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Vintges, K.

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Women and Resistance to Radicalisation

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Citation for published version (APA):

Vintges, K. (2017). Moroccan-Dutch Women's Multiple Voices: Introduction. In F. Sadiqi, & H. Reifeld (Eds.), *Women and Resistance to Radicalisation* (pp. 155-159). Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_51053-1522-3-30.pdf?171212132412

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Moroccan-Dutch Women's Multiple Voices: Introduction

Karen Vintges

ABSTRACT

Sociological research shows how European Muslims are affected by an increasingly hostile social climate, experiencing, among other things, a different treatment by the police and discriminatory practices in relation to housing, employment, and education. The Dutch government counters these negative developments with an equal rights discourse and by equally applying neoliberal 'activation' techniques: the population is increasingly regulated as a set of 'entrepreneurial selves', i.e. as persons who have to manage themselves and who are responsible for their own success or failure. Research shows the various ways in which Moroccan-Dutch women and girls respond to this dominant neoliberal frame of self and society.

[What are we talking about if we refer to Moroccan-Dutch people: Of the estimated 5.6 million Moroccans living abroad, 5.1 million live in Europe, and 380,755 (as of 1 July 2015) live in the Netherlands, which is together 2.2% of the Dutch population.]

We want to show and discuss a film on a Dutch-Moroccan girl living in Amsterdam, a girl who step by step radicalizes and finally travels to the border of Syria. As you might know since 2014 more than 3000 young people—between the age of 16 and 24—have travelled from Europe to Syria, among them 550 women by the way, so as to join IS, or Daesh. The director of the film Mijke de Jong was herself involved in the squatters movement as a student in Amsterdam and knows a bit about processes of ideological radicalisation among adolescent youth from her own experiences. While focusing on Muslim youth, she in fact wants to talk about processes of violent radicalisation

that, according to her, have a universal element, so her aim in that sense is rather to build bridges than to set Muslims apart - as is today witnessed in Western Europe, with the Netherlands being no exception.

In the following paragraphs, I will first very briefly go into the situation of Muslims in Western Europe and I will particularly focus on the current political and social climate in the Netherlands, that to date is one of the most neoliberalized countries of Europe, and in that sense is exemplary for an increasing policy of neoliberalization taking place across the globe. Then I will say something about the responses of Dutch-Moroccans to the society they live in—which are of course diverse. I will mostly focus on women and girls.

Debates on Muslim presence in Western Europe are often framed in terms of a 'clash of cultures'. As French-Turkish sociologist Nilufergöle phrased it in a recent article, controversies around Islam are 'framed within a discourse of incompatibility between Muslims and Europe, ... The pillars of European culture are defined around secular values of Europe, gender equality, right for sexual minorities and freedom of expression'. Neo-populist movements warn against an Islamic invasion and a takeover of Europe, and call for politics of securitization against Islam which they claim as inherently violent and radical. But not only do we have these neo-populist parties and movements in western Europe, we also deal with what we nowadays call populism light, i.e. the framing by mainstream political parties and popular media of Muslims as out group. Being visible as Muslim, for instance by wearing a veil, today even raises hostility - to give you an example, in Dutch society today it can happen that a veiled woman in the streets is called a Bin Laden bitch, or something of the kind. Sociological research shows how European Muslims are affected by this hostile social climate, experiencing, among other things, a different treatment by the police and discriminatory practices in relation to housing, employment, and education. In the Netherlands, unemployment of the Muslim population is considerably higher than of the non-Muslim population, and this is unlikely to improve for the

younger generation. Poverty is widespread, especially among the Moroccan community.

Analyses show that migrants with the same characteristics as natives have less chances of finding (permanent) work, which also counts for higher education graduates, and that 'an applicant's ethnic background plays a role in selection decisions' (Statistics Netherlands, 2013: 198, 184).

The government counters these negative developments with an equal rights discourse and by equally applying neoliberal 'activation' techniques to all parts of the population. Research shows that the Netherlands is currently one of the most 'neoliberalized' Western European countries and a forerunner in dismantling the welfare state and in the burial of multiculturalism. The population is increasingly regulated as a set of 'entrepreneurial selves', i.e. as persons who have to manage themselves and who are responsible for their own success or failure. 'Activation' programs, such as courses to improve people's job application skills and enhance their 'employability' as well as radical cuts in social benefits for those who do not actively seek work or develop skills, are equally applied. Unemployment has become an individual failure, while migrants of all generations have no equal chances at all due to their discrimination on the job market. Christian Joppke (2007) characterizes the new Dutch integration policies in terms of a 'repressive liberalism' that increasingly marks Western European states, and that coerces migrants 'to release their self-producing and -regulating capacities..., seeking to make people both self-sufficient and autonomous by illiberal means' (Joppke, 2007:16).

But rather than speaking in terms of a repressive liberalism these policies are better characterized in terms of neoliberalism, which interestingly today is defined by some sociologists as a marketization not only of the economy but of self and society as well. As Thomas Lemke phrases it referring to the work of Michel Foucault who analyzed neoliberalism already in these terms in the 1970s:

'(G)overnment itself becomes a sort of enterprise whose task it is to universalize competition and invent market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions' (197). 'Neoliberalism in this approach is more than the latest version of capitalism, it is characterized not only by a free market economy but also by a policy which organizes society along the lines of enterprises and activates and produces a new type of man – and woman: the market-shaped individual: a 'free', self-optimizing agent, who is 'the entrepreneur of himself' (Foucault, 2008: 226). This new type of personhood, in terms of an entrepreneur of her- or himself, is supposed to make the most of his or her own human capital, and is responsible for his or her own success. As Aihwaong has shown in her book *Neoliberalism as Exception*, this type of neoliberalism that transforms societal institutions and the self into enterprises spread across the globe, but it does so selectively: huge parts of the world, and huge regions of countries are left out as being not useful, as are for instance parts of Morocco which are literally called non-useful, and everywhere the gap between winners and losers increasingly widens, in many domains, ranging from jobs, to education, to healthcare and even to longevity.

In the Netherlands the dominant neoliberal frame of self and society involves an approach of 'responsibilizing' people, which is extra disadvantageous for migrant groups as is clear for instance from its effects in the school system. In schools, children are trained and supposed to behave as an 'entrepreneurial self', with skills such as coordination, self- and time-management, and cost-benefit calculation. Due to the system's individualizing, 'responsibilizing' approach, especially migrant children with illiterate parents have no hope of equal chances, since they lack parental support, and especially boys from migrant backgrounds drop out and follow the neoliberal message in a different way, namely seeking their own personal success via criminal activities: 60 per cent of boys [till the age 22] from Moroccan background have been in contact with the police as a result of the street culture they have developed.

But girls from Moroccan background are doing well in the school system. They also enter higher education and universities

more than boys from migrant background who—when they do so—reach these levels of education by taking the 'long route', compensating for their discrimination in the school system by moving step by step into higher education. Regular Muslim women's organizations in Western Europe – that focus on mothers – today organize social meetings, self-help groups, readings, workshops, and debates, to support Muslim women in their roles, in the family, in society, and in the Muslim community. It is in such a local Muslim women's groups that my colleague Edien Bartels participates and is confronted with the big worries of Muslim mothers who see their children radicalizing and who don't know what to do about it. It is from this perspective that we feel the film *Lalya M.* is important, and Edien will tell you now more about it.