Between Exclusion and Agency: Muslim Women's Everyday Belonging in the Netherlands

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Abstract: This thesis examined how Muslim women in the Netherlands navigated an imposed political label of "Muslimness" and how this shaped their experiences of belonging across everyday and institutional settings. Drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews and two participant observations, the study analysed experiences in education, work, community spaces, and national and political contexts. The findings showed that belonging was not a stable condition but a situational and conditional process. Across arenas, belonging was often partial and could be withdrawn when religious visibility, institutional norms, or politicised moments made Muslimness salient as a boundary of exclusion. While participants experienced stronger belonging in community and women-led spaces, belonging was more fragile in schools, workplaces, and in relation to the Dutch nation. Women responded through everyday strategies such as managing visibility, explaining religious practices, and selectively engaging or withdrawing. Although these strategies created moments of ease and recognition, they rarely translated into secure or transferable belonging. By following the same women across multiple arenas, this study showed how exclusion and agency were intertwined in contexts where recognition remained partial and unstable.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, Muslim women are frequently positioned at the center of debates on integration, emancipation, and national identity. They are often framed as symbolic 'others' against which Dutchness is defined. Their dress, family roles, or perceived religiosity frequently become shorthand for questions about cultural compatibility and security. (Flood et. al, 2012). Populist and right-wing movements have strengthened this image, framing Islam as culturally backward and irreconcilable with Dutch liberalism (Van Es, 2019). The impact of these narratives is ongoing. For instance, in 2025, a social media post by Wilders depicting veiled women sparked thousands of discrimination reports.

This topic remains relevant because dominant representations of Muslim women continue to shape how they are positioned and treated in everyday and institutional contexts, while often obscuring how women themselves experience belonging. Within broader processes of cultural homogenisation, Muslims are frequently cast as a unified and problematic category. Gendered Islamophobic discourse reinforces this dynamic by depicting Muslim men as threatening and Muslim women as passive victims in need of rescue (Gashi & Essanhaji, 2023)

Academic research reflects similar tensions. Studies of exclusion focus on how Muslim women are categorised through emancipation, integration, and securitisation discourses (Farris, 2017; Gashi & Essanhaji, 2023), while research on agency primarily highlights visible, activist, or collective forms of engagement (Yılmaz & Sönmez, 2023; Güner & Abbas, 2025). Few studies, however, follow the same women across multiple everyday and institutional arenas to examine how exclusion and agency are experienced, negotiated, and intertwined in daily life. As a result, we know relatively little about how Muslim women navigate imposed Muslimness across schools, workplaces, community spaces, and encounters with the state, or how these arenas together shape their sense of belonging.

This leads to the central puzzle: in Dutch debates, "Muslimness" often functions as a politicized boundary of exclusion, yet Muslim women simultaneously build community and claim belonging in everyday life.
Research question: How do Muslim women in the Netherlands negotiate an imposed political label of "Muslimness" into practices of belonging across everyday and institutional arenas?

By addressing this gap, this study linked structural exclusion to Muslim women's lived experiences across everyday and institutional arenas, showing how imposed Muslimness was actively navigated and sometimes mobilised in daily life. The study's contribution lay in demonstrating that belonging in the Netherlands was not a stable status but a situational and conditional process, shaped by the interaction between institutional boundary-making and women's everyday practices of agency. In doing so, it advanced existing debates on belonging and Muslim agency by bringing exclusion and agency into a single empirical and analytical framework. The Netherlands was theoretically relevant because it combined a strong self-image of tolerance and gender equality with an exclusionary politics of belonging centred on cultural norms, creating a context in which conditional belonging was widely normalised.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Belonging and politics of belonging.

Belonging is central to this study and refers both to the lived experience of feeling "at home" and to the political processes through which inclusion and exclusion are organised. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between everyday belonging, understood as emotional attachment and comfort, and the politics of belonging, which concerns the boundary-drawing practices that determine who is recognised as part of a community or nation.

Building on this perspective, this study treats belonging as inherently conditional rather than secure. Drawing on Yodovich (2021) and Lægaard (2012), conditional belonging is understood as a liminal condition in which inclusion is granted provisionally and remains subject to ongoing evaluation. This understanding aligns with theorisation of citizenship in Europe, which shows that formal membership does not guarantee secure belonging, as recognition remains contingent and revocable (de Waal, 2020).

Drawing on Yuval-Davis' distinction, this study operationalises belonging along two dimensions: felt belonging and the politics of belonging. Felt belonging refers to emotional and relational experiences, such as feeling accepted, recognised, or at ease in particular places and relationships. The politics of belonging refers to the institutional and symbolic practices through which belonging is granted, tested, or withdrawn, including expectations of Dutchness or of being an "acceptable" Muslim. This dual perspective allows analysis of both

everyday experiences of comfort and recognition and moments in which belonging becomes conditional or withdrawn across arenas such as education, work, and public space.

To analyse how these dynamics operate in practice, the study also draws on the concept of misrecognition. Misrecognition refers to situations in which individuals are formally included but have their competence or legitimacy questioned through routine practices such as lowered expectations, dismissal, or stereotypical assumptions (Da Silva et al., 2022; Barreto et al., 2010). Treating belonging as conditional and misrecognition as both experienced and anticipated allows analysis of how Muslim women navigate inclusion through everyday practices.

Empirically, felt belonging was traced through participants' accounts of comfort, ease, and recognition in specific settings, while the politics of belonging was traced through moments of categorisation, institutional judgement, and expectations of conformity in interactions, and everyday encounters.

2.2 Identity and Political Identity

Identity is a widely used but contested concept. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) proposed treating it as an analytical category with three dimensions: categorization (how others define someone), identification (self-understandings), and groupness (moments of collective solidarity). This study adopted their framework to examine how Muslim women's identities were shaped externally and internally. Categorization was traced through labels and assumptions in interaction, identification through self-descriptions in interviews, and groupness through references to collective 'we'-positions in interviews and observation. Identity became political when the category "Muslim" was imposed in public or institutional settings and taken up by women as a shared point of identification. In the Dutch context, this meant that conditional and performative expectations of loyalty and cultural fit shaped political identity.

2.3 Muslimness as a Political Label

Muslimness is approached here as a contested political identity whose relevance shifts across contexts; it may remain latent in some arenas and become activated in others, such as during political crises, public encounters, or moments of heightened visibility. Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), categorisation is understood as both imposed and chosen. In this study,

Muslimness functions as a political boundary category through which inclusion, exclusion, and recognition are negotiated.

Analytically, Muslimness is examined as both imposed and strategically mobilised. Imposed Muslimness refers to moments in which participants were positioned as Muslim by others, for example, through labels such as “backward” or “unintegrated,” bureaucratic gatekeeping, or readings based on visible markers such as a veil, name, or accent. Strategic Muslimness captures instances in which participants themselves drew on Islamic identity to build solidarity or community, including through women-led initiatives and reframing progressive values through an Islamic lens.

2.4 Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a framework for analysing how multiple social positions interact in shaping belonging. Crenshaw (1991) introduced the concept to show how different systems of inequality overlap, while Collins (2015) emphasised that categories such as race, class, gender, and religion are interdependent. Anthias (2012) expanded this through the idea of translocational positionality, which stresses that people’s positions shift across contexts and relations of power. For this study, intersectionality highlighted how Muslim women’s belonging was shaped by the interaction of gender, religion, and generation, and how these positions shifted across contexts. This perspective directly informed the intersectional sampling grid used in the study, ensuring variation across visibility, class, generation and locality. Intersectionality was traced empirically by examining how multiple positions, such as gender, religion, generation, class, and visibility, co-occurred and shifted across arenas.

2.5 Defining Dutchness

To understand exclusion, it is necessary to analyze how Dutchness itself functions as a boundary. Scholars argue that Dutchness is often constructed in opposition to an “other” (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2015), particularly the Muslim immigrant. In this study, Dutchness was treated as a contested boundary category. It was traced both through participants’ own civic and behavioural definitions of Dutchness in interviews, and through moments of ascription in everyday and institutional interactions where Dutchness was granted, questioned, or denied

Synthesis

These concepts formed an integrated analytical framework for examining Muslim women's belonging in the Netherlands. External boundary constructions, particularly politicised Muslimness and normative ideas of Dutchness, shaped the conditions under which belonging was enabled or withheld across everyday and institutional arenas such as education, work, and community spaces. Women's responses to these boundaries, including strategic Muslimness and boundary-setting, produced situated and shifting experiences of belonging rather than fixed inclusion or exclusion. Intersectionality functioned as the overarching lens through which these processes were analysed, explaining variation across visibility, generation, class, locality, and forms of civic or political engagement.

3. Literature Review

Research on Muslim women's belonging in the Netherlands has expanded in recent years, reflecting broader debates surrounding integration and identity in Europe. Yet literature remains divided between studies that emphasize exclusion and those that exemplify agency. The following review discusses four key themes emerging from the literature: (1) representations of Muslim women and their agency; (2) belonging as everyday practice; (3) politics of belonging and boundary-making; and (4) the Dutch context of secularism, tolerance, and national identity. These themes illustrate how existing research has shaped our understanding of belonging while revealing where it remains incomplete.

3.1 Muslim Women, Agency, and Representation

Recent studies have examined how Muslim women in the Netherlands respond to exclusionary discourses and assert belonging, often focusing on visible and public forms of engagement. Eijberts (2015) shows how integration debates after 2003 framed Muslim women as backward and dependent, using their presumed lack of emancipation to define Dutch modernity. While her analysis highlights how women are positioned as symbolic tests of progress, it pays less attention to how they navigate these framings in their everyday lives. Van Es (2019) similarly focuses on Muslim women who act as ambassadors of Islam, emphasising organised and representational forms of agency. Other studies likewise foreground public or collective forms of engagement, such as the construction of a "new ummah" (Yılmaz & Sönmez, 2023) or elite activist engagement through Islamic feminism (Güner & Abbas, 2025).

Building on these debates, this study shifts attention away from public or activist forms of agency and instead examines how non-activist Muslim women manage belonging in ordinary, everyday settings.

3.2 Politics of Belonging and Boundary-Making

Theories of belonging often stress boundaries between "us" and "them," yet many studies focus primarily on how inclusion and exclusion are framed and justified, rather than how they are experienced. Drawing on the concept of the politics of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006) and Anthias (2012) show how boundaries are organised through political and symbolic processes, but pay less attention to how individuals navigate these boundaries in everyday life.

Earlier work defined belonging primarily in terms of valued involvement and fit (Hagerty et al., 1992), while more recent scholarship has emphasised its relational and situational character (Allen & Kern, 2022; Loxston & Jachens, 2023). In the Dutch context, belonging is not treated as a settled status but as an ongoing test, positioning migrants and their descendants as permanently "not yet integrated" (Schinkel, 2013).

Together, this literature offers a strong account of how boundaries of belonging are produced and justified through political and symbolic processes, but provides less insight into how such boundaries are encountered, anticipated, and managed by individuals in everyday and institutional interactions.

3.4 Dutch Context: Secularism, Tolerance, and the National Narrative

In the Dutch context, belonging has been closely tied to ideals of secularism, tolerance, and gender equality. Tonkens and Duyvendak (2016) and Ghorashi (2010) show how debates about "protecting our culture" position Muslims as outsiders who are expected to demonstrate their alignment with Dutch liberal values continually. In this context, Dutchness is articulated through norms surrounding gender, sexuality, and religion.

Islam has increasingly functioned as a central boundary of exclusion, often replacing ethnicity as the primary marker of difference (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2015). Muslim women in particular become symbolically charged figures in debates about national values and social cohesion (Farris, 2017). Bracke (2011), Schrijvers (2022) trace how emancipation,

sexual freedom, and distancing from religion came to signify Dutch modernity, producing forms of inclusion that are conditional and selectively extended.
While this work provides a detailed account of the symbolic and discursive construction of Dutchness, it pays comparatively less attention to how these moral expectations are experienced and negotiated by Muslim women in their daily lives and across different social contexts..

3.5 Belonging as Everyday Practice

Recent empirical research increasingly approaches belonging as something that is lived, negotiated, and situational. Loxston and Jachens (2023) show how experiences of discrimination can disrupt belonging while also prompting women to actively manage visibility and identity, foregrounding the emotional and psychological dimensions of belonging. Related research shows that when misrecognition is anticipated, individuals may adjust how they present themselves in order to shape how they are perceived (Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2007; Amer, 2019). Using life stories, Buitelaar (2006) similarly illustrates how religion, gender, and class intersect in shaping how belonging is experienced and narrated at the individual level.

Focusing on everyday contexts is particularly important because dominant images of Muslim women as oppressed continue to shape how they are treated in ordinary interactions (Abu-Lughod, 2002). For visibly Muslim women, this often takes the form of subtle exclusion and everyday microaggressions in workplaces and public spaces (Ghorashi, 2018; Gashi & Essanhaji, 2023). Even without formal legal bans in the Netherlands, acceptance frequently depends on minimising religious visibility, reinforcing informal boundaries around belonging tied to ideas of modernity and emancipation (Bracke, 2011).

This literature conceptualises belonging as a lived and relational process, but tends to focus on individual experiences and narratives, offering less insight into how everyday belonging is shaped by institutional power or negotiated across multiple social arenas.

Gap:

Overall, existing research shows how Muslim women in the Netherlands are positioned as symbolic figures in debates on integration and emancipation, and how some respond through activism, Islamic feminism, or community-building practices. However, few studies follow

non-activist Muslim women across multiple everyday arenas or connect their experiences of belonging to the institutional politics of belonging and imposed Muslimness. In particular, existing research rarely traces the same women across education, work, community spaces, and encounters with state institutions. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how Muslim women negotiate belonging across different arenas within a single national context. It examines how the conditions of belonging are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in everyday life.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Focus

This study uses a qualitative design to examine how Muslim women in the Netherlands experience belonging, imposed Muslimness, and agency across everyday arenas. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe how they experienced exclusion and how they responded to it in everyday situations

Because belonging emerges through interaction, the study focuses on two everyday arenas where participants reported the most detailed experiences: education and local community spaces. Education was selected as a formal institutional arena in which belonging is shaped by dominant norms of Dutchness, while community spaces were selected as informal arenas where recognition and solidarity are more likely to be negotiated on participants' own terms. . Other arenas, including work and national or political contexts, emerged inductively from the interviews as participants themselves identified these settings as central to their experiences of belonging.

4.2 Sampling Strategy

Sampling followed a purposive strategy supported by an intersectional sampling grid to ensure variation across key social positions. Because belonging, visibility, and agency are shaped by intersecting factors such as class, gender, migration history, and locality, analytical contrast was essential. Including both activist and non-activist participants prevented overgeneralizing from particularly visible or politically engaged women.

Table X. Intersectional Positioning Grid

Dimension	Indicators/Categories	Use in Sampling
Generation	First generation; second generation	Ensure variation across migration histories
Migration Background	Refugee background; labor migration; family reunification; citizen-born	Compare experiences across legal-political and settlement pathways
Ethnic background	Turkish; Moroccan; Syrian; Somali; other	Cover major groups while allowing intra-group diversity
Religiosity / visibility	Veiled / non-veiled; practicing / non-practicing	Balance more and less visibly Muslim women
Education / institutional positioning	Secondary education; higher education; student / early career	Capture variation in exposure to schools, universities, and workplaces
Locality	Large city; medium-sized town	Compare urban versus smaller-town contexts
Activism / civic engagement	Activist; non-activist	Avoid overgeneralizing from highly engaged cases

4.3 Operationalization of Concepts

Table Y. Operationalisation of Key Concepts

Concept	Definition	Indicators	Data Source
Belonging	A felt sense of emplacement and recognition, as well as the outcome of boundary practices that include or exclude individuals.	Feeling at home; feeling recognized; trusted networks; place attachment; perceived acceptance or conditional acceptance; tests of belonging (e.g., proving Dutchness); expectations to perform as a "good Muslim".	Interviews; participant observation
Imposed Muslimness	Externally ascribed Muslim identity shaped by integration, emancipation, and securitization discourses, through which Muslim identity becomes a political category.	Labels such as "backward" or "unintegrated"; stereotyping in schools, workplaces, or neighborhoods; questioning of loyalty; selective rule enforcement; being positioned as "not really Dutch".	Interviews; participant observation
Strategic Muslimness	The active mobilization of Muslim identity to assert dignity, claim space or reshape dominant narratives.	Participation in women-led study circles or mosque initiatives; appeals to modesty norms or religious principles; reframing Dutch civic values as compatible with Muslimness.	Interviews; participant observation
Identity	Identity conceptualized through categorization, identification, and groupness (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).	External categorizations by teachers, employers, peers or media; self-descriptions; collective "we"-positions; expressions of solidarity; tensions between being categorized as Muslim and identifying as Dutch.	Interviews
Dutchness	Civic and cultural norms invoked as national boundary markers that can include or exclude.	References to equality, openness or freedom directed at Muslims; women's rights contrasted with Islam; moments of recognition as Dutch; experiences where Dutchness is withheld.	Interviews; participant observation

Intersectionality was operationalised by analysing how concepts co-occurred and shifted across participants and arenas rather than as isolated categories. Coding focused on overlapping positions (e.g., Muslimness, gender, generation, and visibility) and changes in positionality across education, work, and community spaces. Analytical matrices were used to compare experiences of belonging across different combinations of participants' social positions**.**

4.4 Sample

A total of 15 Muslim women were interviewed for this study. This sample size was sufficient for in-depth qualitative analysis and thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Recruitment was more challenging among first-generation women, resulting in a sample weighted toward second-generation and highly educated participants. Despite this, meaningful variation was achieved across age, visibility, religious practice, and forms of civic engagement. These recruitment dynamics shaped the empirical material and are taken into account in the analysis.

Table Z. Participant Overview

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Migration history	Ethno-national background	Visibility (Muslim-identifying dress)	Education level	Locality	Activism
Nadia	24	2nd	Moroccan	Yes	HBO	Large city	No
Leila	35	2nd	Syrian-Turkish	No	University	Large city	No
Rania	27	1st (Arrived as baby)	Syrian	No	University	Mid-sized city	No
Maya	30	2nd	Moroccan	Yes	MBO	Medium town	No
Aylin	19	2nd	Syrian-Iraqi	Yes	MBO	Mid-sized city	Yes
Hana	26	1st	Yemeni	Yes	University	Large city	No
Amira	27	2nd	Afghan	Yes	University	Large city	No
Yasmin	28	2nd	Iranian	Yes	University	Large city	No
Amal	22	2nd	Afghan-Albanian	Yes	University	Mid-sized city	No
Salma	24	2nd	Moroccan	Yes	HBO	Small town	No
Emma	24	2nd	Somalia	Yes	HBO	Mid-sized city	No
Nora	45	2nd	Moroccan	No	HBO	Large city	Yes
Dina	24	2nd	Pakistan	No	MBO (not completed)	Large city	No
Kara	43	1st	Morocco	No	MBO	Large city	No
Isabel	22	2nd	Turkish – Portuguese	No	HBO	Mid-sized city	No

4.5 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews formed the main data source. Using a topic list as a flexible guide, participants were invited to discuss:

1. personal and migration background.
2. religious identity and visibility.
3. experiences of belonging across arenas (education, workplace, neighborhood, community spaces, national context);
4. experiences of exclusion, stereotyping, and imposed Muslimness.
5. definitions and experiences of Dutchness, both self-identification and ascribed categorization.

The topic list was derived directly from the operationalised indicators, ensuring coherence between theory and data collection. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted in Dutch or English, depending on participant preference. Interviews were carried out online, in person, or by voice call, with flexibility in format helping to lower participation barriers; most interviews were conducted online for reasons of convenience.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and translated where necessary. Translations were checked against the original transcripts to minimise meaning loss and to preserve participants' phrasing as accurately as possible. No financial compensation was provided for participation.

4.6 Participant Observation

Two overt non-participant observations were conducted to contextualize the interview data and examine how belonging, visibility, and interactional dynamics unfolded in communal Muslim women's spaces. Observations were used for contextual triangulation and analytic enrichment, illustrating how belonging, agency, and visibility unfolded in practice. Observations were thematically coded with the same conceptual categories and used mainly for contextualisation and illustrative examples rather than as an equally weighted data source.

Observation 1: Zusters voor Zusters (Amsterdam)
This observation took place during an openly advertised educational evening for Muslim women. The session involved religious learning and discussion, and fieldnotes focused on the atmosphere of the space, patterns of interaction, and practices of sisterhood.

Observation 2: Ulu Mosque (Utrecht)

The second observation was conducted during a women's religious reading at the Ulu Mosque. Fieldnotes focused on participation, informality, and the ways comfort and belonging were enacted within the group setting.

4.7 Recruitment Plan

Recruitment combined organisational outreach and snowball sampling. A short recruitment message describing the study, eligibility criteria, and voluntary nature of participation was emailed to women-led Islamic organisations, mosque networks, and community initiatives.

Recruitment ultimately relied primarily on snowball sampling via WhatsApp and Instagram, which proved most effective in reaching participants beyond my immediate networks. Many participants were therefore recruited through indirect connections rather than pre-existing personal relationships.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach, combining deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were derived from the operationalised core concepts of the study, including belonging, imposed Muslimness, exclusion, and agency. Inductive codes were developed from the interview material to capture themes that were not anticipated in advance. Audio recordings were transcribed using TurboScribe. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed and corrected manually to ensure accuracy. Coding and analysis were conducted manually using annotated transcripts, colour-coded highlighting, and analytical notes, supported by working documents and matrices developed in Word and Excel.

Analysis followed a clear sequence. First, transcripts were coded using a combination of deductive and open coding, after which the codebook was refined by merging overlapping codes and clarifying definitions. Second, analytical matrices were constructed by arena, participant position, and co-occurrence of exclusion and agency. These matrices enabled cross-case comparison and the identification of recurring or contrasting patterns. Analysis moved back and forth between coded interview material and fieldnotes, enabling both within-case and cross-case comparison.

4.9 Suitability and Reflexivity

A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was appropriate for examining how belonging and imposed Muslimness are negotiated across encounters and settings. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe imposed events and stereotypes in ways surveys would not capture.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the topic, informed consent and confidentiality were prioritised. Participants were informed of the research aims and recording took place only after consent was given. For both observations, I obtained explicit permission from the organizers or community leaders before entering the space. I adopted an overt researcher role, in line with ethical guidelines emphasizing that participants should be aware when research is taking place. (DeWalt, 2011). Participants are protected through pseudonyms, and identifying details were altered without affecting the meaning of the data. Audio files and transcripts are stored securely and are only accessible to me. Some interviews addressed sensitive experiences; participants were reminded they could pause or skip questions at any time. The aim throughout was to ensure a respectful and participant-led environment.

4.11 Researcher Positionality

As a non-Muslim Dutch researcher, I was aware that my positionality shaped field access and interaction. Similarities in age, gender, and student life often created ease during interviews, while differences in religious background and social positioning may have influenced the interaction and the topics that were discussed or emphasized.

Throughout the process, I remained conscious of the power imbalance involved in researching a marginalised group. I aimed to avoid harmful dynamics by giving participants space to steer the conversation and by being careful in how I interpreted their words. During interviews, I explicitly invited participants to clarify or correct my understanding where needed, which helped manage misinterpretation.

Reflexivity also informed the analysis. I paid attention to how my background influenced how I read certain moments and how I coded the material. Combining interviews with observations helped me contextualise participants' accounts and check my interpretations against what I observed in practice. My positionality likely shaped how experiences were framed, with some participants explaining Islam in detail and others avoiding more sensitive aspects of community life.

4.12 Methodological summary

Together, interviews and non-participant observations made it possible to examine how Muslim women experience and navigate belonging across everyday and institutional settings. Interviews captured participants' own accounts of recognition, exclusion, and agency, while observations provided context on interactional dynamics in community spaces. Analysis focused on themes of belonging, Muslimness, visibility, and institutional responses, and on how these themes intersected across settings. This approach allowed the study to show how belonging is produced in practice and how women manage imposed Muslimness in different arenas, directly addressing the research question.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Belonging in Education: Schools and Universities

Educational institutions were central sites where participants first encountered questions of belonging and difference. While several participants initially described school environments as neutral or welcoming, particularly in mixed settings, others experienced early exclusion or misrecognition. Across accounts, belonging in education was conditional and shaped less by formal inclusion than by everyday institutional decisions, the effects of which often became visible only in hindsight. institutions were central sites where participants first encountered questions of belonging and difference. While several participants initially described school environments as neutral or welcoming, particularly in diverse settings, others experienced early exclusion or misrecognition. Across accounts, belonging in education was conditional and shaped less by formal inclusion than by everyday institutional decisions, the effects of which often became visible only in hindsight.

5.1.1 Early Schooling: Diversity and Everyday Normality

Experiences of belonging in primary and secondary education were often described as positive or neutral, particularly in schools with diverse student populations. As Amal noted, "Almost everyone there was Muslim… nobody looked at you differently."
Several participants later re-evaluated their early experiences of belonging in education. Nadia reflected that although she felt she belonged at the time, this sense of inclusion

obscured underlying inequalities that only became visible in hindsight: “I used to think at school that I really did belong… but looking back, I don’t think that was actually the case.” Institutional assumptions also had concrete consequences for educational trajectories. Nora described how her learning difficulties were attributed to her background rather than properly assessed, delaying recognition of her dyslexia: “It turned out I was dyslexic, but it was immediately attributed to my skin colour.” This misrecognition limited her access to support, illustrating how unequal treatment could be normalised without taking the form of explicit discrimination.

5.1.2 Explicit Exclusion and Institutional Responses

For other participants, exclusion was more visible. Amira and Yasmin, who were among the only visibly Muslim students in their cohorts, described isolation and bullying. Amira explained, “I was the only one in my class… the only one in the entire pre-university track cohort.” Aylin recalled being subjected to racialised name-calling, such as “tea towel girl” and “brown bear,” and emphasised that teachers did not intervene. Salma similarly described being treated differently by teachers for the same mistake as a Dutch classmate, and only being allowed to resubmit her work after filing a formal complaint herself. (Appendix A) These accounts show that educational institutions did not simply reflect broader social inequalities, but actively shaped them. Through teachers’ responses, assumptions about ability, and uneven interventions, schools became sites where belonging was reinforced for some students and undermined for others

5.1.3 Higher Education:

In higher education, belonging was more often described as fragile or absent. Several participants reported a noticeable shift when transitioning from relatively diverse school environments to predominantly white universities. Hijab-wearing students in particular described feelings of isolation in lectures. As Amira noted, “In my first and second year, I was basically always sitting alone in lectures.” Emma similarly explained at HBO level, “At school I was the only dark-skinned girl wearing a headscarf …at that moment I felt I really didn’t belong.” This feeling of isolation was echoed by Hana,“In my master’s, like 50 people, my colleagues, uh, I'm the only Muslim there .My supervisor said: ‘This is my first time being around a Muslim woman’… and then he asked me how I pray.”-Hana

These experiences intensified feelings of being out of place, shaping how participants experienced their position within the university.

Participants studying at the VU reported relatively higher levels of belonging, which they linked to both a more diverse student population, a more cosmopolitan urban context, and available prayer room, underscoring the role of institutional setting

Institutional practices also shaped experiences of belonging in higher education. Several participants described difficulties arranging practical accommodations, such as prayer or silence rooms. Yasmin referred to this as “a whole hassle,” (Appendix B) while Emma described outright refusal despite available space. By contrast, participants at institutions where such facilities already existed reported fewer obstacles, and women in MBO settings often described a stronger sense of belonging, which they linked to greater diversity among students.(Appendix C)

In education, the findings show that diversity mattered not because it guaranteed inclusion, but because it altered everyday interaction. In more diverse settings, participants described fewer moments of scrutiny and greater ease, reducing how strongly conditional belonging was felt. By contrast, in less diverse institutions and where basic accommodations were absent, students were required to actively negotiate recognition and access, which intensified feelings of isolation.

5.2 Belonging in Workplaces and Institutions

Compared to education, participants more often described recognition at work when seen as capable, yet belonging remained conditional and shaped by expectations of professionalism and neutrality, particularly when Muslimness was visible.

5.2.1 Belonging Through Participation and Recognition

Several participants described positive experiences of belonging at work when recognised for their skills and contributions. Amal, for example, contrasted her earlier detachment from Dutch society with the inclusion she experienced during her legal internship: “Since I’ve been doing my internship at the JND, something in me has changed… I now feel more comfortable and more involved.” In her account, belonging developed gradually through daily interaction and recognition, rather than through formal inclusion alone.

Similarly, Aylin described how political and institutional engagement altered how she was recognised locally: “Since I’ve become involved in politics, I’m no longer seen as a Syrian-Iraqi girl, but really as someone from Dordrecht.”
These accounts show that belonging in institutional contexts was tied to participation and perceived contribution, with recognition emerging through being seen as useful, engaged, and competent. However, this recognition remained conditional, as it depended on continued performance and did not automatically extend beyond specific roles or settings.

5.2.2 Everyday Undervaluation

Alongside positive experiences, participants also described more fragile or limited forms of belonging in work and institutional settings. Several reported subtle forms of misrecognition that did not amount to overt exclusion but undermined their sense of being valued.
Amira explained that her contributions were often overlooked in professional meetings: “What I say just doesn’t seem to get through.”. Dina recalled an internship in childcare where colleagues and children were white, and interactions felt dismissive: “The way they spoke to me…I really didn’t like that.”
Amira, who works as a doctor, described being mistaken for a cleaner by a nurse, illustrating how professional status could be overridden by racialised and gendered assumptions. (Appendix D) Even when participants were present and actively participating in institutional settings, they could still lack a sense of belonging when their involvement was not recognised or valued (Hagerty et al., 1992).

5.2.3 Religious Visibility and Boundary-Making at Work

More explicit boundary-making emerged when religious practices or appearance became visible in the workplace.
Amal recalled being reprimanded during a job training for declining a handshake with a male colleague: “Amal we have a very big problem here… you’re refusing to shake Bas’s hand.” She was told, “We live in Western Europe with Western European norms and values,” and questioned about her appearance: “Why do you wear lipstick if you don’t want to tempt men?” In this interaction, her religious practice was recast as a violation of both professional and cultural norms. Beyond formal reprimands, Amal also described everyday discomfort linked to visible Muslimness: “Some colleagues can never greet me normally… It’s very awkward.”

Several participants described being refused jobs or internships unless they removed their headscarf, or being told that certain professions were inaccessible to women who visibly expressed their Muslim identity (see Appendix E), echoing earlier findings that Muslim women are often expected to minimise religious visibility to be accepted at work (Allen et al, 2015; Gashi & Essanhaji, 2023).

Participants' accounts further show that conditional inclusion did not end once access was granted. Salma recounted patients refusing treatment because of her appearance: "No, we don't want you. We'd like that other one…". Despite her professional role, her hijab became grounds to question her legitimacy. Dina, who did not wear a headscarf, described explaining that she was fasting during Ramadan and being met with a dismissive response: "Then they thought it was ridiculous that I took part in that." In her case, Muslimness became salient not through visibility, but through disclosure of religious practice.Together, these examples show that belonging at work depended on whether participants were seen as legitimate and professional. This judgement was shaped both by visible markers, such as religious appearance, and by everyday interactions in which their Muslim identity became known.

5.2.4 Overperformance and Strategic Agency

In response to conditional recognition, several participants described strategies aimed at securing respect and belonging through overperformance. Aylin noted, "People see me as a hardworking young woman… that's when I get respect." Salma similarly explained, "You had to show I'm good as well… even though I wear a headscarf."

These accounts show that visibly Muslim women carried a disproportionate burden of proof at work, where recognition depended on continual demonstrations of professionalism rather than being assumed. While earlier research shows that anticipated misrecognition can lead individuals to adopt performative strategies to claim recognition (Amer, 2019), this study demonstrates that such overperformance functioned as a routine expectation in the workplace. Belonging was therefore tied to ongoing evaluation and effort, rather than secured through formal inclusion or competence alone.

5.2.5 Political and Institutional Agency

While most participants navigated workplaces through everyday and defensive strategies, a small number described more sustained forms of political and institutional engagement. Aylin

outlined a trajectory of involvement ranging from student representation to local politics and the Rotterdam student council. She highlighted her campaign for the introduction of silence or prayer rooms at Zadkine, which was initially resisted by management but eventually implemented across locations. This engagement altered how she was perceived locally, increasing recognition as someone who actively contributed to the community.

Nora similarly exercised agency through collective and institutional involvement, including leadership roles in anti-racism coalitions and the co-founding of a Muslim women's collective focused on combating Islamophobia and advocating for Muslim women's rights

However, the effects of such engagement on belonging differed. For Aylin, institutional involvement increased recognition and local belonging, whereas for Nora, it did not substantially alter her sense of belonging, which she described as already secure. In both cases, institutional engagement primarily produced situational recognition rather than structural inclusion.

5.3 Belonging in Community and Religious Spaces

Community and religious spaces emerged as some of the most consistent sites of belonging across participants' accounts. Belonging here was grounded in everyday interaction and often involved not having to defend one's Muslimness. At the same time, community belonging was not automatic or uniform, and could be shaped by internal boundaries and expectations.

5.3.1 Felt Belonging and Emotional Safety

Most participants described a strong sense of belonging in interpersonal and community-based contexts, particularly in diverse and Muslim-led spaces experienced as familiar and emotionally safe. As Maya put it, "I feel most at home with the people around whom I feel safe." Community spaces such as mosque classes, sisterhood groups, study circles, and informal gatherings were central sites where participants felt seen and understood, often without having to explain themselves.
Belonging in these spaces rested on shared presence and mutual recognition.

Observations of women-only community spaces illustrated how felt belonging was produced through everyday practices (see Appendix X for detailed field notes). At a Zusters voor Zusters gathering, women were welcomed through informal conversation and shared food, creating an atmosphere of ease and familiarity from the outset. Belonging in this space was

also actively maintained. During the observation, a woman explicitly introduced herself as a contact person for anyone experiencing difficulties or feeling unsafe, signalling that care and protection were built into the organisation of the space.

Similar dynamics were observed during a women's religious reading at a mosque in Utrecht. Despite gender-segregated seating and a male teacher, women participated actively by asking questions, sharing experiences, and engaging collectively with religious knowledge. Informal interaction during breaks further reinforced a sense of mutual recognition and comfort.

Building on work that conceptualises religious and community spaces as sites of agency and self-formation (Van Es, 2019), This study shows that these spaces did not replace national belonging or resolve broader exclusion. Instead, they reduced the need for participants to account for their Muslim identity in everyday interaction.

5.3.2 Muslimness as a Resource

For some participants, Muslim community spaces functioned as sites where Muslimness became a source of strength. Nora described her involvement in a women-only Muslim group as a deliberate choice based on shared experience: "You really have to be Muslim to be part of our group. Otherwise, you can't understand our struggle." In these spaces, Muslimness functioned as a shared frame that made participation easier and interaction more predictable. At the same time, this form of belonging was limited to spaces participants could shape themselves and did not alter the conditionality they encountered in institutional or national settings.

Beyond emotional safety, community and religious spaces also enabled everyday forms of agency. Participants described volunteering, organising women's groups, or participating in informal support networks, which allowed them to influence how these spaces functioned. Compared to institutional or national contexts, community spaces offered greater scope for initiative, making belonging feel more stable within the space itself, even though it remained context-specific.

This was also reflected in the Zusters voor Zusters observation, where the evening opened with a stand run by a Muslim woman entrepreneur as part of a rotating initiative showcasing women's small businesses. This practice positioned Muslim women not only as participants,

but as contributors whose skills and work were recognised within the community, reinforcing belonging through contribution rather than external approval.

5.3.3 Internal Boundaries and Ambivalence

Community belonging was not automatic. For Aylin some Muslim community spaces heightened her sense of difference: “That’s exactly where I’m reminded that I’m a foreigner.” Leila and Rania, who identified as Muslim but were less religiously practising, also expressed ambivalence, while Kara described distancing herself from local community spaces, shaped by earlier experiences of rejection and trauma.

Participants who were not strongly religious could nevertheless experience these spaces as meaningful in different ways. Dina described them primarily as socially supportive environments: “It feels like a nice place…with the other women.” Together, these accounts show that community spaces were not neutral or open to everyone, but organised around shared understandings of Muslim identity. Within these boundaries, women experienced belonging through shared experience, gendered solidarity, and everyday interaction. These spaces did not change how participants were treated in institutional or national contexts, but they did allow women to be present without having to explain or manage their Muslimness within the space itself.

5.4 National and Political Belonging

Across the sample, belonging in the Netherlands was described as moderate and fragile. Participants defined belonging less as a fixed national identity and more as a matter of everyday treatment and recognition. As Amira explained, “Belonging, to me, is simply about how people treat you.” Compared to other arenas, national belonging was experienced as the most externally governed arena, shaped primarily by public categorisation, political discourse, and symbolic boundaries around Dutchness.

Participants repeatedly described being positioned as not fully Dutch, regardless of birthplace, language proficiency, or formal citizenship. In this arena, Muslimness was not something participants actively enacted, but something imposed by others. At the same time, several women emphasised attachment to everyday aspects of Dutch life, such as social norms or ways of interacting, even when they did not feel recognised as Dutch by others.

(Appendix F) This combination of everyday attachment and external exclusion meant that national belonging was experienced as conditional and unstable: women felt connected to Dutch society in practice, while remaining symbolically positioned outside it.

5.4.1 Everyday Categorisation in Public Life

Participants described numerous everyday moments in which their Muslim identity became immediately salient in public and semi-public settings. These encounters often involved awkwardness, avoidance, or unsolicited assumptions, particularly for women wearing a headscarf. Others described being positioned as informal representatives of Islam, regardless of their personal views. As Nadia noted, “I end up being the spokesperson for every Islamic country.” In such moments, Muslimness preceded recognition of individual identity and shaped how participants were approached in public space.

In line with earlier studies (Bouteldja, 2011, Gashi & Essanhaji, 2023), most participants recognised and rejected the trope of the submissive, weak Muslim woman. “Muslim women are portrayed as weak… why do I need to be ‘saved’ by you?” (Nadia). “They always see me as weak or oppressed… that I depend on men” (Hana). Rejecting this stereotype pushed back against imposed positioning, even if it did not prevent it from happening again. Non-hijabi and less religious participants also recognised the trope, though some interpreted it as more closely tied to cultural norms than to their own experiences and rejected it less explicitly.

Imposed Muslimness also shaped behaviour in advance of interaction. Nora described how awareness of how visibly Muslim women are treated influenced decisions around visibility. She referred to women who had stopped wearing the headscarf due to repeated hostility in public space and explained that the expectation of differential treatment had also shaped her own decision not to wear one. Isabel similarly described delaying wearing a headscarf explaining that she delayed wearing a hijab because she rides horses in a predominantly white, conservative environment, anticipating that increased visibility would change how she was treated. In these accounts, categorisation often worked in advance. Participants adjusted how they presented themselves based on how they expected others to see them, rather than only reacting to specific incidents. This reflects earlier research showing that visible markers such as the hijab are often managed strategically in response to anticipated reactions in public space (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011; Blackwood et al., 2015).

Assumptions based on appearance further shaped everyday interactions in public space. Amira noted that people sometimes avoided sitting next to her on public transport. Similar dynamics emerged when participants did not conform to stereotypical expectations, such as surprise at Dutch language proficiency or educational level. As Maya described, “Looking like this… and then speaking ABN, people are sometimes taken aback.” These moments illustrate how Muslimness shaped first impressions in public space, often before other aspects of identity such as education, profession, or personality became visible.

In line with Brubaker and Cooper’s idea of situational categorisation, Muslimness was assigned based on context rather than behaviour. Participants did not report acting differently in these moments; instead, categorisation followed from how others interpreted their appearance. As a result, recognition in public space was shaped by external readings rather than a participant’s own actions.

5.4.2 Political Events as Triggers for Scrutiny

Participants emphasised that Muslimness was not always central, but became especially salient during moments of political crisis involving Islam or Muslim-majority societies. Nadia described how news coverage of Gaza prompted side glances in public, “as if they expect me to say something.” Similar experiences were recalled from earlier in life. As she noted, “When ISIS was at its height, people literally asked me, ‘So what do you think about that?’ I was fourteen.”

During such moments, participants were treated as representatives of a wider group and implicitly held responsible for events they had no control over. These political crises did not create new forms of categorisation, but made existing ones more visible in everyday interactions. In this sense, categorisation was shaped by publicly politicised events rather than by participants’ own behaviour, in line with Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) argument that group categories become salient in particular political contexts.

5.4.3 Media and Political Discourse as Everyday Context

Participants described national political rhetoric and media coverage as shaping how welcome they felt in Dutch society on an ongoing basis. Electoral cycles, debates on migration and integration, and proposals around de-Islamisation were experienced as signals

that Muslims were positioned as a problem group. Several participants referred explicitly to the rhetoric of Geert Wilders as contributing to feelings of insecurity or alienation. As Hana put it, “They weaponize religion… terrorism… it’s all politics.”

These debates had direct consequences for everyday life. Participants described feeling less safe in public spaces, becoming more aware of how they were seen, and more hesitant about asserting belonging. Rania noted that “people really come out with what they think… that whole racism thing is just accepted now.”

In some cases, this translated into direct hostility. Amira recounted how a friend was physically assaulted during a Palestine demonstration, where an attacker attempted to pull off her hijab. Dina similarly recalled an incident of public harassment: “They just spat in her face… she was wearing a headscarf and an abaya.” Another participant described no longer feeling safe walking home alone at night after a brick was thrown through the window of her local mosque.

Together, these accounts show that national belonging was shaped less by single hostile encounters than by an ongoing political and media climate that repeatedly activated Muslimness as a public category, positioning participants as outsiders in everyday interactions.

5.4.4 Dutchness: Definition, Ascription, and Gendered Boundaries

Participants’ own understandings of Dutchness often differed from how Dutchness was attributed to them by others. Many defined being Dutch in civic terms, emphasising contribution and participation. As Maya explained, being Dutch meant “taking part and contributing to society,” while Aylin noted that “if you build your life here and take responsibility, then you’re just Dutch.”

Recognition by others did not consistently follow these criteria. Formal citizenship or long-term residence did not guarantee being seen as Dutch, and participants described being treated as foreign even when born and raised in the Netherlands. As Nadia stated, “I’m always seen as a migrant, even though I was born here.” She added, “I do feel Dutch sometimes, but I know that others don’t see me that way,” reflecting the conditional nature of Dutchness, in which belonging is granted selectively. (Tonkens & Duyvendak, 2016).

This conditionality was also evident in housing access, as Kara described being denied a family home while a Dutch family was later accepted, illustrating how Dutchness operated as an informal boundary beyond formal criteria (Appendix G)

Religious visibility, particularly the headscarf, further sharpened these boundaries. Participants described how references to "Dutch values" such as freedom, equality, and secularism were often raised in response to their appearance. Yasmin noted that freedom was framed in exclusionary ways: "It's made to seem as if freedom only applies when you don't show any religion." These interactions positioned Muslim women as incompatible with Dutchness through gendered expectations around emancipation and equality. (Farris, 2017; Bracke, 2011)

Place shaped how Dutchness was experienced. Urban and diverse neighbourhoods were described as more comfortable, while predominantly white or rural areas were associated with heightened scrutiny. Amal explained that "in Amsterdam-West you feel more at home." By contrast, Kara described feeling permanently out of place in smaller towns: "Ik heb het niet over financieel of geld, maar ik heb het over hoe je gezien wordt. Ik word nooit geaccepteerd." Experiences were not uniform, however. Emma described being well received during a placement in a small village, while remaining unsure whether this reflected genuine inclusion or situational tolerance, underscoring the fragility of recognition.

These findings illustrate how national norms are enforced in everyday interactions, not only through public discourse or policy. While earlier studies show how Muslim women are symbolically positioned as outsiders in national debates, this study demonstrates how such boundaries are reproduced in ordinary encounters, where women's own claims to belonging are often overridden by how they are read in terms of religion and gender. Rather than being secured through citizenship or participation, Dutchness was continually tested through appearance, place, and everyday interaction

5.4.5 Agency at the National Level: Managing Exposure

Within the national arena, participants described a more limited space for agency than in community or workplace settings. They had little control over the conditions under which recognition was granted, meaning responses rarely took the form of overt resistance or attempts to claim national belonging. Instead, agency was expressed through managing

exposure, such as adjusting visibility, choosing when to engage or remain silent, and distancing themselves emotionally from political debate.

A recurring form of agency involved responding to stereotypes or explaining religious practices in everyday encounters. Participants described answering questions or correcting assumptions as moments of dialogue rather than confrontation. Hana, for example, noted: "I'm happy when people ask why I fast or pray… I'm glad to explain it." while Amal noted that even small shifts in understanding could feel meaningful.

Collective forms of agency also appeared through political expression, particularly in relation to Palestine. Participants described demonstrations as moments of visibility and solidarity. As Amal explained, "At the protests I felt we're not standing here alone … that gave strength," while Yasmin reflected, "I'm glad that I spoke up… as a visible Muslim."

In both observed settings, visible symbols of solidarity with Palestine underscored how community and religious spaces also functioned as sites of political identification and collective belonging.

In these accounts, participants exercised agency mainly by limiting their exposure in national and public contexts. This included choosing when to speak or remain silent, avoiding engagement in politicised debates, and distancing themselves from situations where they anticipated being singled out as Muslim. Agency at the national level was therefore limited and situational: while participants could protect themselves in specific moments or find brief solidarity, they had little influence over the broader terms on which national recognition was

5.5 Intersectional Patterns Across the Sample

5.5.1 Visibility and Place: Hijab, Locality

Hijab-wearing participants consistently reported stronger visibility and more frequent moments of being read as "other," particularly in public spaces, workplaces, and smaller towns. Maya, who began wearing a hijab while already employed, described a shift in how colleagues approached her: "At my previous job I first worked without a hijab and later with one… people had to sort of feel me out again." Yasmin similarly noted that wearing a hijab altered assumptions about her character and competence: "With a hijab, they suddenly saw me as stricter… and also kind of as someone a bit less smart, actually."

Local context shaped these experiences. Participants living or working in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, or The Hague described greater anonymity and more everyday diversity, which meant that visible difference attracted less attention. By contrast, participants in smaller towns or villages reported being more noticeable and more frequently scrutinised, as limited anonymity and predominantly white surroundings made visible difference stand out more.

Participants who did not wear a hijab reported fewer direct encounters of exclusion and less frequent pressure to manage interactions through explanation or boundary-setting. Leila reported a relatively high sense of belonging, while Dina and Nora described feeling Dutch without having to repeatedly justify this. Muslimness was not absent from their lives, but it was less immediately activated in everyday interactions, though it was often noted that women without a headscarf were still subject to stereotyping.

These patterns show that visibility did not produce exclusion on its own, but intensified the conditional nature of belonging by making Muslimness more salient in everyday interactions, particularly in less diverse settings.

5.5.2 Education and Professional Sector

Educational and professional positioning shaped the *context* in which belonging was negotiated, but did not fundamentally change how Muslimness was read. While participants described relatively inclusive experiences in vocational (MBO) education and more alienating encounters in predominantly white higher education, these differences did not eliminate boundary-making. Professional workplaces similarly reproduced conditional recognition through expectations of competence and neutrality across sectors. In this sense, imposed Muslimness cut across educational and class differences. What differed was not whether boundary-making occurred, but how strongly it was felt and where it became most visible, with more pronounced experiences reported in predominantly white and higher-status institutional settings.

5.5.3 Activists vs non-activists

Participants who were politically or institutionally active sometimes described greater recognition within specific organisational settings, where participation positioned them as contributors. Non-activist participants rarely described such recognition and instead located belonging mainly in interpersonal or community-based contexts. This contrast shows that

activism could improve recognition in particular settings, but did not remove the broader conditionality of belonging.

5.5.4 Generation and Migration History

Differences also appeared across migration trajectories. Second-generation participants described greater familiarity with Dutch norms and institutions. By contrast, more recent arrivals expressed greater distance from Dutchness and Dutch institutions. Generation affected how familiar participants were with institutional rules and expectations, but this familiarity did not guarantee recognition or belonging.

5.5.5 Intersectional positioning in practice

Amira described overlapping disadvantages: “A major disadvantage… being a woman, having a migration background, being Muslim, wearing a hijab.” Amal similarly noted cumulative effects: “Even if you’re not a Muslim… just being a woman already puts you behind… and then you’re also Muslim, and then also with a hijab.” At the same time, participants stressed that Muslim women were not positioned identically. Yasmin pointed to class and language as mitigating factors: “We have certain privileges because we are financially comfortable… because I speak the Dutch language.”

Aylin, a second-generation, vocationally educated woman who was visibly Muslim and politically active, described relatively high recognition within specific institutional and local political contexts. Her civic engagement allowed her to be read as a contributor and representative, which in her village reduced how strongly Muslimness functioned as a boundary.

By contrast, Hana, a first-generation, highly educated but non-activist woman, described greater distance from Dutchness and less willingness to seek recognition within Dutch institutions. While she did not report frequent overt exclusion, she experienced a more persistent sense of non-belonging, stating: “I don’t belong here. So why should I prove something that is not true?” Her position illustrates how the absence of civic engagement and weaker institutional embedding shaped how belonging was negotiated.

As someone who also entered Dutch higher education after having lived elsewhere, she was the only participant to explicitly describe university curricula as Eurocentric (Appendix H) which may have shaped her sensitivity to how knowledge was framed and valued.

These cases demonstrate that belonging was shaped by the interaction of multiple positions, with different combinations producing different forms of recognition and exclusion across contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Muslim women in the Netherlands navigate an imposed political label of "Muslimness" and how this shapes their experiences of belonging across everyday and institutional arenas, including education, work, community spaces, and national belonging.

The findings show that belonging was conditional and context-dependent rather than stable or cumulative. Across arenas, recognition was granted selectively and could be withdrawn when Muslimness became salient through visibility, institutional norms, or politicised moments. Women primarily navigated these conditions through everyday forms of adjustment, such as limiting exposure, setting boundaries, explaining themselves, or selectively engaging and withdrawing. While these strategies could create moments of ease or recognition within specific settings, they rarely translated into secure or transferable belonging. Importantly, although women actively managed their positioning, the power to define when and how Muslimness became relevant largely remained with institutions and the non-Muslim majority.

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, the study contributes to debates on Muslim women's agency by showing that agency often takes everyday, non-activist forms. Rather than appearing mainly as resistance or mobilisation, agency consists of how women manage imposed Muslimness in daily life when acceptance remains uncertain. The study also grounds the politics of belonging in everyday institutional practices, showing how belonging is shaped, tested, and withdrawn through routine interactions and organisational decisions, not only through discourse or policy. Lastly, it offers an intersectional, arena-based understanding of belonging, showing how visibility, generation, education, locality, and civic engagement combine to shape where and when recognition becomes possible.

Together, these findings show that belonging for Muslim women in the Netherlands is not secured through formal inclusion alone, but must be continuously negotiated within unequal and externally defined conditions.

6.1 Methodological Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample consisted mainly of second-generation, highly educated Muslim women living in urban or semi-urban areas. While this allowed for in-depth analysis of institutional navigation and everyday belonging, it likely underrepresents the experiences of women with less formal education, fewer social networks, or living outside cities. Recruitment through personal networks and community organisations may also have favoured women who were relatively articulate and socially engaged.

The observational data were limited in number and scope, which restricted insight into longer-term dynamics and variation across settings. In addition, my positionality as a non-Muslim Dutch researcher may have shaped both access to participants and the data produced, for example by prompting explanation or influencing how experiences were framed. Reflexive coding and comparison across cases were used to mitigate these effects, though positional influence cannot be fully eliminated.

Future research could build on this study by working with larger and more socio-economically diverse samples, adopting longitudinal designs to examine change over time, and conducting cross-national comparisons. Longer-term observation across a wider range of everyday settings could further deepen understanding of how belonging is produced and contested in practice.

6.2 Implications for Institutions and Policy

The findings point to clear implications for institutional practice, showing that inclusion cannot be achieved through formal equality, neutrality, or individual accommodation alone. Belonging is shaped through everyday interactional and organisational practices.

Schools. Addressing bullying, teacher responses, and unequal treatment is as important as maintaining formal neutrality. Early misrecognition and uneven intervention can have lasting effects on educational trajectories.

Universities. Physical accommodations such as prayer or silence rooms matter, but do not automatically produce belonging. Representation, everyday interaction, and institutional responsiveness play a crucial role in whether students feel recognised.

Workplaces. A persistent gap remains between anti-discrimination norms and everyday practice. Incidents involving handshakes, hijab discrimination, or clients refusing treatment show that belonging depends not only on policy but on how norms of professionalism are interpreted and enforced in daily work settings.

6.3 Final Reflections

Beyond institutions, participants repeatedly expressed a desire for less polarisation and greater openness within Dutch society. Despite experiences of exclusion, many conveyed hope for a more diverse and inclusive future, emphasising their willingness to contribute and be involved. As Nadia put it: “Speak with us. Not about us.”

In a political climate marked by increasing racialisation and hardened public debate, their accounts call for openness and reflection. As Aylin emphasized, “No one chooses where they are born, so the world belongs to all of us.”

Overall, this study shows that the politics of belonging are not only negotiated in public debate or policy, but lived through ordinary interactions and institutional routines. Muslim women’s belonging in the Netherlands emerges through ongoing, situated negotiations that reveal both the possibilities of agency and its persistent limits under conditions of racialised boundary-making

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7. Appendix:

Appendix A:

Salma: I once had something happen with a lecturer, actually. He indicated that he was willing to grade my exam. And in the end he said: no, that's no longer possible. And then a Dutch student came, a classmate. And he still graded it for him. And he eventually received a pass for it. And I received a fail, but I had done exactly the same thing. Made the same mistake with submitting it. And I had to apply for a third attempt.
The way we had submitted it was incorrect. So technically, it shouldn't have been graded anymore. And he had already indicated, basically: okay, I'm going to do it. Because I understand that you didn't do it wrong. And it's our fault, because we changed the system. But in the end he told me: no, I'm not allowed to do it anymore. And he still did it for him.

I then filed a complaint with the examination committee. And the boy involved also came along. He also stated: it's exactly the same. And then I was allowed to submit it again in the same week to another lecturer. Very strange, yes.

Appendix B:

Yasminl: But I do think it's a shame that there is sort of a—uhm, yes, a rule that there doesn't always have to be an option for a prayer room or a meditation room. I really think that is a very big shortcoming. Uhm, and also the effort involved in arranging that. I did experience that at TU Delft. I think there is now some kind of meditation room here as well, but that was also such a hassle to arrange. And, uh, it was very bureaucratic, actually.

Appendix C:

Maya: It might also make a difference that I only did MBO. There it is, at least that's what I think, more mixed in terms of culture and ethnicities.

Appendix D:

Amira: I once had something like that happen in the hospital as well. I couldn't really defend myself then either. But I did file a complaint. A nurse came up to me and assumed I was a cleaner. And she said, in a very harsh tone, that I had to clean that room right now. I said: why? She said: Yes, because you have to. I said: Yes, but I am a doctor. And then she turned around and walked, ran, away. Because the room was broken. But then you also can't really teach someone a lesson. Because I eventually went to a supervisor. And I said: listen, this is just not normal. Before you, you know, just look at someone's coat. Look at someone's position. Ask someone's name. But she mmediately went to: you have to clean that room now.

Appendix E:

Aylin: For example, because of my headscarf, I can't access certain jobs or follow certain programs. I can give an example. Before I started my studies, I had enrolled in a flight attendant training program. And I really wanted to do that. And already at my initiation interview that man said, I'm just going to be very honest, you simply cannot do an internship in the Netherlands with a headscarf.

Appendix F:

Emma: Well, I was away for half a year in Indonesia. Yes, then you miss, for example, the directness. That's what I mainly missed in things that were planned. Yes, there was definitely a big cultural difference there. Especially being direct, something you really have to watch out for there. Things planned in advance. Being very busy. And time is super important in the

Netherlands. And there it was all very relaxed and that was fine. Which means that you try to implement those Dutch norms and values there, and that just doesn't work. And besides that, it's kind of a standard thing, but I really love cheese. I just really love a normal cheese sandwich.

Appendix G:

Kira: We experienced it once as well. I'm going to tell you something very strange.
We saw a house near Bertrick's Park. I will never forget it. It was elevated. We really wanted a garden. The house had a view of Bertrick's Park. At the time, it was quite affordable.
I'm talking about seventeen or eighteen years ago. We wanted to move. We weren't allowed to see everything. The regulations, that kind of thing, we were rejected. Because we had children. Because we were also different. Eventually, another family ended up there. Dutch. Not us. That always bothered me. And then they also came up with excuses, saying you would pay more costs. Extra costs. But that was nonsense. Because it was actually manageable. And then I once heard from a real estate agent: in Zuid, you will never get into those properties there. The Apollolaan. Bertrick's Park.
Where I live now, that's just multicultural. You can get in there easily. But as soon as you're behind the Apollolaan, near the Hoofdstraat, you won't get in.
Even if you had the money. It's simply a preference for certain… they prefer certain people living there. It wasn't about overbidding back then. It was simply about not wanting to.I found that really painful. Very. That has always stayed with me.

Appendix H

Hana: Whenever they talk, for example, about wind or rain or water management, for example, this kind of normal stuff, they would always, um, talk about Europe,
But whenever they talk about war, famine, uh, resources, all this kind of stuff, they would talk about the Middle East or Africa. So it hurts me because like why

Appendix X: Observational Field Notes

To minimize ethical risk, I avoided taking notes during the sessions and wrote field notes only after leaving the setting.

Observation 1: Zusters voor Zusters - Amsterdam

Setting

The observation took place during an evening gathering organised by Zusters voor Zusters, held in a community building. The space consisted of two main areas: an informal area where women gathered before and after the lesson, and a separate room used for the religious reading.

Participants

The group consisted primarily of younger women, with some older women present. When older women were present, they tended to sit on chairs placed along the back wall of the reading room, while other women sat on the floor against the walls. Participants included women wearing a headscarf and women without one, in roughly equal numbers. The space was women-only.

Sequence of activities

Prior to the observation, I contacted the organisers by email but did not receive a response. Upon arrival, I approached one of the women present to explain my research and ask whether my presence was acceptable. She confirmed that it was and showed me to the appropriate spaces within the building. She also briefly explained that the evening included a rotating initiative in which Muslim women entrepreneurs were given space to present their work.

At the start of the evening participants gathered in an informal area where food and drinks were available. Attendees were offered refreshments and addressed by others present. Conversation in this space was informal and focused on everyday topics not related to the lesson.

At the start of the evening, one woman briefly introduced herself as a contact person available for private conversations if participants were experiencing difficulties at home or felt unsafe. Women were called to pray together before the reading if they felt inclined to do so.

The religious lesson lasted approximately one hour and was delivered via a recorded lecture displayed on a screen. The lecture was presented by a male speaker with an immigrant

background and focused on the origins of Islam, including the historical context of Mecca, the emergence of Islam, and broad differences between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Shoes were removed before entering the reading space. Approximately 30-35 women were present over the course of the evening. Around 15 participants were present in the informal area before the lecture began. Additional women arrived during the lecture, and after the lecture, approximately 10–15 participants remained for informal conversation. I stayed until the end of the gathering.

Interactional dynamics

The atmosphere throughout the evening was relaxed, with frequent laughter and casual conversation in the area before entering the lecture space. Participation in these conversations varied: some women spoke easily and frequently, while others remained quieter. These differences were not explicitly commented on.

During the reading itself, interaction was limited. The lecture was followed in silence, with participants taking notes, and there was no opportunity for questions during the session. After the lesson, women briefly remained in the reading space where volunteers then explicitly invited questions and emphasised that it was normal not to understand all terms or concepts. Conversation continued in the informal area and focused largely on catching up and everyday matters unrelated to the lecture.

Researcher position

As a researcher, I was approached by participants, offered refreshments, and invited to return to future gatherings. Several participants asked about the focus of my research and engaged in conversation about it. My presence as a researcher was openly acknowledged and did not appear to disrupt the activities of the evening.

Observation 2: Mosque Reading - Utrecht

Access to the second observation was facilitated through one of the interview participants, who invited me to attend the study session with her. I arrived shortly after the participant and was seated alongside her and several of her friends on the left side of the room where the women sat.

Setting

The second observation took place during a reading at a mosque in Utrecht. The session was held in a room with gender-segregated seating: men were seated on one side of the space and women on the other.

Participants

Approximately 45 participants were present, including around 34 women and 11 men. The majority of women wore a headscarf. Participants included women with an immigrant background as well as converts.

Sequence of activities

The session lasted approximately two hours and was led by a male teacher who identified as a Dutch convert to Islam. The lesson involved close reading of Qur'anic text, with sentences broken down into concrete examples. The format was interactive and informal, with participants encouraged to ask questions. A break was held halfway, during which tea and food were available.

After the lesson, participants gathered informally, continued conversations, and shared personal experiences. The teacher offered a tour of the mosque, which I attended together with several women.

Interactional dynamics

Women asked the vast majority of questions during the lesson and engaged actively with the content. During the break and after the session, women spoke with one another with ease, laughed together, and exchanged experiences. The atmosphere among the women was collegial and open.

Researcher position

During and after the session, participants engaged in informal conversation with me and asked about the focus of my research. I was invited to stay for tea and informal discussions after the lesson. My presence as a researcher was visible and acknowledged, and I participated as an observer without intervening in the session.