

Muslim Women Living in Brazil - Challenges for the Practice of a Culturally Sensitive Medicine

Bianca Stella Rodrigues¹, Fátima Bottcher-Luiz², Egberto Ribeiro Turato³, Joel Salles Giglio⁴ & Mohamed Habib⁵

Abstract

The aim of this study was to focus on the experiences of Muslim women in Western society, their perception of cultural and religious differences. To this end, the Qualitative Clinical Method was used. We applied semi-directed interviews to eight Muslim women living in Brazil. The construction of the sample utilized the snowball technique, closed, according to the criterion of the saturation data. The categories emerging from the interviews were analyzed and interpreted in light of the psychosocial theories. The interviewees were interested in promoting visibility to religious issues that permeate the life of Muslim people, pointing out the ignorance of the Western world on these issues. These women had pointed that they were discriminated against in many ways, especially regarding the use of the veil; they questioned the Western idea of subdued woman, presented as a counterpoint to the submission to the rigid standards of beauty and health that permeate the Western world. We also discussed general aspects of the Islamic culture, including sexuality, marriage, parenting, and relationships with the population of a country with different customs and traditions from their culture. The impact of the events of September 11 was evident on the lives of these women in the promotion of fear and social exclusion. We concluded that these women seek conciliation in their way of living, without denying their religion, in a world whose values are often diametrically opposed. Although, at the beginning of this study, we aimed at raising issues that concern Muslim women living in Brazil, at the end, the results suggest that we did not only talk about these women, but about most of those who are from a religious and ethnic minority in their countries.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim women, Qualitative studies, religious and ethnic minority, Brazil

¹ Dra, Clinical-Qualitative Research Laboratory (LPCQ), Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Email: biancastella@uol.com.br, Tel: +55 11 44110049

² PhD, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Clinical-Qualitative Research Laboratory (LPCQ), Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Email: luigi@unicamp.br

³ PhD, Department of medical psychology and psychiatry, Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Email: pesq.qualitativa@uol.com.br

⁴ PhD, Department of medical psychology and psychiatry, Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Email: giglioj@uol.com.br

⁵ PhD, Institute of Biology, State University of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Email: habib@reitoria.unicamp.br

Introduction

Islam arose in the year 622 A.D. and was the last of the three great monotheistic traditions to be consolidated. Originated from the Arabia, Islam spread to various parts of the world and the cultural and social factors of the various societies affected the expression of the religion, being today concentrated in Asia and northern Africa. Therefore, the Muslim term refers to the followers of Islam that aggregates participants of various ethnic groups and geographic locations. Thus, Islam would correspond to the nation of diffuse devotees around the world, regardless of their geographical origin, but united by religion and by the same principles, dictated by the scriptures of their holy book, the Koran.

Globally, it is estimated that there are 1.97 billion Muslims, with an average growth rate of around 1.84% per year, and forecasts that says that they will account for 26% of world population by 2030 (Pew Research Center, 2011). In Brazil, extra official data recognizes a Muslim population of approximately 1 million people. This number includes Arab immigrants, their descendants and converts to Islam, who makes up about 10,000 people. Within a population of over 170 million (www.islamfortoday.com/brazil.htm) Islam devotees in Brazil are only 1% of the total and, therefore, constitutes a typical ethnic minority.

Despite the growth in numbers, Islam is considered by Westerners as a monolithic society, in which women occupy a secondary position in their society. This negative stereotyped view is externalized not only in the sphere of social research, but also in the field of health research and in the scientific literature, where Westerners are fixated on questions about personal aspirations and democracy, while Islamists tend to develop their analysis in light of the Koran; in short, there would be two paradigms in eternal conflict, with dire prospects of reconciliation.

As emphasized by Van Ryn (2002) the scientific rationality of health professionals does not relieve them of the cultural influences of the society where they live. In the doctor-patient relationship, the manifestations of strangeness can occur both in the context of chronic, degenerative, and infectious diseases, as well as in addressing the ethnic minorities (Tsang, 2001). As the quality of life and adherence to treatment are intimately related to the world view, health professionals' world view can reproduce cultural prejudices and feed disparities both in access to health care and its effectiveness (Foucault, 1973; Laird *et al.*, 2007).

In this context, gender issues, especially those relating to Muslims, have been the subject of debates in the Western social-political scene. Despite its importance, little is known about the reality of Muslim women, their role in communities, and how they participate (or not) in the perpetuation of the precepts imposed by their religion.

Given the socio-cultural diversity that intervenes in the interests of the female population and considering the Westerners' lack of knowledge about Islam, the aim of this study was to understand the universe of a group of Muslim women living in Brazil, focusing on their experiences in the Brazilian society, their perception of cultural differences, and resolution of personal conflicts. This study is part of the results of a research on the subject.

It is important to emphasize that we sought to retain ourselves to the reports and omit, purposely, value judgments. Our main role was to be rapporteurs and transmitters of the speech practiced by the women in question.

Subjects and Methods

The project of this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution and the participants signed an informed consent form for the data collection and to record the interviews.

The qualitative method was used. We conducted oral interviews with open questions to eight Muslim women living in Brazil and who declared themselves Muslim. Data were collected from the narrative of participants, where women were encouraged to report their memories and experiences in Brazil, as a western-world country.

The construction of the sample was based on the snowball technique (the interviewee suggests another person among their acquaintances), closed, according to the criterion of saturation of the information, when the more recent data show, under the assessment of the researcher, a certain redundancy in relation to the previous one (Fontanella, 2008).

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into scanned text document.

The speeches were abridged in their multiple sentences, and these sentences were submitted to a thematic analysis of the content. The emergent categories were introduced and at a later stage were made valid by the integrating pairs of the Clinical-Qualitative Research Laboratory from the Faculty of Medical Sciences.

The results were shown in a descriptive form starting from inferences, interpretations and illustrative citations of the speeches, prioritizing the psychosocial relation where the emotional aspects were explained and interpreted under the social approach.

Results

Characterization of the Sample and Life Histories of Participants

The following are elements of the life story of the participants who were considered relevant to the understanding of this study. To preserve anonymity, we opted for the mention of fictitious names, chosen by the interviewees themselves.

- **Zaihra** - 24 years old, works in an Islamic school and attends college; she was engaged at the time of interview, no children. Daughter of Brazilian evangelicals, Zaihra was born in Brazil. She attended an evangelical church, when she began volunteering painting with children in a mosque, where she began to study the Islamic religion. She converted to Islam four years ago. She met her fellow Muslim through mutual friends in the workplace. According to Shia custom, the couple made a one-year contract, renewed twice, in which the man stands as a tutor and responsible in taking care and giving care to women during the term of the contract. She uses the hijab and a cover over the Western dress.

- **Paula** - 28 years old, college degree, works in an Islam school; married for 4 years, two children. Daughter of a Brazilian Catholic mother and a Lebanese Muslim father, Paula was born in Brazil. She was raised in the Muslim religion and she says that she, at age nine, made her own choice of religion. She met her husband in a Muslim community in Brazil. In six months, they got engaged and married. She only uses the hijab.

- **Fátima** - 28 years old, teaching degree, teacher at an Islamic school; married for 8 years, 4 children. Daughter of Lebanese Muslims, Fatima was born in Brazil and considers herself as Muslim at birth. She met her Lebanese husband through a common cousin, who made presentations via Internet. The candidate came to Brazil, and, in three months, the couple became engaged and married. Later they went to Lebanon, where they lived for four years, but then returned to Brazil. They had four children; two born in Lebanon and two in Brazil. She uses the veil (hijab) over her head and a cover over the Western dress.

- **Isabel** - 42 years old, lawyer; married for 16 years, no children by choice of the couple. Daughter of a Christian mother and a Palestinian Muslim father, Isabel was born in Brazil. She was raised in the two religions because there was no mosque where she lived and her father felt good that she had Christian teachings. She attended the Mass, and she was baptized and educated in Christian schools. With fifteen years old, she saw the prayer closely, liked it, and got converted to Islam. She met her husband, who was her relative, when she was 24 years old, during a travel to Palestine, and she stresses that their marriage was not arranged. She does not use the hijab or any typical Muslim dress.

- **Sonia** - 45 years old, university professor; married for 8 years, no children. Daughter of Lebanese Muslims, Sonia was born in Brazil and considers herself as Muslim at birth. In college, she belonged to the Brazilian student political movements and claims to have turned away from religion in this period. Dated a non-Muslim man and, after 10 years, married him, with parental consent. Sonia never used the hijab or any typical Muslim dress.

- **Julia** - 45 years old, college degree, works with marketing; divorced for 20 years, has a son. Daughter of a Brazilian Catholic mother and a Palestinian Muslim father, Julia was born in Brazil. The parents separated when she was 5. The father's origin was kept secret until Julia was 14 years old. She was raised a Catholic and converted to Islam at age 24. She was married to a Brazilian, non-Muslim, but they broke up four years after the wedding. She does not use the hijab or any typical Muslim dress.

- **Nina** - 62 years old, housewife, high school degree; a widow for two months, four children and eight grandchildren.

Daughter of Lebanese Muslims, Nina was born in Lebanon and came to Brazil only after marriage. She considers herself as Muslim at birth. She met her husband at age 17 while working on a basic level school as a teacher. The uncle of the candidate mediated the contact between the families, and, three months later, they married. In Brazil, she was president of a charitable association of women. At the time of the interview, she was a widow for two months and wore a black cloak, from head to foot, in mourning.

- **Miriam** - 69 years old, primary school degree, housewife; married for 49 years, four children and seven grandchildren. Daughter of Indian Muslims, she was born and raised in South Africa. She is Muslim from birth and she studied Arabic at a "madrasa" Muslim school (schools connected to mosques in countries where Muslim communities are communitarian, whose purpose is to teach Arabic and the Islamic religion). The husband, of African origin, worked in Brazil and went to South Africa to seek a wife. She was chosen among the sisters, as she had a more compatible age. They married and came to Brazil. She does not use the hijab or any typical Muslim dress.

Emerging Categories

According to Said (1978), a person who researches and writes about the East is, as a rule, is an Orientalist; a practitioner of what he called *Orientalism*, with its typical manifestations of colonization and power. As a result, the East does not present itself as free theme for thought and action, but as a confusing network of information and permeated by obscure interests that always surround the political issues.

Resemble the above considerations, the authors were surprising with some aspects at the moment of interview. So, when asked about their lifestyle and their memories as Muslims living in Brazil, women responded as members of their community. No responses were received from subjective nature, at least for a long time of the interviews. Considering this context, the first six categories were delineated as below:

1. Be Muslim, Become Muslim - Religion as First Condition

According to the interviewees, to be born in an Islamic family means to be Muslim unconditionally, from birth, without cogitations about a possible choice, according to the statements below:

"... When you're a child of Muslims, you're Muslim. It isn't like your religion, where, often, the father is Catholic and the son decides for another religion ... you don't choose" (Fátima).

"... I was born in an Islamic family, so I'm automatically a Muslim, since I was born". (Sonia)

"... the Muslim NEVER changes religion. The Muslim's faith is very strong, it doesn't change". (Miriam)

For the Islamic religion, everyone is born Muslim. Thus, the converts to Islam would be simply returning to their roots, hence the use of the term "reversion" to a natural condition of divine creature, instead of the term "conversion":

"... reversion is thus: we are born as a Muslim, a creature of God, and God is one ... I was a Christian, always believed in God ... I also believed that Christ was God, but then, when I met Islam, I reverted to Islam, reverted to my original form of his creature, unique ..." (Zaihra).

"In reality they aren't converting, they are returning to their origin ... as they were born ... born Muslims ..." (Nina).

Faith, as the report of the women interviewed, presents itself as a primary condition, from which stems the others, even in cases of reversal. Thus, identity is built upon an initial condition.

"... Many people do wrong things and then want to find the right path; we are already on the right path, we did not make a mistake." (Fátima).

2. Islam as a Way of Life - Cultural Diversity in People Unified by Faith

The problem of succession after the death of the Prophet Muhammad originated two great spiritual families within Islam: the Sunni and the Shia. Thus the pluralism lesson was early learned in Islam. Following this same line, Islam knows another kind of pluralism: The religious message across the different socio-cultural realities that Islam is conquering on its way from the Arabian Peninsula to various regions of the planet. The Muslim religion has adapted itself to different socio-cultural environments where it is spread: sometimes it is able to dominate, and sometimes, instead, it absorbs traces of this or that culture far from the Arabic trunk (Pace, 2005).

The religious basis of Islam is unified and maintained in the Koran and Hadith*, which keep the five pillars of practice: 1. the Muslim profession of faith (*Shahad*); 2. the set of prayers made five times a day (*Salat*); 3. financial or material help to the needy (*Zakat*); 4. the practice of fasting between dawn and sunset, during the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*); 5. pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a person's lifetime, provided that there are physical and financial conditions for it (*Hajj*).

Guided by these principles, the interviewees commented on the practice of their daily lifestyle:

"... Islam's a lifestyle ... from the moment that you stick to it, you begin to see with other eyes everything that you'll do ..." (Zaihra).

*Hadith or Sunnah, in Islamic terminology, means the words, habits, and teachings of the prophet. They are the second source in which the teachings of Islam are drawn.

"... you end up getting some habits that influence your life. Every religion should influence life. It's your life itself ... Islamic principles address all matters of human life" (Paula).

"... prayers, fasting ... all this is very important, makes you different. You believe. God is Allah ... at the age of seven, you go to the Madrasa, where you learn religion ... we weren't born Arab, then we learn Arabic ... decorate the Sura... do the Salat ..." (Miriam)

"... each country has its own customs, traditions ... our food's different ... a Muslim in India's different from Saudi Arabia, right? The Koran's the same. Because The obligation is the same. But the culture, the custom, it's different." (Miriam).

3. Being Muslim in Brazil - Forms of Coexistence

In our survey, the respondents seek a different way to reconcile these differences.

They said it is essential to adapt to local ways of being and living.

"Life in a Muslim country's different because it's the one you're following; it's what most people. Here you're swimming against the current ... so I wouldn't swim against the current; it would deeply bother me; I would never wear a veil in Brazil. It would deeply bother me to enter the Forum and turn into the center of attention" (Isabel).

It was observed, through the words of these women, the commitment to conciliatory attitudes, with no room for confrontation, but for constant persistence. Without direct confrontation, but insidious, as one participant of the study said:

"But the time came that I had been dating for ten years ... there wasn't a time when I broke with them ... and they never said 'you marry him and you won't be our daughter'; it never happened ... it was a situation like 'Constant dripping wears away the stone' to reconcile the two things over the years was a construction ... it had painful moments, but I managed to make this transition not a traumatic one" (Sonia).

On the other hand, some interviewees understand their religious heritage as the guide to their conduct, as their "social brake":

"... Islam has had a very strong influence in my life because of the rule, the regulation, that organized stuff... the stiffness in relation to the guiding principle ... like you're on a rail, a train, and you won't go off track, because if you go off-track the train derails... you have this clear..." (Julia).

"... to me, religion's the brake; it's my social brake..." (Isabel).

It was further observed that the new generations of Brazilians brought to light some patterns of behavior that caused surprise to these women.

"For me it was easier because 25, 30 years ago, these customs still existed between the Brazilian non-Muslim families, but today I don't think that it still exists ... It was easier for a Muslim woman, to live in a Brazilian society in which there was also stricter rules. The problem's that the rules have changed a lot in 20 years." (Isabel).

"And it's also complicated because in a society, where there is freedom, you can easily confuse it with libertinism. You have behaviors in a society like ours that are completely disrespectful." (Julia).

Rodrigues *et al.* (2011) hypothesizes that it already exists, as she calls it, a "loosening" of the religious precepts of the community of Muslims living in Brazil. "Loosening", says the author, not in the sense of a distance, but one of a reconfiguration, especially from the younger generation.

4. The Use of the Veil – "Woman is Like a Diamond"

Fostered by the media and today forbidden in some countries, the veil became, for the West, the representative mark of the Muslim woman and a symbol of her submission (Silva, 2008; Saroglou, 2009).

Probably because of this, although the script of questions did not have a specific question about the use of the veil, all interviewees talked about it, noting that its use is a voluntary one and unrelated to the subservience to Islam men:

".. My mother is a typical Muslim woman who follows all the customs ... She made the choice to put the veil... everyone thinks that the Muslim woman puts the veil because she was forced, imposed by someone, that she's being suppressed. This is not true, it is really not true ..." (Sonia).

"... I know few cases that the family has asked, but I do not believe that a woman submits herself in fact, to the wishes of her family" (Isabel).

According to the interviews, the veil is associated with an inner conviction, to a belief that can be publicly expressed. The option to use the veil represents a differentiation and the enhancement of their feminine condition:

"... woman's like a diamond" You have a diamond, will you put it there, will you expose it in the street?" (Fátima)

"... The veil, it encompasses everything; when you wear the scarf, you seem to have more faith It covers what she has as precious, all her modesty. This is what the veil is for me" (Zaihra).

In their article, Ternikar (2009) and Rodrigues *et al.* (2011) expand the understanding of the concept of modesty in the Islamic frame of reference. The veil, for Muslims, represents the submission to their only God, and, also, it represents the modesty of devotees before God and his people.

The custom of covering the head with veils, hats, or variations of these, is a ritual part of the three great monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). In religions with strong patriarchal tradition, the women covering of the body and/or face, which has more recently shown a tendency to disuse in the Western world.

"All religions allow the woman to wear the veil. The best example, Saint Mary ... Sorry, you use it this way because no one advises you ... Why the Catholic nuns can use it, and not others? Are they better than the others? (Nina).

It is interesting to note that, in countries with strong Muslim tradition, such as Afghanistan, women continued to wear their burqas (full coverage of the body, from head to toe, with only a network of fibers around the eyes, from which a woman observes the outside world), even after the departure of the Taliban. Abu-lughab (2002), called the burqa as "mobile homes", as it allows women to leave the private space of home and family and move through public spaces where strangers mingle.

5. Sexuality, Sexual Morality, and Marriage

Islam, on one hand, is against fornication before marriage and against adultery, blocking all roads leading to it.

On the other hand, it is against the suppression of sex, thus encouraging the marriage, even among its priests (Al-Karadhawi, 1974).

"The Islamic sexual morality is much stricter. For us, marriage is the benchmark from which sex is free... what changes is how to live. The Muslim has a very strict sexual culture; a culture that preaches virginity before marriage" (Isabel).

Lavau (2005) states that, for many women, the imposition of virginity before marriage is not linked only to the parents' speech, but it can also be claimed by the young themselves. "For us, it is so logical that the question never arises". According to the author, Muslim women do not talk about sexuality.

However, there seems to be a clear demarcation that oscillates between two extremes, the before and after marriage. A paradox between "everything is prohibited" to "everything is permitted". It was not possible to exactly ascertain, nor measure the degree of permissiveness agreed by couples or pointed out in the circle of friends. However, it was clear the supposed freedom of women after marriage, similar to what occurs in many Western homes, where marriage is still the possibility of freedom from the parents' conspicuous look over the daughter.

"... Muslim women, Arab women in particular, have a much better resolved sexuality, much more satisfied. We freely talk about sex. The old teaches sexual positions. As they exchange these ideas, they make jokes, something that Brazilian women still can't do." (Isabel).

"After the marriage, it is normal. The woman has to be a doll. For the husband, she does it all ... Muslim woman uses it all covered, she has to be a doll, perfumed, smelling nice for her own husband. Between woman and her husband, they can do whatever they want. What you want to do ... everything, everything, everything. As he likes, as she likes. We can please each other. Everything". (Nina).

The vision above is not confirmed by the literature (Merghati and Samani, 2008), once there are prohibitions against anal intercourse as well as intercourse during menstruation.

The man is allowed to see the woman whom he intends to propose marriage before taking the next steps.

On the other hand, they can not take this permission to the point that they leave together, go to the movies, shopping, etc., without being accompanied by one of her relatives (Al-Kardawy, 1974).

"... there is no dating before marriage, like here.. How do we do it? The family (of the candidate) meets my family ... they send a proposal of marriage ... Then, it depends on the woman, whether she accepts it or not ... I went there, I went with the tea, as shown in the soap opera ... Then he saw me and liked it ... (laughs) I want to marry. That's it. Without knowing..." (Miriam).

On the other hand, it is very common marriage between relatives or well-known families. Those involved seem to peacefully accept the negotiation of proposals and the prioritization of family interests in the choice (economic situation, priority for the older daughters, mediation by older relatives). There was no evidence of clashes in that direction. However, a difficult battle can settle when the applicant is not a Muslim, and, then, the impasse sets in and the relationships within the family may suffer significant shocks.

"... he came from Lebanon to Brazil, and in three months we got engaged and married. It was like this, very quick" (Fátima).

"They wanted. They chose to marry Muslims." (Nina)

Men are allowed to marry women from the People of the Book (Christians and Jews), while women are forbidden. Islam believes that there are sustainable reasons for this difference but it does not explain the reasons for such tolerance (Al-Kardawy, 1974).

"I joke with my husband. I say so: In this regard, I am Brazilian (laughter). I do not accept it. It is in the religion, but I, I don't know, I wouldn't accept ... Do you think he might be able to enjoy all alike?" (Fátima).

The Koran accepts the man to marry more than one wife – "And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four. But if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess.

This is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course." (sura *IV, verse 3*). In a footnote, the translator explains that the Arab people, similarly to other ethnic groups, for centuries embraced polygamy, and that this verse refers to the fear that tutors would marry orphaned girls. A fact very much present in the Arabian Peninsula, in pre-Islamic times. Islam, according to him, was the first religion that limited the number of wives, by imposing three conditions to the man: to not exceed the number of four wives, to not be unfair to any of them, and to be able to support them equally.

6. Education of Children

Both in Christian communities, as in Islam, children have great social value, symbolically transforming the identities of women. As mothers, they have the legitimacy to act in the public sphere on their behalf and on behalf of other mothers (Oh, 2010). Truzzi (2008) states that the Muslim woman has as first obligation the education of their children. This is the focus of constant concern of many Muslim families.

"Here, the children learn to pray with their mother. I'm always praying. My kids have seen me praying. It's some help. Fasting ... Then, they see. We read the Koran. The way of life...." (Miriam).

"In a community such as the Pakistan or African ones, the child is part of the whole community, of the process, however repressive it is this community. The relationship of the community in an Islamic culture or a tribal culture is different from our Western relationship. The children are not dumped. With all the poverty, with all the problems they face..." (Julia).

According to S., the creation of mosques as a place of living eased the fears of parents in the education of children, regarding the loss of Islam references. "... thirty years ago, I think the situation was a little different here in Brazil ... immigrants felt much pressure to keep the traditions. It was very strong; there was much talk that our children could not lose themselves... I mean, that they do not assimilate and do not absorb our religion and our culture ... So the pressure was greatly decreased because there are places for interaction ... They began to see that they could live in Brazil without losing their traditions. That great fear they had forty, fifty years ago, I think it was mitigated over the last decades ..." (Sonia).

7. Academic and Financial Status versus Autonomy

Some participants of the study said they got concessions as to the demands of the family thanks to their financial independence. At this point, there is a concession to the feminine condition due to an economic power or academic intellectual status, which, in all respects, does not differ from any Western standard, with its traditionally pragmatic view.

"The fact that I did masters, then doctorate ... it ended up opening other doors: 'Never mind that she does not wear the veil... does not pray five times a day ... she is a doctor!'" (Sonia).

"Having income is what really changes a woman's life, in my opinion, especially the Muslim woman ... it's interesting because, from the moment you start to have economic independence, one can no longer impose such demands" (Isabel).

Muslim women in France share the same feeling. According to Lavau (2005), the fact that they have a higher education emerges them in another culture, with other values. Additionally, financial independence leads them to integrate other standards, in terms of independence.

"... Girls from here (Brazil) are independent. They earn their own money, right? If it does not work, they go on and get separated...." (Miriam).

Cherif (2010) suggests that the influence of Islamic culture is not a sufficient factor to justify the lack of progress of women in Muslim countries; he cites the progress of Morocco and Tunisia on these issues, opposed to Jordan.

8 - About the Doctor-Patient Relationship

In our review of the international literature about the Muslim women's health, we found out that behaviors, which in our culture are representative of respect and consideration, symbolize almost the opposite to Muslims (Rodrigues et al. 2011).

The most striking and frequently mentioned examples in the literature were about the "eye contact" effect and handshaking between people of the opposite sex, what are considered disrespectful by Muslims. Additionally, the service performed by male workers was another factor that hindered the relationship between doctor and patient, since it could cause embarrassment, anxiety and even discontinuance of the demand for health services, in some situations (Rodrigues et al. 2011).

Differently to what has been reported in the scholarly literature, our interviewees referred themselves to the need for caution with the body, and they emphasized that issues relating to the professional as something apart from other relationships in general. In that sense, although they felt themselves embarrassed when they were examined by doctors, this fact did not prevent them from seeking care and from submitting themselves to medical examination. These points will be explored again in a paper we are writing; from this draft we reproduce some statements below:

"...I'm the kind of woman that heart, blood, goes to male doctor. I don't extend my hand to greet him, a man. But if he wants to see my arm, he can do so, see here (she points to her heart), he can do that, because it is his work to see me here ... even to earn his daily bread, he sees me here (she points to her genital area). He will see. It's his work in here. It isn't to hug or kiss." (Nina)

For women who wore the veil, the general perception was that there existed a greater respect when they were being examined by male doctors; according to the testimony of Paula:

"... they ask if they can lift the veil a bit, always very politely... they are more careful."

On the other hand, Zhaira refers to a different panorama, for she felt herself discriminated by the healthcare professional; according to her statement:

"...but the way he said: 'why do you wear it?', as if I were wearing an old rag. As if I were a crazy lady walking down the street, who found a piece of cloth, and put it on her head, and walked away. It's not like that. He treated me as if I were a thing, you know? I did not like it."

From that testimony, we can think on some questions regarding future studies: does the fact of Zhaira being a convert interferes in this perception? Would it be natural for someone, who does not descend from Muslims, who had not been educated in the Muslim religion, to follow and to accept its precepts? Would it be natural to wear the veil and to cover oneself entirely in a country where such clothing is not the standard? This difficulty, or this strangeness, would it come from others or from herself?

In their studies about the conversion to Islam (Roald, 2012) four phases of the conversion process were identified: the “initial phase”, which occurs just after the conversion, moved by fanaticism and by certain arrogance; the “second phase”, which corresponds to the feeling of disappointment with the new group, followed by a phase of acceptance of the faithful people as ordinary ones, having virtues and deficiencies. Finally, the “fourth phase” occurs when the convert assumes a personal and private attitude with regard to their new religion. On this framework, which would be the real meaning of the use of female clothing for Zhaira?

Finally, our interviewees highlighted the issues related to the practice of religious rituals, namely the *sawm*, which happens during the month of Ramadan, when Muslims must fast from dawn to sunset. However, similarly to other religions, devotees are released from fulfilling the practices if they have health problems, advanced age or even if they are in the process of long trips or similar impediments (Al-Karadhawi 1974).

9. Signs of Discrimination Aggravated After September 11

The observed racial diversity in Brazilian ethnic background seems to have significantly raised the level of tolerance of the community, which, usually, coexists peacefully with the most varied ethnic and religious groups. Nevertheless, there is a diffuse discrimination, regardless of sex and socioeconomic status, identified almost exclusively by the segregated, as the interviewees pointed out:

“... I decided to use the veil, and my father talked to the priest at the school, which didn't accept it. The priest unfortunately ... said, 'Go follow your religion in your country.'” ... (Fátima) (Fátima's father, after this episode, sold his business and his home and went to live with his children in Lebanon, only returning years later).

"... when I was doing the teaching degree, people asked me if I had hair, if I had lice. Some people asked if a woman gets beaten by her husband, if she can work." (Fatima).

" ... Then they would come: 'look you say hamele, hamele, hamele, (smiles).' Then I would said: 'no, I'm Brazilian, I don't speak Arabic, I only know a little, I'm learning'. 'Oh, nice! Can you write?'" (Zaihra).

One day we went to sleep and, when we awoke, the world had changed. A bearded man was not only a man with a beard; a pair of scissors in the hand luggage was no longer just a pair of scissors; a war in a country far away was no longer only interesting to them. September 11, a milestone in the world history.

Everything that a person reads and writes about the East and West relationship is guided by the "before" and "after" September 11. The Islamophobia (a term that first emerged in Britain to describe an intense fear or an aversion to Muslim people (Runnymede, 1997) is intensified after this date (Barkdull *et al.*, 2011).

Women, who are especially visible because of the use of the hijab as belonging to the Islamic religion, were victims of indiscriminate physical and verbal attacks in Europe, after September 11. Many women sought support to ask if it was Islamically permissible to remove their hijabs for fear of these attacks (Ahmad, 2006).

"Once I went to a slum as volunteer. There was a guy who wanted to throw me in the trash, and there was another that said 'a saint !!!'... It was at the time of 09.11. Then they started to say 'Bin Laden's wife, throw a stone at her, gotta go to the trash bin.' I was with a group of people there, and they talked and all was fine. (Paula).

It's great the influence of the media in perpetuating stereotypes, such as the threat of cultural differences, the extremism of the Muslim people, and the impact on those who feel directly targeted. Muslims in Western report as the media has influenced their lives, fueling hostility, hatred, and resentment among non-Muslims (Ahmad, 2006; Khiabany & Williamson, 2008; Barkdull *et al.* 2011).

"... after September 11, there was discrimination ... there is a movement fostered by the media that discriminates against Muslims, even in Brazil." (Sonia).

10. Discrimination in the Muslim-Majority Countries

Comparing the Brazilian society with others where she lived, J. was surprised at the problems faced in countries with a significant number of Muslims, in which factions played a key role in social relations, as she reports below:

"I would say I had more trouble in Lebanon because I was Muslim than in Brazil. When I was in Beirut, I couldn't say I was Muslim on the Catholic side. I had to say I was Catholic. And when was at the Muslim side, if I was on the Shia side, I had to say I was Shia Muslim. I couldn't say I was Sunni Muslim. And when I was with the Maronites, I had to say I was Maronite; I couldn't say I was Sunni. I saw this much stronger in the Middle East itself" (Isabel).

11. The Other Side - The Muslims Vision

Among the most common stereotypes, it was evident the condition of excessive permissiveness of the Brazilians, in relation to the Muslims strict standards of conduct:

"... My father, for example, was an extremely negligent person with his family. Which the Arabs aren't. It is not the Arabic nature to be negligent ... He came here and found promiscuity, or he was also very promiscuous, irresponsible." (Julia).

"... I want them to remember me as a good student, a good lawyer, and not as the girl that uses short skirt. And perhaps this prejudice has to do with my Arabic origin" (Isabel).

12. The West Burqa – The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads

Sireen, Muslim woman living in the U.S., says that the veil protects her from the worry about physical beauty. She says she feels free from much of the pressure exerted by the dictatorship of beauty; suffering that other young Americans have to endure (Gehrke-White 2006),

"... Both are oppressions: the burqa of the Taliban and France banning girls from wearing a veil; one forces, the other prohibits.

Both are oppressive ... if I want to be wrapped, if I want to wear a low neckline, that's my problem. I'm the one who has to know what I would like to wear." (Julia).

".. in Brazil, there's this very strong issue of aesthetics. In the Western world, there's the issue of aesthetics. I think it's making these people feel pressured ... I don't know to what extent the man, by the dictatorship of aesthetics, would submit himself to all that the woman submits herself, up to risking his life. Would a man do a formaldehyde treatment just to get his hair straight?" (Isabel).

"What society is this that standardizes all of us as merchandise? This standardized woman. This perfect lady, housewife, and at the same time she has to be something else. This woman, is she really free? Independent? Who is the submissive one in this story? Who is submitting to what? Is the one that is wrapped in a burqa over there in Afghanistan; is the woman that puts the Islamic veil, meets all Islamic precepts? Or is it us that are submitting to the director, professionally well-succeed, and everything else, these pressures, these patterns of behavior, morality, way to be?" (Julia).

Interesting to note that, just as Western women feel more fulfilled, due to the feminist movements, the "beauty myth" arises, which involves an idealization of the female body, perhaps the most striking feature of this century, allowing the idealization of a shape and its performance from the available technology. When feminism came to value women, a contrary ideology became urgent and necessary to continue to devalue them. A new imperative of consumption and beauty based on weight, age, sexual attractiveness, replaced those who could no longer influence the newly liberated women. These come to be obsessed with beauty, as, in earlier times, they were with household chores (Wolf, 1992).

A study about body image representations of African-American Black Muslim women shows that religion is a factor that influences their body image. This study suggests that women may be more tolerant with an overweight person because they believe that people should not be judged by their personal appearance but based on other attributes, such as spirituality. They conclude that body image is not universal and may vary among different cultural, and socioeconomic religious groups (Odoms-Young, 2008).

“...the women from there, not the women from here – they have a degree of acceptance of their bodies at least 10 times bigger than any Brazilian woman...” (Isabel).

Conclusion

Some aspects that have emerged in this study deserve to be highlighted. When they were invited for possible participation, all respondents, even at the beginning or during the interview, mentioned the satisfaction in being able to talk a little about the Muslim woman. These women felt misinterpreted, and that took shape during the interview, when they talked about religious precepts of Islam and the issues they face daily. It seems to us that they try, at all times, to demystify the stereotypical notion of submission and lack of human rights that affect them, in the eyes of the West. They do not deny the differences in the way of life and how they see the world, but they neither deny their religion. They reinforced that a reconciliation is possible, to maintain their religious precepts, even in a world whose values are often diametrically opposed.

The interviewees also pointed us to important aspects of Western culture today, such as over exploitation of the physical aspects or the “beauty myth”, as it is called. Is this a new form to repress the freedom gained by Western women? They asked us: “Who wears the burqa?” or “Who is the one that needs to hide?”.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that, at the beginning of this study, we aimed at discovering the experiences of Muslim women living in Brazil. By its end, we verified that we talked not only about these women, but most of those who are from a religious and ethnic minority in their countries. Maybe, the greatest contribution of our research has been the possibility of giving voice to these women and provoking the reflection that, somehow, we all “carry our burqas”.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the women who participated in the study and Moema Sanchez by the revision of the English language.

References

- Abu-Lughab, L. (2002). Do Muslim Really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3),783-790.
- Ahmad, F. (2006). British Muslim Perceptions and Opinions on News Coverage of September 11. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(6), 961-982.
- Al-Karadhawi, Y. (1974). *The prohibited and the unprohibited in Islam* (published in Arabic Language). Cairo, Egypt: Ettessam.
- Barkdull, C., & Khaja K., & Queiro-Tajalli, I., & Swart, A., & Cunningham, D., & Dennis, S. (2011). Experiences of muslim in four Western countries post-9/11. *Affilia*, 26,139-153.
- Cherif, F., M. (2010). Culture, rights, and norms: Women's rights reform in Muslim countries. *The Journal of Politics*, 72, 1144-1160.
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gehrke-White, D, (2006). *The face behind the veil*. NY, USA: Kensington.
- Khiabany, G., & Williamson M. (2011). Veiled bodies □□ naked racism: culture, politics and race in the Sun. *Race & Class*, 50(2), 69–88.
- Laird, LD., de Marrais, J., Barnes, LL. (2007). Portraying Islam and Muslims in MEDLINE: A content analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*, 65, 2425–2439.
- Lavau, J.M. (2005). Sexualidade e religião: o caso das mulheres muçulmanas na França. *Estudos Feministas*, 13, 377-386
- Merghati, ST., Samani, RO. (2008). Islamic ideas about sexual relations. Reprod Biomed Online, 17(1), 54.
- Nash, H. (2002). Translation of the meaning of the Noble Koran to Portuguese language. Medina, Arabia Saudita: King Fadh complex's printing-press.
- Odoms-Young, A. (2008). Factors that influence body image representations of Black Muslim women. *Social Science & Medicine*, 66, 2573-2584. possibilities. *Journal of religious ethics*, 38(4), 638-653.
- Pace, E. (2005). *Sociologia do Islã*. Petrópolis: Vozes
- Rodrigues, BS., Bottcher-Luiz, F., Giglio, JS., Habib, M. (2011). Approaches to Muslim Women's Health Care: implications for the development of culturally-sensitive medicine. *The International Journal of Person Centered Medicine*, 1(2), 11-18.
- Roald, SA. (2012) the conversion process stages: new Muslim in the twenty-first century. *Islam and Christian Muslim*. 23(3),347-362
- Runnymede, T. (1997). *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*. London: Author.
- Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Saroglou, V., & Lamkadem B., & Van Pachterbekea, M., & Buxanta, C., (2009). Host society's dislike of the islamic viel: The role of subtle prejudice, values, and religion. *Internacional Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(5): 419-428.
- Silva, M., C. (2008). As mulheres, os outros e as mulheres dos outros: feminismo, academia e Islão. *Cadernos Pagu*, 30, 136-159.
- Tsang, A. K. (2001). Representation of ethnic identity in North American social work literature: A dossier of the Chinesepeople. *Social Work*, 46(3), 229–243.
- Ternikar, F. (2009). Hijab and Abrahamic traditions: a comparative analysis of the Muslim veil. *Sociology Compass*, 3(5), 754-763.

- Turato, E.R. (2003). Tratado da metodologia da pesquisa clínico-qualitativa. Petrópolis, RJ:Vozes.
- Truzzi, O., (2008) Sociabilidades e valores: um olhar sobre a família árabe muçulmana em São Paulo. *Dados*, 51(3), 37-74.
- Van Ryn, M. (2002). Research on the provider contribution to race-ethnicity disparities in medical care. *Medical care*, 40(1),140-151.
- Wolf, N. (1992). *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. New York, USA: Harpercollins.
- Pew Research Center, (2011). "Muslim-Majority Countries". *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*. <http://pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-muslim-majority.aspx>. Accessed December 22 2011.
- www.islamfortoday.com/brazil.htm Accessed January 05 2012.