Muslim Women in Portugal
Strategies of Identity (re)Construction

Les femmes musulmanes au Portugal. Stratégies de (re)construction identitaire
Mulheres Muçulmanas em Portugal. Estratégias de (re)Construção identitárias

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Muslim immigrant women in Portugal with Guinean and Indian origin develop specific strategies of negotiation between inherited references – associated with a strong familial and social control – and an intention of gaining more autonomy, connected with the new sociocultural elements found in the receiving society (mainly the possibility of getting a paid job or an education, which are practices frequently not allowed in their countries of origin). In addition to a group comparison, the generation issue is equally central in the research presented on this paper.

In fact, an attenuation and flexibility of traditional and religious rules becomes more evident between Muslim young girls, involved in larger social networks and maintaining a stronger proximity to the sociocultural model of the host society than their mothers. On the other hand, familial networks remain the less flexible aspect, translated in the process of choosing a marriage partner, which stays firmly restricted to members of the same religious and ethnic group, even for the younger girls. How will these scenarios develop within the following generations is therefore a question that is put forward and that opens room for important further research on this field.


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Mulheres Muçulmanas em Portugal.
Estratégias de (re)construção identitárias

Mulheres muçulmanas imigrantes em Portugal com origens guineense ou indianas desenvolvem estratégias de negociação específicas entre referências herdadas – associadas ao forte controle familiar e social – e o objectivo de obter mais autonomia, ligadas aos novos elementos sócio-culturais encontrados na sociedade anfitriã (maioritariamente a possibilidade de conseguir um emprego remunerado ou uma educação, práticas frequentemente proibidas nos seus países de origem). Além duma comparação de grupo, a questão da geração é também central na investigação desenvolvida neste artigo.

De facto, a atenuação e flexibilidade das regras tradicionais e religiosas torna-se mais evidente entre jovens muçulmanas, envolvidas em maiores grupos sociais e mantendo uma proximidade mais forte ao modelo sócio-cultural da sociedade anfitriã ao invés das suas mães. Por outro lado, os grupos familiares permanecem o aspecto menos flexível, traduzindo-se no processo da escolha do marido, que permanece firmemente restringido aos membros da mesma religião ou do mesmo grupo étnico, mesmo para as mais jovens. Como se desenvolverão estes cenários nas próximas gerações é por consequência uma questão que é avançada e que abre espaço para futuras investigações importantes nesta área.

Research Field, Main Goals and Methodology

Migration processes always involve a continuous adaptation and reconstruction of migrants’ identities. The lack of studies connected to the women’s role in these processes, mainly in Portugal\(^1\), was the basis for a Master thesis, aiming at identifying specific strategies of identity reconstruction by Muslim women living in Portugal. In fact, these women develop particular strategies of negotiation between inherited references – where a strong familial and social control can be observed – and new sociocultural elements found in the receiving society, which can be connected with an intention of gaining more autonomy.

Identity construction is a flexible and dynamic process, to which permanent changes are associated. Since individuals receive a variety of influences and act constantly in diverse contexts, they assume different roles and combine multiple references that are interrelated. This diversity can, however, be used to create a distinct identity, composed by different categories. This intermediate position in what concerns identity issues has been adopted by a large number of social scientists, illustrating perspectives that distance from essentialism or fragmentation and defend that the various elements which coexist in each individual can be united in order to give place to a single human being (Costa 2002; Giddens 1994; Maalouf 1999). Migration processes are privileged places for identity (re)construction analysis, since the categories that could wrongly be perceived as universal and invariable are, in this context, permanently moving into at least two different geographical areas and, consequently, different cultures.

\(^1\) The state of art at the European level provides a reasonable number of studies on Muslim women. See Andezian 1988; Salih 2000, 2001 and Wernier 1996. For an overview see: Haddad & Qurquz 2000 and Tavares, Ferreira, & Portugal (eds) 1998.
Public debate on female immigration is recent and has been mostly limited to the wives that migrate to join their husbands, in the family reunion context. Situations in which women present different migration motives, associated or not with economical ones, or in which they even lead their own independent movements, are thus often ignored. Though they rarely migrate alone, some Muslim immigrant women in Portugal present a particular position, where gaining more autonomy becomes an important migratory intention, even if not the primary one, often achieved through specific strategies of negotiating original and new sociocultural elements.

The master thesis motivated by this observation had its fieldwork carried out between July and October 2003. The main goal was to identify specific strategies of identity (re)construction among Muslim women in Portugal, where the filtration of new sociocultural elements is negotiated with the social and familial control and a strong religious identity, associated with traditional ways of life that involve specificities of the women’s role. The research was based on the two most representative groups of Muslim immigrants (and their descendants) in Portugal – those with Indian and Guinean origin (the first coming mostly from Mozambique, as their families illustrate a migration course involving three territories: India-Mozambique-Portugal).

These two groups are socially and culturally differentiated. Despite the existence of a common religious basis, their specific ways of life often overlap religious traditions, which are therefore reformulated according to those specificities. Local culture assigns a culturally distinct shape to religion, originating different expressions of Islam. The strong ethnic and religious internal divisions that both groups present also influence these coexistent expressions of local culture and Islamic practices. In Guinea-Bissau, ethnic heterogeneity and the particular historical process that characterizes the country have produced an original Islam, just as in other Islamised countries of West Africa. Aspects of Muslim religion are thus combined with elements of pre-Islamic traditions and with the cultural pattern introduced by European colonization (Machado 2002). Likewise, a large part of former Hindu cultural practices has been kept among Indians converted to Islam, which led to a continuous bond between Hindu and Muslim cultural elements (Malheiros 1996).

In addition to a group comparison, two different generations were also compared within the various dimensions analysed in the research. These two generations correspond, in certain cases, to mothers (between 37 and 69 years old) and

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1 Though some studies on independent female immigration have recently been carried out. Regarding this subject, see Hellermann & Stanek 2004.

2 Facing the complexity of this group’s trajectories, it is here identified as the one with Indian origin in order to simplify the text.

3 For the analysis of the New Islamic Presence in Portugal, see Tiesler 2000; 2005. For a reflection on the concepts of religious, cultural or ethnic identities, see Tiesler 2006. About Muslims in Portugal, see also Vakil 2003; 2003b; 2003c.

4 The Guinean population is divided in more than 20 ethnic groups, which are, in their turn, distributed among Animists, Muslims and Catholics. Guinean Muslims are mainly Sunnis, as well as those with Indian origin. Religious affiliation, however, was not considered in this research.
daughters (from 19 to 27 years old), but the original methodological intention of approaching direct families was not possible to accomplish in all cases, due to some obstacles encountered in the beginning of the research. On the one hand, the contact with some older women was made difficult by the difference with which they perceived the idea of sharing their private lives (although their daughters easily integrated me into their social networks). On the other hand, the more recent arrival of some of the older Guinean women and their complex family structures implied, in some cases, the absence of children in Portugal, added to the fact that some of the young girls’ mothers did not live in the country either.

Although some of the “second generation” girls were already born in Portugal, most of them were born either in Mozambique or in Guinea, having arrived in Portugal at a very early age, unlike the “first generation” women of the sample, who were all born in Mozambique or Guinea. Since Guinean immigration has a more recent character, Indian girls were more often born in Portugal or came younger than the Guineans. It is possible to observe, among these youngsters, a particular way of negotiating the strong social control inherent to the group and to the family. In fact, an attenuation and flexibility of traditional and religious rules becomes more evident between younger girls, involved in wider social networks and maintaining a stronger proximity to the sociocultural model of the host society than their mothers. Without losing their religious beliefs, they adjust and reinterpret certain representations and practices connected with religion.

In addition to semi-directive interviews with 13 young girls (8 of Indian origin and 5 of Guinean origin) and 13 older women (6 Indians and 7 Guineans), participant observation was also a key method of analysis. Despite the barrier initially encountered, translated in the strong difference shown by some women, these obstacles were surpassed through a personal relationship progressively created on a trust basis. The participation in wedding festivities, in Friday’s public prayer at the Central Mosque of Lisbon and other informal conversations held in these circumstances or in other gathering occasions, mostly at the interviewees’ homes, were extremely important sources of information. The sample was centred in Lisbon’s region, due to the fact that this geographical area concentrates the largest proportion of both groups’ presence in the country.

Female Strategies of Gaining Autonomy: Educational and Professional Courses

The female component of these two groups of Muslim immigrants in Portugal puts forward new expressions of immigration and ethnicity issues, since these women create migratory strategies that go beyond the well-known economical and family reunion reasons and that include intentions of personal achievement.

This intention expresses itself through the possibility of getting a paid job abroad or gaining educational perspectives for their children, who are vehicles for trans-

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6 Though the complexity of categorizing age groups in this case makes it inaccurate to talk about two generations (some of the young Guineans are also immigrant in the sense that they arrived in Portugal between 10 and 20 years old with other family members) the concept is used here in order to underline the importance of age differences.
mission of cultural codes and values from the receiving society into their own families. In some cases, the possibility of going to school and learn to read and write was also accomplished by these “first generation” women after migration, since this practice was, like working outside, frequently not allowed in their countries of origin:

“I have never studied there, my brother wouldn’t let me. I’ve been to school only here. There, at the time, Muslims wouldn’t let females go to school, as they considered women could be misled and choose a wrong way….” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 44 years old, in Portugal since 1977)

In what concerns the wish for professional integration expressed by these women, economical circumstances in the initial period of the arrival in the new society can contribute to achieve it, since difficulties often require an additional economical contribution within the family. In this sense, paid work comes either as an intention carried from the country of origin or as a need from which these women strategically benefit:

“When I got here, […] some people – neighbours – asked me to do some hours of cleaning at their houses, but my husband didn’t let me. […] But then he accepted it. He felt … he saw that there was a difference, because money wasn’t enough anymore. And also … they were neighbours, I didn’t have to go far, it was in the same building, so I managed to convince him.” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 58 years old, in Portugal since 1977)

Young Muslim girls also underline the importance of their jobs to their own independence. The way in which these girls manage the advantages of their scholastic capital is clearly visible, as they recognize the possibilities that this capital can open to them in the future:

“… Well, at that time I was almost integrated in this culture. I still had a little bit of the Muslim culture, but not that much. Muslims, when they get married, the man commands the situation, and women have to submit to what he wants, it is really like that. But I was studying here, right? So I had already some lights…” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 24 years old, in Portugal since 1990 – arrived at 11)

Both ethnic groups present, however, strong dissimilarities in what concerns social integration, mainly visible through the professional activities they are involved in. While most Guineans have low qualified and badly paid jobs in the domestic service sector, Indians generally work in commercial activities, often connected with the management of import-export storehouses or smaller businesses. Within both groups, a more qualified professional integration can be observed among younger girls, when compared with their parents’ situation.

7 This difference is also due to variables such as the duration of residence (frequently more reduced among Guineans) and social origins. In fact, a large part of the Indian families held already a higher social status in Mozambique, when compared with Guinean women, whose husbands are protagonists of a labour migration. Most Indian families, on the contrary, first left Mozambique together for political reasons, after the independence of the country. Moreover, Indian women own Portuguese citizenship more often that Guineans, which usually provides better life opportunities (MACHADO 2002).
In what concerns education, differences are not as significant among older women, since both groups point out that studying often represented a forbidden practice for them in their countries of origin. Indians show, however, less cases of illiteracy, when compared with Guineans. Among the younger girls, on the other hand, stronger differences emerge. Unlike young Guineans, almost all of the interviewed Indian girls have already completed a higher education degree or are studying in university, as well as their jobs are usually more qualified. In this respect, access to university was clearly negotiated between Indian girls and their parents, who initially did not approve it. Mothers, in their turn, play a crucial role in this negotiation process, due to their efforts to make their husbands accept this new scholastic situation of the daughters. A situation of female complicity is therefore often created:

“In the beginning, my husband was not really the type of letting his daughters study. [...] And when Latifah wanted to go further with her studies, he said: ‘Oh no, the secondary is enough, and that’s all!’ Well, he was not used to it, but here in Portugal there were already many girls studying, so I told him: ‘Look, there is no problem, let’s see’ [...] It was always the fear that people ... Well, it was not the tradition, you see? But sometimes we have to go along with the progress, right? ...”

(Translated from an Indian interviewee: 49 years old, in Portugal since 1981. Mother of a 27-year-old girl)

Besides the possibility of personal achievement in the receiving country through a paid job or an education, in cases where these practices were allowed only to men, offspring’s studies actually play a fundamental role for two reasons. On the one hand, it can be object of negotiation between the young girls and their parents and, on the other hand, it produces an inevitable filter and attenuation of cultural differentiations, since the enlargement of these girls’ social networks ends up interacting with the social and familial structure of origin. The fact that these women’s daughters can reach higher levels of education and get more qualified jobs which may give them more autonomy contribute for their attraction to the way of life in Portugal – since, in this way, their autonomy intentions are passed on to their children – though the fear that these youngsters may detach from traditional values paradoxically persists.

Among these women, less schooled and more used to be constrained to the private space than their daughters, the weight of traditional practices and values remains more emphasized. It is also important to highlight the stronger need of negotiation shown by the Indian women, who are involved in a more closed social structure and control and to whom access to public space and outside activities was more frequently interdicted already in the country of origin, when compared with Guinean women.

Reinterpretation of Religious Practices and Representations

The importance ascribed to religion can differ significantly, since diverse aspects of religious practices or representations can be emphasized in different ways, according to the meaning given to self-definition as Muslim (Sunier in Baumann & Sunier, 1995). As social actors, Muslim women with Guinean and Indian origin
often reinterpret the religious meaning of certain practices according to their own
strategies. Younger girls, though maintaining the family cohesion by holding to a
large part of its values and respecting the religious codes, often negotiate the mean-
ing of those codes with their parents, in which process the mothers’ role assumes
great significance again.

The attendance of koranic schools, either in the country of origin or in the
host society, in the case of youngsters already born in Portugal or arrived at an
early age, represents the first vehicle of socialization and the common religious
element to all the interviewees. Religious expressions, however, may differ as a
result of the interference of a variety of aspects, such a familial heritage. To young
girls who do not have their parents or other close relatives living nearby, a cer-
tain detachment from religious practices can be observed, though Islam continues
to represent an important role in their lives:

“Honestly I think that we still have faith, but what really attached us to religion was
my mother. After my mother died […] I can say we basically detached from those
things, you see? …” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 23 years old, in Portugal
since 1982 – arrived at the age of 2)

Although Ramadan represents the period in which intra-group sociability networks
are intensified and religion is practiced in a more continuous way, its meaning is
sometimes reinterpreted by the younger generations as well. In their speeches, rea-
sons associated with aesthetic – as the beginning of a diet – or health advantages
are the most mentioned ones concerning the fast carried out in this period.

A common element to many interviewees of all ages, mainly Guineans, is the
wish to follow religious practices in a more rigorous way in a later stage of the
cycle of life, when temptations to daily pleasures will be easier to prevent. This
intention is connected with the Hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca – one of Islam’s
pillars that, as achieved, should be translated in a more suitable behaviour accord-
ing to religious rules and values. The pilgrimage is therefore, among Guineans,
something to be done later:

“No, I still haven’t done it, I am thinking of going when I turn the age when […]
Because when you are young you have more tendency to sin, and old people do not
play around anymore. And when you come back from Mecca you have to follow the
rules, that is why you avoid going when you are young …” (Translated from a
Guinean interviewee: 23 years old, in Portugal since 1998 – arrived at 18)

“I would like to go to Mecca, but not now. I am very young. No […] later, around
50 or something. The reason why I don’t want to go now is that now I wouldn’t
follow the rules as I should. If I went to Mecca I would have to stop doing many
things, such as going to those parties […] I wouldn’t be able to dance as I wanted
 […] And I like going to discos, I like it very much. I often go out at night. That is
the problem. With Mecca one has to get shyer, follow the rules. Now it’s not the
time for me.” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 44 years old, in Portugal since
1999)

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1 See Silva 1999.
There is, in fact, a clear difference in the meaning given to the pilgrimage between Guineans and Indians. Generally having more economical resources, the latest have performed this religious ritual in a larger number, and do not usually adjust their behaviour after coming back from Mecca. On the other hand, what we observe is an adaptation and reconstruction of this practice’s meaning, which becomes a moment to be with friends or go shopping as well.

“... I always go with my father’s entire family and I meet my cousins there, which makes it even wilder. We have a lot of fun, but at the same time we’re at a spiritual, quiet place. But we have fun, we laugh, we do crazy things, we make fun of everyone, we give my grandmother a fright and she almost has a heart attack…” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 21 years old, born in Portugal)

“When we come back from Mecca we always think we are going to follow all the religious rules, because while we are there we are praying all the time … Well, I am not saying we don’t go shopping there, because we do, but when they call for the prayers everyone starts praying, and we have to get out of the shops […]. So, when we come back we say we are going to follow all the rules, but then you know […] Here we come back to this stressful life…” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 49 years old, in Portugal since 1981)

The adaptation of religious codes to these women’s life context – mainly among youngsters – is thus part of the dissociation between beliefs and behaviours. Though they do not always follow the religious rules, they uphold the importance of their faith, which is, regarding certain aspects, a source of strength and comfort.

Familial and social control does not have the same weight regarding religious practices as it has in other aspects within these groups, such as in the establishment of social networks or intra-ethnic marriages. However, though the practice of religion is not imposed, some mothers regret the weakening of these traditions among younger generations. The already mentioned attendance of koranic schools also reveals the parents’ concern in transmitting a sense of religious belonging to their children.

“They do what they can, but here most youngsters don’t follow the religion, they say they are Muslims but it’s only the name.” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 44 years old, in Portugal since 1977)

Identity negotiation is therefore also present in the way religiosity is lived by Muslim women in Portugal. The last day of Ramadan – Aid – is referred to as “our Christmas”, hence Christmas represents an occidental symbolic import that some of these women also celebrate, due to social networks established with neighbours of Portuguese origin or to mixed marriages existing in the family:

“In December, Christmas evening is always at my uncle’s home, with a Christmas tree and everything. If his wife celebrates Christmas and she is with us in our day, why shouldn’t we be with her in her day? In Portugal, it is impossible not to feel something these days, when everyone around is celebrating Christmas”. (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 24 years old, in Portugal since 1979 – arrived at 1 month old)
Cultural References’ Combination: Ritual and Dressing Practices

Ritual actions that symbolize the cycle of life involve pre-Islamic elements of local tradition that adapt themselves to religion and might even be opposed to it, as the practice of magic among Guineans illustrates. In addition, migration contributes to this process of adjustment and reconstruction of ritual practices.

Festivity days, for instance, might need to be changed according to the new rhythms and work schedules, as well as parts of certain rituals suffer some adjustments, mainly due to the absence of older family members who usually play a central role in the ceremonies.

The coexistence between traditional and new sociocultural elements and the woman’s role in this process can also be translated into the combination of symbols used in these rituals. In the wedding ceremony among those with Indian origin, for instance, the bride comes dressed in the occidental white costume together with the combi – long veil embroidered in red, green and golden colours, usually brought from India – and henna drawings on her hands.

In addition, although some Indian young girls try to escape certain rules regarding dressing codes, they get simultaneously enthusiastic with the idea of buying traditional clothes for wedding festivities. Apart from these moments, traditional clothing is used only at the mosque or during the prayers, although their mothers use it with more regularity. Articulation between traditional and new cultural elements is thus clearly visible in dressing practices, where a combination of references is generally observed. Talking about traditional Muslim clothing is, in its turn, a complex issue itself, since Indian and Guinean clothes are extremely distinct, due to the already mentioned influence of origin local references.

Moreover, social control can produce an adaptation of Indian girls’ dressing habits to specific places and to the presence of other Muslims, mainly older people. In this sense, the place of residence can influence behaviours, as it is possible to observe in the following speech, from a young Indian girl living in a neighbourhood where a large number of Muslims is concentrated:

“There you go, I am a little bit careful because I live where I live, you see? I may not go out with a top showing my belly, as it bothers me to see the others looking, because they don’t dress like that. So maybe I get out of my house with a longer shirt, I take it off when I get far away from the neighbourhood and there I can stay with the top.” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 24 years old, in Portugal since 1979 – arrived at 1 month old)

Among Guineans, on the other hand, there is a stronger interference of local culture in what can be considered religious dressing codes. Moreover, the social control they are involved in is less severe when compared with the Indians. Although they use long dresses and cover their hair to pray – even if their clothes and headscarves reveal particular African traits regarding colour and shape – they refer to the absence of social pressure in this respect, in other moments of their daily lives.

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9 For an analysis of Guinean ritual practices, see QuinTino 2004.
10 See Keshavjee 1996.
Migration tends to assume a central position in these women’s identity (re)construction, whether through a conscious intention aiming at certain adjustments in their lives, or through the changes that inevitably occur by influence of new sociocultural elements, as it happens with the dressing habits. In a migratory context, the combination of traditional and new symbols in the rites of passage in which these women take part, mainly in marriages’ celebrations, also confirms the process of identity (re)construction that associates modernity and tradition, and highlights the singularity of those rites when being held far away from the country of origin11.

Between Engagement and Marriage: the Choice of a Partner and Changes in Family Systems

Among the codes and values that migrant Muslim women try to keep and pass on to their daughters, those connected with marriage and sexuality can be distinguished for their importance. Since children’s education is part of the mother’s responsibility, a child’s marriage according to the group’s codes will condition the family’s position and, in this way, the manner in which traditional values were passed on will be evaluated.

Connected to marriage, the choice of the partner is one of the situations that reveals some distance between generations. While for the older women this choice was imposed by their parents (in this context, marriages between two cousins were frequent among Guineans), youngsters manage to avoid that imposition, which mothers themselves do not insist in maintaining either. However, the family’s approval remains important and social control is still present, often limiting that choice to the ethnic group of origin, among Indians and Guineans. The possibility of religious conversion is not easily accepted by the girls’ families, while it is more simply approved when referring to their sons:

“When I prayed I always asked God to make me meet someone of my religion, to make me love someone of the same religion that I am, because I knew that only in this way it would be easier…” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 23 years old, in Portugal since 1998 – arrived at 18)

An affective relationship, in what concerns the partner’s ethnic and religious origin, becomes more flexible and easier to negotiate rules than marriage – mainly among Guinean families – since it does not yet enter the familial circles. Among girls with Indian origin, on the other hand, familial and social control remains stricter, which increases their need to develop specific strategies of negotiating certain rules regarding this aspect. Since there should not be a long relationship without making the engagement official, many of these girls hide their partners from their parents and present them to the family only when marriage becomes their purpose:

11 For narratives of life stories of Muslim women and youngsters of different origins in Portugal, as well as their ritual practices, see Coelho & Rocha 2005.
“He became interested in me, there you go. He called me, saying he wanted to go out with me, and we started going out and dating. We went like that for 4 years, always hiding from my parents. No one actually knew. I used to make up a lot of excuses to my mother, saying I was doing some work at the university, and stuff, only to be with him.” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 23 years old, in Portugal since 1980 – arrived at 8 months old)

In many cases, these norms’ flexibility is possible, once again, through the mother’s role. She is, in fact, complicit in the definition of strategies that include hiding their daughters’ partners from their husbands:

“Well, my mother always knew. But my father only knew after 3 years, because I was forced to tell him, since people started talking about it. But I didn’t tell him I was dating for 3 years. Then I finished university and my father told me: ‘let’s make it official, as everyone is talking about it.’” (Translated from an Indian interviewee: 24 years old, in Portugal since 1979 – arrived at 1 month old)

Regarding young girls who do not have close relatives nearby due to different circumstances, such as parents’ death, their perceptions of a future marriage shows what the absence of familial control can mean:

“No, I mean […] If it was before, when I lived with my father, or if I lived with my grandparents, I would have to think like that, they always made clear that it had to be a Muslim. But well, now I am alone, it will be as it comes.” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee: 24 years old, in Portugal since 1990 – arrived with 11 years old)

Guineans, however, though considering the partner’s origin equally important, do not control their daughters’ relationship and sexuality in the same way as the Indians. In this respect, while female virginity before marriage occupies an important role in Indian women’s family life, since it traditionally represents granted purity, essential value to enter the future husband’s family (Hermet 1997), Guinean women mention the importance of this value that was passed on to them, but also the impossibility of maintaining this control over their daughters in Portugal though they have been submitted to it in Guinea by their own mothers:

“These kids nowadays […] what should I say? I don’t care about those things, I am a modern mother. Things change and get more and more modern, we shouldn’t prevent those changes from happening. We got that control, but our children won’t […] I would like for my daughter’s husband to be her first one, but only if she wants to. If she doesn’t understand that, I can’t do a thing.” (Translated from a Guinean Interviewee: 44 years old, in Portugal since 1999)

“It is still like that. We don’t talk about it directly, you see? But it is assumed, really. I always knew I wouldn’t do it until he was my husband, you see? And I didn’t even want to …” (Translated from an Indian Interviewee: 27 years old, in Portugal since 1977 – arrived at 1 year old)

Once again, the influence of familial control plays a special role, since young girls who do not live close to older relatives are more detached from these cultural codes. Social and familial control regarding sexuality is hence weaker among those whose parents are absent, due to death or to other migratory movements.
The tradition regarding young girls’ passage to the parents-in-law’s house after marriage also suffers some changings and adaptations in Portugal. Young girls of Indian origin do not intend to live with their husband’s parents anymore, and conflicts often emerge when they do. For them, holding higher levels of autonomy and education and being more influenced by the sociocultural context of where they live, the period of cohabitation with their mothers-in-law, which traditionally aimed at learning the best ways of assisting the husband, according to his preferences, no longer makes sense. However, this “abandon” of the original family and the passage into the husband’s family is still symbolically represented in the “departure ritual” at the end of the wedding ceremony, when the bride’s closer relatives say goodbye to her, crying together, covered by the combi.

Among Guineans, the larger and more complex original family structures, where polygamy sometimes prevails, modify the practice of transiting to the husband’s household. Although this tradition does not present the same weight within this group, the need to prove to be able to cope with domestic tasks was mentioned by the older women as a condition to get married.

In this respect, changes that migration can bring to polygamous family structures illustrate new strategies of negotiations developed by these women, in the process of constant adaptation of the group’s traditions to certain sociocultural aspects of the receiving society, as it happens with the possibility of professional and educational integration. Migration can thus be, for these women, a way of strategically changing practices such as polygamy, which represent a restraint to their personal achievement, by making use of the influence of monogamous patterns in the receiving society.

Polygamous family structures suffer, in fact, frequent changes with migration. This is an aspect often pointed out by these women as a preference for life in Portugal. Younger Guinean girls, in their turn, declare to reject this practice in a more determined manner, stressing their refusal of being part of a polygamous family if it ever became a possibility within their own marriages.

The Development of Social Networks: Friendship and Family Domains

Sociability’s central importance for identity reconstruction processes has to do with the strong influence of social relation’s networks on migrants’ cultural references. Regarding social control established over these networks, two categories of sociability can be distinguished in the first place: one connected with friendship or affective relationships before marriage and a second one related to the family. Since relations are built in different ways in each of these categories, it is within familial circles that closure becomes stronger and social control tighter. The choice of a marriage partner, usually limited to the ethnic group of origin, translates precisely this differentiation regarding the level of control inherent to social networks when these enter the family domain. In this case, social control becomes more severe and the corresponding capacity of negotiation diminishes.

On the contrary, social networks built on a friendship basis are less controlled and often shaped outside the group’s frontier. At a first level, it is possible to underline clear differences between friendship networks established by older Guinean
and Indian women, more closed and constrained to co-ethnics, and the young-
ster’s social relation networks, wider and often exterior to the group, though not
free from a certain level of familial and social control.

Mothers play a significant role again, by frequently accepting their daughters’
male friendships, as well as their friends of different religious and ethnic origins,
under the condition that they stay far away from places regularly visited and con-
trolled by co-ethnics, in order not be seen by other group members in male com-
pany or with friends of different origins. This need to negotiate friendship networks
is essentially part of Indian families, since familial and social control among
Guineans is less rigorous. However, friendship networks are often created between
young Muslim girls of both groups and youngsters of Portuguese origin, which is
clearly related to their scholastic insertion and might also be translated in their
stronger proximity to the way of life of the indigenous population.

Leisure practices associated with friendship networks are negotiated in the same
way, since some of those practices must be hidden from the other co-ethnics. In
this sense, going to night clubs or wearing clothes not considered appropriate, as
already mentioned, are situations that shall remain distant from the group’s stare,
for being perceived as harmful to the family’s honour. In this respect, the pres-
ence of older relatives in the household is once again relevant in the transmission
of traditional values, in what concerns sociability networks:

“My mother always told me: ‘You can go out at night as long as no one sees you’.
As long as no one from my community saw me. So, with my friends from outside
the community I always go out to places where no one sees me. […] But my
grandmother, for instance, doesn’t have a clue that I go out at night, it is a question
of respect, you see? […] And every time I want to go out there is always that thing
of being careful so that no one sees me.” (Translated from an Indian interviewee:
21 years old, born in Portugal)

Among older women, while Indians build their friendship networks mainly within
the ethnic group of origin, the tendency of Guinean women’s networks is difficult
to foresee, since many of the interviewees had recently arrived in Portugal at the
moment of the research, as they represent a more recent type of migration.
Nevertheless, until now it is possible to observe the closed nature of these net-
works as well. Combining the sociability component with the professional situa-
tion, a particular aspect observed among Guinean women should be underlined.
In fact, some of them who were not working at that moment expressed the wish
that a future job outside the house would allow them to escape the present con-
trol their husbands carry out in what concerns their social networks:

“For me to go out? He doesn’t let me go out alone, only with him. Maybe when I
get a job […] this is what I hope, you see? Because the moments when I am not
with him, when I am at my work, in those moments I will be free, right? I hope.
Only Allah knows.” (Translated from a Guinean interviewee, 40 years old, in Portugal
since 2002)

It is therefore possible to observe a situation of relational closure, distinct between
women of each group and between both categories of sociability, in addition to
generational differences. On the one hand, this closure is generally more intense
among Indians and, on the other hand, familial sociability networks are more closed within both groups, since marriages are predominantly intra-ethnic.

* * *

Multiple experiences and references lead to a diversity of influences in the continuous construction and reconstruction of identity courses. In the migratory context, Muslim Guinean and Indian women develop specific strategies of negotiation. Differences in both comparative levels – groups and generations – can however be underlined. Among young girls, the wish of gaining autonomy is stronger, and the negotiations they develop aiming at that autonomy are more conscious. Among older women, circumstances lived in the receiving society – mainly economical ones in the initial period, which lead them to find a paid job – or their daughters’ individual projects’ influence their autonomy strategies. The level of flexibility allowed in social networks within a certain family or group is in fact a condition for the viability of an individual project (Velho 1987). Since Indians’ social control is stricter, the need to negotiate these strategies is also of a higher level, though a tight connection to the original values also remains among Guineans, whether based on a conscious choice or on the familial and social control that, though weaker, is still visible.

The fact that Muslim young girls reveal a stronger proximity to the culture of the society they live in than their parents leads us to put forward the question on how these scenarios will develop within the following generations in Portugal, including the family sociabilities’ dimension, translated in the process of choosing a marriage partner, which so far stays more restricted to members of the same religious and ethnic group. Family sociabilities is therefore the element that remains less flexible, and though some of these girls have already had relationships with boys of different ethnic origins, they recognize the importance of passing on religious references to their children, which becomes more difficult if their husband does not share them.

The importance of transmitting traditional values is also connected with familial and social control. However, although this control can represent an obstacle to individualization, it can also be translated in means of support that these girls do not want to lose (Portes 2000). The fear of running this risk with a marriage outside the frontiers of the group might contribute to their option of staying attached to the values they know will guarantee that cohesion12.

Within these women and girls’ identity (re)construction processes, the weight of their original sociocultural references – in what concerns the young girls, these references are inherited from their parents – plays an extremely important role and it is characterized by a certain closure around the nuclear values those references comprise. These are, however, also ethno-cultural references and not only

12 Altay Manço also highlights the articulation between cultural belongings and individual actions, referring to the descendents of Turkish immigrants in Belgium. It is this combination that gives these youngsters the possibility of constructing strategies in line with familial values and at the same time compatible with the need of adaptation to the surrounding social context (Manço 1999).
muslim women in portugal

religious ones, deriving, in fact, from cultural traditions developed in specific contexts of origin, and further reconstructed in the migratory context, where some elements gain importance, while others nearly disappear.

Integration in a new society opens the possibility of receiving other references, sometimes preferred, which leads to the establishment of complex – and occasionally contradictory – relations between the reproduction, wanted or imposed, of some original cultural elements and the acquisition, intentional or inevitable, of new values. The existence of voluntary forms of acculturation or cultural miscegenation must not be ignored, since cultural patterns prevailing in the receiving societies might actually represent an option for some minority groups, as the preference for a monogamous society exemplifies (Machado 2002). In the definition of these women’s strategies, it is therefore difficult to establish clear limits between familial and social control’s pressure and their own will to maintain inherited references, which proves the complexity of identity (re)construction processes.

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