submissive nature of Muslim women, in Muslim countries, pornography, prostitution and lack of respect for women in the mass media are used by the heads of Muslim States to systematically criticise Western countries and their citizens. In both discourses, there is not a real concern for “the condition of women” but rather the will to defend a geopolitical space in which the West seeks to maintain its “position of superiority” and the Orient strives to challenge that position.

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