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The Image of a Muslim Woman in the Russian Mass Media: Trying to Overcome Stereotypes in Islamic Media Space*

Abstract

The article presents an analysis of media-discourse regarding the position and status of a Muslim woman in Russian society. Consideration is given to the existing stereotypes in the official media, their influence on the formation mode of social visibility of Islam and Muslims in the country, and their use as a resource for constructing political concepts. Another pole of creating visibility is Islamic media (the information resources created by Muslims in the Internet space), with their attempts made to overcome these stereotypes about Muslim women. Almost all Islamic media have material devoted to exposing the existing stereotypes about these women. The research demonstrates how visibility modes can be constructed and deconstructed using the example of the image of Muslim women in a secular and multi-religious society via the modern media resources.

Keywords: Islam; Muslim woman; gender; Mass Media; stereotypes; Islamic media.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis del discurso mediático acerca de la posición y estatus de una mujer musulmana en la sociedad rusa. Se tienen en cuenta los estereotipos existentes en el espacio público, su influencia en la formación de régimen de visibilidad social del islam y las personas musulmanas en el país y su uso como recurso para construir conceptos políticos. El polo opuesto para crear visibilidad son los medios de comunicación islámicos (medios creados por personas musulmanas), en los que se llevan a cabo intentos de sobrepasar estos estereotipos sobre la mujer musulman. Prácticamente todos los medios islámicos destinan material a exponer estos estereotipos. La investigación demuestra cómo la visibilidad se construye y deconstruye tomando como ejemplo a las mujeres musulmanas en una sociedad secular y multirreligiosa a través de los medios de comunicación modernos.

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Palabras clave: islam; mujer musulmana; género; medios de comunicación; estereotipos; medios de comunicación islámicos.

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel präsentiert eine Analyse des Mediendiskurses im Hinblick auf die Position und den Status der muslimischen Frau in der russischen Gesellschaft. Berücksichtigt werden die vorhandenen Stereotype in offiziellen Informationen, ihr Einfluss auf die Art der Bildung sozialer Sichtbarkeit von Islam und Muslim*innen im Land und ihre Verwendung als Ressource zur Konstruktion politischer Konzepte. Ein anderer Pol der Erschaffung von Sichtbarkeit sind islamische Medien (die Informationsquellen, die von Muslim*innen im Internet geschaffen werden) mit ihren Versuchen, die Stereotypen über muslimische Frauen zu überwinden. Fast alle muslimischen Medien haben Material, das dazu dient die vorhandenen Stereotypen über diese Frauen aufzuzeigen. Der Beitrag zeigt, wie Formen der Sichtbarkeit konstruiert und dekonstruiert werden können, und zwar am Beispiel des Bildes muslimischer Frauen in einer säkularen und multi-religiösen Gesellschaft mittels moderner Medien.

Schlagworte: Islam; muslimische Frau; Gender; Massenmedien; Stereotypen; islamische Medien.

Introduction

Modern media resources are considered to include mass media and modern means of communication, such as the Internet and social networks. They can change social institutions, discourses and social practices, expand the range of interactions, open up new opportunities for believers to express themselves. Most of the information for traditional types of media, such as television, radio and press, comes from the Internet. All of them influence, either directly or indirectly, the formation of the image of the Islamic society. Also today's manifestation and self-presentation of religions are increasingly finding their place on the Internet through forums, social networks and sites. The growing role of virtual life rapidly actualises this sphere of communication and culture giving more opportunities as compared to the ordinary reality to express opinions (sometimes anonymous) on various debatable aspects, including the issues concerning believers.

This paper considers stereotypes broadcast by Russia's official mass media in regard to Muslim women and attempts to overcome them in the Islamic media content. The great majority of the Russian society entertains stereotypes about a Muslim woman and experiences misunderstandings, irony or fear,

frequently maintained by mass media. To overcome these negative thinking patterns, the Muslim community uses Internet resources, by which it creates Islamic visibility modes. Actions are taken mainly by cultural associations and private persons who seek to disseminate knowledge on Islam and thus change the image of the Muslim faith in the Russian society and mass media.

The first part of the paper deals with the range of problems associated with stereotyped ideas about the “disempowered” position of Muslim women, the “radical and extremist inclination”. It also reveals the sources for the formation of these ideas in Russia. According to the research conducted by Russian scientists, a negative image of Muslim women is frequently formed by the official press and TV. Much was written about these aspects by Aida Soboleva, Natalia Kuzina, Sofia Ragozina, and Shukran Suleymanova who studied the image of Islam using top Russian newspapers (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Kommersant*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Izvestiya*), federal TV channels (*Rain*, *First Federal TV Channel*, *Russia 1*) and information agencies (*Interfax*, *Lenta.ru*). The authors’ choice of exactly these print media and TV channels was dictated mainly by their popularity in Russia. The article by Aida Soboleva, a practicing journalist with long time work experience on the national TV describes the evolution of a Muslim woman’s image in the Russian information space and points out two persistent stereotypes according to which (1) a Muslim woman is passive and downtrodden and (2) a Muslim woman tends to follow extremism.

The second part of the article corresponds with our research on the Muslim woman’s visibility mode, this topic being highlighted in the Islamic Internet resources as opposed to the existing stereotypes. At present the Internet is one of the main Russian Muslims’ information platforms. This is explained by the fact that Muslims institutions have no authoritative print media intended for a broad audience. Muslims are poorly involved in creating information and have lower level efficiency in communicating with the journalist community. Our focus is on presenting alternative viewpoints concerning the women’s status in Islam disseminated via the websites of Muslim associations and large Islamic information agencies and also those for spiritual knowledge.¹

¹ We have studied publications concerning Muslim women on the sites of two large Russian Islamic organisations – Russian Council of Muftis (www.dumrf.ru) and Central Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Russia (www.cdum.ru); popular information agency *Islam-Today* (www.islam-today.ru), sites for spiritual knowledge – *Islam and Family* (www.islam-isemya.com) and *Muslim Fashion* (www.muslimfashion.ru).

This research is based on the methods of content analysis of source texts and media-discourse as well as cyber-anthropology, which along with traditional tools of public information through the Internet investigates “new mass media,” including social networks and blogs, where different Islamic content is now regularly disseminated.

Islamic content is available in VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Twitter and YouTube. In the Russian-language media space, there are more than a hundred different sites on Islamic subjects, regardless of the *mazhab* and target orientation that contain a section devoted to the issues of family and women. Some sites are specially created for female audience members. All of them present the advantages of a Muslim lifestyle; examine the problems that women face who choose to live according to the Shariah rules in the secular state exhibiting publicly their religiosity through dress-code and other symbols.

This investigation is part of the Russian research project on “Virtual Ethnicity and Cyber-Ethnography: Innovation and Tradition” aimed at studying manifestations of ethnicity and religiosity within the network space. This project made it possible to investigate some aspects of Muslim life on the Internet, including those related to the formation of the contemporary Muslim women’s image in the mass media space. The bulk of data were collected throughout the course of anthropological research within the Muslim segment of the Internet while performing content analysis of textual material, photos and video images.

Islamic visibility on the Internet

The most rapid development of information technologies has transformed the sphere of communication. Thus, the virtual world has become an integral part of modern life and a reflection of social reality. Being on the threshold of the new millennium, ethnographers and anthropologists have found a new field of research, that is the online (cyber-)space with just the same participation of a person, presentation and self-expression of his/her ethnic and religious identity as in the traditional area. The abundance of online resources poses a great many scientific problems concerning the representation of modern-day cultures in virtual space. Many issues are dealt with theoretically in terms of an interdisciplinary approach.² Anthropologists focus their attention on ethnic and

² Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ 2012); Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage: London 2000); Annette N. Markham, *Life Online*:

denominational processes that occur in the online mode and correlate or supplement the obtained results with offline observations.

For the most part, scientists consider the interaction between Islam and the Internet in two aspects. These are “the attitude of Islam towards the Internet” and “the presence of Islam on the Internet.” Qualitative research is being performed to describe Islamic online resources.³ However, research on the Islamic faith using the Internet itself is carried out less frequently.⁴ There are many points of contention on Islam debated in the cyberspace. A wide range of topics are in the public eye with the availability of information and possibility to give one’s own interpretation of traditional texts. An example of this is the hijab discussion among Muslims because the Quran provides little information about it.⁵

Islam enjoys active development on the Internet. There are a lot of electronic resources created by Muslims to disseminate news, rules of the Muslim lifestyle and information about religious notions and rites. Activities are carried out by web-based parishes, jamaats, “Skype” muftis and sheikhs. Some religious practices, among them sermons, prayers, rites, fasting during Ramadan, took place online. Virtual debates on religious topics have become more informative than in real life; pilgrimage sites and Islamic landmarks of historic and cultural value have been digitized. Virtual disputes concerning religious issues are becoming even more informative and relevant than in real life.

Researching Real Experiences in Virtual Pace (Altamira Press: Walnut Creek, CA 1998); Sarah Pink, Heather A. Horst and John Postill, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Sage Publications Limited: Los Angeles 2016); Liav Sade-Beck, “Internet Ethnography: Online and Offline,” in: *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2 (3/2004) (<https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/tc/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4472/3597>, 26 March 2019) et al.

³ Rasha A. Abdulla, *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond* (Peter Lang Publishing: New York 2007); Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis 1999); Kristin Zahra Sands, “Muslims, Identity and Multimodal Communication on the Internet,” in: *Contemporary Islam* 4 (1/2010), 139-155; Daniel Martin Varisco, “Muslims and the media in the blogosphere,” in: *Contemporary Islam* 4 (1/2010), 157-177.

⁴ Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Pluto Press: London 2003); Gary R. Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 2009); Alexis Kort, “Dar al-Cyber Islam: Women, Domestic Violence and the Islamic Reformation on the World Wide Web,” in: *Muslim Minority Affairs* 25 (3/2005), 363-383.

⁵ Heather Marie Akou, “Interpreting Islam Through the Internet: Making Sense of Hijab,” in: *Contemporary Islam* 4 (3/2010), 331-346.

Cyberactivity of Muslims is not only its supplement, but it also expands the area of interactions and offers new possibilities for self-expression.⁶

The communicative and discourse functions in the virtual space are implemented by social networks that connect like-minded people. In virtual groups every participant has his/her own goals, views and opinions, which can either agree with those of other participants or be the subject matter of bitter disputes.

Sociologists made attempts to reveal the essential interrelation between the concepts of “Ummah”⁷ and “crowdsourcing.”⁸ Some of them think that crowdsourcing, as a technology for building social relations, resembles traditional features of the Ummah (Muslim community), and that it therefore has positive prospects for being used both in the format of local projects and on the scale of collective identity.⁹ According to this concept, a virtual platform, like a religious community, unites initiative members of society to implement Islam-oriented projects.

A similar principle forms the basis of the international multi-language Muslim social network *Suhba* (Arabic “community”) and the social network of basic Muslim values SalamWorld developed by the Muslims of Russia.¹⁰ The main idea of the developers is to record positive things in the world of Islam. The *Suhba* service is intended to be the analog of Facebook, or the so-called “Halal Facebook,” functioning on the filtration principle in the case of phenomena negatively perceived by the Muslim community, such as Nazism, violence, terrorism, drugs, gambling, same-sex marriages, etc. The network is intended to unite people with “traditional moral values on the basis of multi-ethnic healthy lifestyle and moral security.” Currently, the *Suhba* service is operating in the demonstration version. The developers think that main users of this network will be residents of the states with Muslim population, including China, India, Russia and former Soviet republics.

⁶ Andrey Golovnev, Svetlana Belorussova and Tatyana Kisser, “Веб-этнография и киберэтничность [Web-ethnography and cyber-ethnicity],” in: *Уральский исторический вестник* 58 (1/2018), 102.

⁷ Ummah (Arabic “community, nation”) is a Muslim community in Islam.

⁸ Crowdsourcing is the practice of solving socially relevant problems by combined forces of many volunteers using information technologies.

⁹ Elena Smolina, “Умма” и “краудсорсинг”: связь понятий в рамках интернет-пространства [“Umma” and “crowdsourcing”: A Connection Between the Notions Within the Internet Space],” in: *Исламоведение* 4 (2015), 74.

¹⁰ Lauren Bon, “Salamworld: социальная сеть для базовых мусульманских ценностей [Salamworld: A social network for Muslim fundamental values],” in: *Ain.ua*, 3 October 2012 (<https://ain.ua/2012/10/03/salamworld-socialnaya-set-dlya-bazovykh-musulmanskih-cennostej>), 30 October 2019).

Intense activities of religious organisations in media space and the growing role of electronic mass media in everyday life allow believers to “cover distances and be aware of the life of Muslim communities in different countries; mobile media and mobile communication technologies help open and create spaces where you can be together with others or feel mutual presence.”¹¹

On the Russian-language Internet there is now formed an almost entirely separate segment. This is the so-called the Islamic Network, which can be self-contained and satisfy all the needs of a Muslim believer. This segment contains nearly all analogs of the Internet resources: from dating sites and clothing stores to search systems where Muslims can find any information about Islam. The Islamic cyberspace has resources aimed against islamophobia and negative attitude towards Islam and intended for the non-Islamic audience. There are also websites focused on Muslims and their problems.¹² Almost all of them include materials contributing to the elimination of the existing prejudices about Muslim women.

Muslim women turn to the Internet in order to assert themselves. They create their own websites; a great many women’s blogs have evolved in recent years. Muslim women think it to be one of the most promising ways to struggle against stereotypes. “We are the best source of information about ourselves,” they say.¹³ Instagram blogs have become a place of creativity where Muslim women can express their thoughts, opinions and attitudes towards religion, family life, motherhood, child upbringing and many other things. The number of women bloggers continues to grow, and this can be partially explained by the fact that the culture of writing and keeping a diary is peculiar to women rather than men. Today’s blogs represent a diary as a cultural example in form and content.¹⁴ Blogging topics raised by Muslim women, in common with the female blogosphere on the Russian Internet as a whole, are

¹¹ Zilya Khabibullina, “Селфи в Мекке: харам или досточтимый хадж? [Taking Selfies in Mecca: Haram or Still the Venerable Hajj],” in *Сибирские исторические исследования* 2 (2019), 88-89.

¹² See Daniel Martin Varisco, “Muslims and the Media in the Blogosphere,” in: *Contemporary Islam* 4 (1/2010), 157-177.

¹³ Nico Colombant, “Активисты раскрывают позитивный образ исламских женщин [Activists Unveil Positive Image of Islamic Women],” in: *Golos-ameriki.ru*, 8 March 2010 (<https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/muslim-woman-misconceptions-2010-03-08-86878007/183394.html>, 15 June 2019).

¹⁴ Anna Gnedash, “Женские сообщества в Online-пространстве: ‘Режимы видимости’ в публичной политике РФ [Women’s Communities in the Online Space: ‘Regimes of Visibility’ in Public Policy of the Russian Federation],” in: *Человек. Сообщество. Управление* 1 (2012), 98.

oriented towards private issues. Contrastingly, it is socio-political topics that prevail in Islamic blogs written by men. Men's blogs are of great interest for network users; they are the most popular and widely read. Of women's topics in men's blogs, the moral teachings and behaviour of modern Muslim women, their appearance in accordance with Shariah rules, and relations with men are the most popular.

Islam in Russia – “traditional” and “non-traditional”

Russian society often has a misunderstanding about Islam and its followers despite the fact that Islam is the second largest religion in the Russian Federation after Christianity. Similar to Europe, Islam in Russia is often associated in people's minds with violence and fanaticism, whereas Muslims themselves associate their religion with justice and democracy. The confrontation of these two standpoints reinforces “the defense mechanisms” on both parts.¹⁵ Figures that show the number of Muslims in Russia are conditional, since Russian censuses do not reflect the religious denomination. Muslims comprise about ten percent of the population in the country (from fourteen and a half to twenty million people). The majority of Russian Muslims are native Turkic peoples of the Volga-Ural region and ethnic groups of North Caucasus. Islam began to spread over the country in the early 1640s, and nowadays it is the traditional religion among more than thirty indigenous ethnic groups in Russia as well as a considerable number of permanent or temporary migrants. In seven constituent entities of the Russian Federation Muslim people are in the majority: 98% in Ingushetia, 96% in Chechnya, 94% in Dagestan, 70% in Kabardino-Balkaria, 54.6% in Karachay-Cherkessia, 54.5% in Bashkortostan and 54% in Tatarstan.¹⁶ Recent studies report on the progressive increase in the number of Muslims in Russia, both due to their natural growth and migrants primarily from Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan and also due to the growing number of new converts. For example, between 2009 and 2012 Russia saw a decrease in the number of Orthodox Christians (by 6%) and an increase in the

¹⁵ Isabelle Rigonì, “Media and Muslims in Europe,” in: Jorgen S. Nielsen (ed.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe 1* (Brill: Leiden and Boston 2009), 475.

¹⁶ See Информационные материалы об окончательных итогах Всероссийской переписи населения 2010 года [Information Material on the Final Results of the Russian Census of 2010]. (https://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/perepis_itogi1612.htm, 25 September 2019).

number of the followers of Islam (by 3%).¹⁷ There is fear of islamisation in Russian society heightened by users of the Russian-language segment of the Internet who hold on to the idea of islamisation and tend to publish on the Internet most actively.

Russian Islam is now closely identified by citizens of the country with the Muslim world, especially in terms of Northern Caucasus. Muslims themselves show a growing perception of the Russian Ummah as part of the Islamic world. An inevitable process of Russian Muslims' integration into the global Islamic community is accompanied by growing religiosity and influence of large Islamic centres, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. Among Muslim peoples of Russia there is a growing need for unity, cohesion and solidarity inherent in the concept of the Muslim Ummah accompanied by the tendency to obey the rules of Islam, including Islamic dress-code, careful fulfillment of rituals, demonstration of religious symbols often poorly understood in secular society.

In the 1990s, Russia saw the subdivision of Islam into "traditional" and "non-traditional" for the purpose to distinguish radical interpretations of Islam and identify the peculiar features of Islam in Russia defined as the religion of "peace and tolerance." In the context of the state's religious policy, "traditional Islam" at the present-day stage is intended to consolidate Russian Muslims within one country and serve as a powerful resource for the formation of civil unity. The term used by representatives of government authorities, religious organizations, ethnic associations, scientific communities and mass media is the commonly accepted notion in the Russian Islamic space. However, there is no unambiguous definition of this notion, and different social groups interpret this word combination in many ways to substantiate their own standpoints on one or another issue of the Russian Ummah. Quite recently, in the course of his meeting with Muftis of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin stated the need to create Muslim cultural and women's centres. "New socialisation of Islam should be viewed as the development of traditional Muslim lifestyle, way of thinking and opinions in accordance with contemporary social reality, as opposed to the ideology of radical leaders pushing people into the Medieval

¹⁷ В России за 3 года доля православных сократилась, мусульман – возросла [In Russia the percentage of Orthodox Christians has decreased and that of Muslims have increased over 3 years], in: *Regnum.ru*, 17 December 2012 (<https://regnum.ru/news/1605531.html#ixzz2mnq3ThZy>, 10 August 2019).

Agas. New forms of activities are of importance here, including approaches to Muslim cultural centres, Islamic scientific and educational organisations, youth and women's clubs," the Head of the State said at the meeting.¹⁸ In his turn, Mufti Ravil Gaynuddin noted, "Along with the President of our country, we are confident that intense social activities of Russian Muslim women make an inestimable contribution to the future of our country. Through the combined efforts we shall be able to solve hot issues, including the hijab problem, create the matchmaking institution, establish centres for family building, crisis centres for women and centres of confidence; we shall also be able to form a positive image of Muslim women in the country. Around the Internet, Muslim women attract much attention and interest throughout the world becoming trendsetters of fashion and lifestyle."¹⁹

Research on the Russian mass media shows that there is certainly no unambiguous understanding of what is radical Islam versus traditional Islam in the press. "In mass media, radical Islam is associated with the insecurity in the North Caucasian regions, and also in any other insecure regions of the world. Traditional Islam is mainly described as moderate and loyal to authorities. In this regard, all bad things are considered to come from radical Islam, while all good things from traditional Islam."²⁰

In the information space, the visibility mode of Islam follows the lines of "traditional" and "non-traditional" and stereotypes are built on these ideas.

Stereotypes of Muslim women in society and broadcast media

In modern-day societies, mass media (press, radio, television) play a tremendous role in creating the image of the social world. The mass communication system is the most important channel to acquire information about society and one of the main tools of learning new things. The role of mass media in the process of social cognition lies also in the fact that they often propose a

¹⁸ Ravil Gaynuddin, Greetings at the conference "Роль женщины в современном обществе [The Role of a Woman in Modern Society]" took place on 9–10 November 2019 in Saratov, in: *Muslim.ru*, 1 December 2019 (https://islam-today.ru/zhenshchina_v_islame/blogery-musulmanki-zavoevyvaut-internet/, 28 October 2019).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Maria Zaprometova, "Есть ли в России исламофобия, и почему русские обращаются в ислам: доклады в МВИСЭН [Is there Islamophobia in Russia, and Why do Russians Convert to Islam: Reports at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSSES)]," in: *Mbknews.today*, 16 October 2019 (<https://mbknews.today/sences/est-li-v-rossii-islamofobiya/>, 25 November 2019).

ready-made image of one or another social phenomenon. The image of Islam in the Russian information space has frequently been the subject matter of scientific inquiry for Russian specialists.²¹ According to these studies, the image of a Muslim is formed in Russian society under the influence of actions undertaken by religious extremists, conflicts with participation of Muslims, and radical statements of Muslim politicians and spiritual leaders.

In the Internet mass media (both in TV channels and publishing houses), there is a stable thematic set concerning the semantic binding between “Muslim – Islam” and terrorism.²² It is the first federal TV channel and the “News” channel that associate growing terrorism and criminality with Islam in their information agenda. As regards the cultural life and also the issues of inculcation of Muslims in the Russian Federation, the priority in covering the events is accorded to TV Rain, news aggregators Google News, Yandex News and Rossiyskaya Gazeta.²³

In official Russian mass media, the most detailed materials on the existing stereotypes about Muslim women’s lifestyle were written by Aida Soboleva. Being a journalist and a documentary filmmaker who has been working in the official broadcasting system for many years, she says that the image of a Muslim woman was formed in the Russian information space in accordance with political changes.²⁴

²¹ See, for example, Shukran Suleymanova, “Образ мусульман в ФедеральныхСМИ: мифы о “чужаках”и “врагах России” как угроза единству нации [The Image of Muslims in the Federal Mass Media: The Myth of ‘Outsiders’ and ‘Enemies of Russia’ as a Threat to the Unity of the Nation],” in: *Ислам в современном мире* 11 (1/2015), 135-142; Sofia Ragozina, “Анализ лексической сочетаемости лексемы ‘ислам’” в российских печатных СМИ (2010-2013) [The co-occurrence range of the word Islam in the Russian Print Media (2010–2013)],” in: *Исламоведение* 8 (1/2017), 112-130.

²² Natalia Kuzina, “Семантика и контекст лексем ‘ислам’ и ‘мусульманин’ в современном российском официальном информационном пространстве и в актуальном общественном сознании (анализ федеральных СМИ, новостных агрегаторов, запросов пользователей сети интернет) [The Semantics and Context of the Lexemes ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ in Russia’s Official Media Space and in the People’s Minds Today (an analysis of the federal media, news aggregators, and Internet users’ searches)],” in: Zilya Khabibullina (ed.), *Российский ислам в трансформационных процессах современности: новые вызовы и тенденции развития в XXI веке* (Dialog: Ufa 2017), 165.

²³ Khabibullina, *Российский*, 166.

²⁴ Aida Soboleva, “К вопросу об образе женщины-мусульманки в российском информационном пространстве [On the Image of Muslim Women in the Russian Media],” in: Irina Frolova and Liliya Gazizova (eds.), *Статус женщины-мусульманки в поликонфессиональном обществе: история и современность* (WorldPress: 2016), 105-111.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russian mass media have got rid of ideological and antireligious principles, but contrarily, they have been commercialised resulting in the dependence on ratings, advertisers, sponsors, and investors. At the state level, broadcasting of Islamic festivals is still financially supported on federal TV channels. Also, educational programs on Islam were broadcast for some time and then got gradually cancelled in the crisis periods. For example, the program called “Now” was cancelled in 1995. The weekly program “The Muslims” on the first Russian TV channel managed to last from 2002 until 2015. In 2004, All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company cancelled its radio program “The Voice of Islam” broadcast each Friday since 1991. Programs on the life of Muslims still continue to be broadcast on local TV channels and radio stations. Virtually, every religious organisation has its own publishing arm.

Since the late 1990s, the entire structure of the Russian information space has been radically changed with the development of the Internet. Press has become multimedia and reached a wide audience. In the early 1990s, during the most active renewal of religious life in the post-Soviet space, federal and local mass media considered Islamic topics from the positive standpoint. Muslim women wearing traditional clothes, preparing halal (healthy) food and studying spiritual literature were perceived as the guarantors for renewal and preservation of the best national traditions.

However, with the beginning of the Chechen campaign in the mid-1990s, Islam began to be strongly associated with the image of a female homicide bomber. Over the period from 2000 to 2013 they performed twenty-one terrorist acts in Russia. Formal hijab styling, patriarchal values and gender inequality are still associated with Muslim women by the majority of people. The image of an oppressed Muslim woman remains prevalent. As users of social media platforms write, “They stay at home. There is polygamy in Islam. They give birth to many children and give up a career for the sake of their family. This culture turns a woman into a hostage of her own family. She becomes a slave to her children or has to compete with the other wife. She never goes outside the house and cannot communicate with anyone, because she is afraid of her husband.”²⁵

²⁵ Мифы о мусульманских женщинах [Myths about Muslim Women], in: *Ислам и семья. Исламский информационный духовно-просветительский портал*, 5 July 2017 (<http://www.islamisemya.com/mify-o-musulmanskikh-zhenshchinakh.html#prettyPhoto>, 25 August 2019).

We should agree with Aida Soboleva that “in Russian society there are currently two persistent negative stereotypes concerning a woman who follows Islam:

- A Muslim woman is passive and downtrodden;
- A Muslim woman tends to follow extremism.”²⁶

Islamic themes are actively manipulated by mass media in the political context using standard definitions such as “Vakhabites,” “Islamic Fundamentalists,” “Mojaheds,” “Shakhids,” and so on. Political problems acquire a religious subtext growing sometimes to a level of generalisations.

This critique of Muslim women begins with their appearance: Why do they cover the entire body and sometimes even veil the face? People judge these women by appearance and have no interest in their inner world and moral values.

The peculiar features of Muslim clothes are used as a resource to create and dispute the social visibility of Muslims. Mass media promote the image of an anonymous Muslim woman. By means of photos where Muslim women are dressed in black niqabs, they become “homogenised” and are often represented as silent inanimate victims who need to be protected and are unable to accept Western values. However, many Muslim women do not wear headscarves and only few of them in Russia hide their faces completely.

Muslim women’s visibility mode in the Russian Islamic Internet content in the fight against stereotypes

Almost all Islamic sites contain material aimed at dispelling myths on passivity, lack of education and aggressiveness of Muslim women. Muslim women are convinced that there is little information in mass media about successful women in Islam and their true status remains concealed. “A Muslim woman” seems now to be a synonym for “a helpless victim,” authors say on the site “Islam Today.”²⁷

²⁶ Aida Soboleva, “К вопросу об образе женщины-мусульманки в российском информационном пространстве [On the Image of Muslim Women in Russian Mass Media],” in: Irina Frolova and Liliya Gazizova (eds.), *Статус женщины-мусульманки в поликонфессиональном обществе: история и современность* (WorldPress: 2016), 108.

²⁷ Медиа-стереотипы, разрушающие жизнь мусульманки [Media Stereotypes Destroying the Life of a Muslim Woman], in: *Islam Today Kazan*, 23 February 2014 (https://islam-today.ru/zhenshhina_v_islame/media-stereotipy-razrusausie-zizn-musulmanki/, 28 November 2019).

As regards the religious symbols, in the Internet space Muslim women urge their co-religionists to reject black cloaks in order not to attract people's attention and make a terrifying impression. "Traditional Muslim dark abayas, that is, black clothes covering a woman's figure from head to foot and hiding face completely are inappropriate in Russian society," they think and recommend choosing bright colours and ornate prints.²⁸ There is now a whole fashion trend of the so-called "hijabists." They show fashionable hijabs and share ideas in their blogs and on Instagram. One can find them by the hashtags #hijabista, #hijabfashionand #hijabstreetstyle.

However, despite appeals on the part of Muslims to fairly reflect the reality, Islamic mass media are mainly focused on missionary work and dissemination of information about the benefit of belief for women. They almost say nothing about scientific, creative and sporting achievements of those Muslim women who lead a lifestyle inconsistent with religious laws and yet identify themselves with Islam by origin. Islamic mass media give little information about women's participation in public and political life of the country and their interaction with the followers of other religions, but much is written about beauty, fashion, clothing, halal cosmetics and rules of behaviour according to the Sunnah.

There is a tendency among Muslim women to keep blogs on the Internet where they have a chance to display their lifestyle and share their thoughts and impressions. In Russia the most popular female Instagram bloggers are:

- Aydan Mamedova (forty thousand followers), the Azerbaijan by origin, is a journalist, a blogger and an anchorperson of the program "Islamic Mosaic" on the TV channel Russia twenty-four.
- Aygul Gabaydulina (twelve thousand female followers) writes a "strict blog for strict Muslim women." The author writes in a very detailed, accessible form about her vision of life in the Muslim countries.
- Aleksandra Golovkova (more than four hundred sixty-three thousand followers) known as "The Most Stylish Muslim Woman of Russia," "Beauty in Hijab," "Modest Beauty." The conversion to Islam by a Russian girl provoked keen interest among the users of social networks. The image created by Aleksandra has become a fashion icon for a great number of young Muslim

²⁸ Как выглядит и кто такая современная мусульманка [What does a modern Muslim woman look like and who is she], in: *Muslim Fashion – все о мусульманской моде* (https://muslimfashion.ru/news/muslim_news/modern_muslim_women,_how_they_look_like, 10 September 2019).

women. Her dress-code, the way of wearing a headscarf, photos, selfies and many other things have gained unprecedented popularity and led to imitation.

- Safiya Umm Ibrahim (forty thousand Muslim followers), the Georgian, is a physician by profession. She writes a medical blog and recommends using *Hijama* known as cupping therapy to treat and prevent diseases.

Such official Islamic organisations as the Russian Council of Muftis and the Central Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Russia are also engaged in creating a positive image of the Muslim woman. The image of a contemporary female Muslim is presented by Nailya Ziganshina, Head of the Union of Russian Muslim Women, on the website “The Muslims of Russia” in the following words, “We see the image of a Muslim woman in such a way. The beauty of her soul should necessarily be reflected in her appearance. She is well-educated, affable, favourably disposed towards the people around, not indifferent to social problems, eager to earn the grace of Allah, our Almighty, and certainly she is active in solving social problems. All these merits should be incarnated in a genuinely believing woman.”²⁹

Each year in Ufa the Spiritual Administration holds the All-Russian Women’s Forum at which they discuss “the problems of morality, family, parenting, issues concerning Muslim women’s self-actualisation in society and their influence on the destinies of both society and country.”³⁰ The event is accompanied by a trade exhibition of halal goods and services and closes with a contest among married women “Super Daughter-in-Law”, where each participant presents a written permission from her husband and a recommendation from her mother-in law.³¹ The event is a kind of closed entertainment, and unfortunately, it does not aim at solving the problems of Muslim women in society with its stereotypes of mistrust.

A similar situation is observed in the Islamic Internet resources. Muslim women do not try to engage in dialogue with society, often assert their exclusion and claim special rights. In order to find reliable information about the

²⁹ Доклад Наиلى Зиганшиной “Образ современной мусульманки в России” [Report by Nailya Ziganshina “The Image of a Modern Muslim Woman in Russia”], in: *Мусульмане России. Официальный сайт Духовного управления мусульман Российской Федерации*, 5 May 2012 (<http://dumrf.ru/dumer/speeches/3375>, 25 August 2019).

³⁰ В Уфе состоялся V Всероссийский форум женственности [The 5th All-Russian Forum of Femininity was held in Ufa], in: *Центральное духовное управление мусульман России*, 3 December 2017 (<http://www.cdum.ru/news/44/8942/>, 15 November 2019).

³¹ Ibid.

status of a Muslim woman, Islamic sites recommend that the “non-Muslim” part of society read the Quran and hadiths. For example, they advocate the possibility to wear hijab without feeling confused and biased on the part of other people or to be absent during the working hours for *namaz* and Friday sermon. Russian Islamic mass media emphasise women’s high status according to the Islamic religious canons and admit the non-performance of religious precepts to a proper degree and, as a result, women’s discrimination in family and society. Last year I was lucky to conduct field research in Saudi Arabia during the Hajj. I spent almost a month with Muslim women and had the chance to observe their lifestyle. In fact, the visibility mode among Muslim women includes emphasised piety; they compete with each other in the thoroughness of observing religious rules, ostentatious wearing of headscarves and prescribed clothes, modesty and obedience to the opposite gender.

It should be noted that the Internet is highly efficient in improving the image of one or another religion. The greater part of information for traditional mass media, such as television, radio and press, is found online, that is, the global networks exert either direct or indirect effect on the formation of images and visibility modes. The Internet is filled up with real people, and information put on the website reflects social reality. In order to change the attitude towards religious people and cope with various phobias, Muslims create databases and attract attention to the resources about Islam and its followers informing of their traditions. In our days, the sphere of using the Internet by Muslims is considerably expanded, and the formation of the image of Islam will still continue in the future by means of the Internet.

Conclusions

The problem of the Muslim woman’s image is the cross-link for the categories of religion, gender and policy. The negative image of a Muslim woman existing in the Russian mass media attests to the formation of islamophobia. This facilitates the use of the Internet by Muslims as a platform for them to announce protests against information discrimination. On the other hand, there is a feeling of the growing danger of Islam inspired among non-Muslims under the influence of mass media. Eventually, mutual distrust emerges and develops on both parts. The visibility mode of a Muslim woman displayed by Islamic mass media includes beauty, womanhood and piety and fails to break the negative image of a Muslim woman existing in society through the opposition of housekeeping and family values with such harmful stereotypes as backwardness and aggression. The Muslim woman’s status is aggravated by her

visible closedness to Islamic community, demonstration of outward religiosity, development of patriarchal gender in a society, where Orthodoxy predominates and there are different faiths, but not the aspiration to exhibit her level of education.

The study of Islamic mass media in the gender aspect suggests that there is a specific situation in Russia associated with Islamic feminism among Muslim women spread throughout the Eastern countries, Europe and the United States finds no response on the part of the Russian Muslims. There is no well-organised Islamic feminist association in Russia.³² The movement of Russian Muslim women does not imply the struggle for gender equality, but is the struggle against the existing stereotypes about Islam in society. Islamic mass media reflect the struggle against stereotypes about the lifestyle of a Muslim woman that develops in two directions. These are overcoming of negative ideas about Islam as a whole and struggle with public opinion for the right to obey religious prescripts. In Europe many Islamic mass media disseminate feminist views, but in Russia we do not observe such a phenomenon.

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³² Alsu Gusmanova, Феминизм в исламе: Как женщины-мусульманки отстаивают свои права [Feminism in Islam: How Muslim Women Defend Their Rights], in: *Enter*, 24 October 2017 (<https://entermedia.io/people/feminizm-v-islame-kak-zhenshhiny-musulmanki-otstaivayut-svoi-prava/>, 10 September 2019).