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# Polish Ummah? The Actions Taken by Muslim Migrants to Set up Their World in Poland

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*This report discusses the ways in which Muslim communities form in Poland, with particular emphasis on the role of migrant men and women from Muslim countries, broken down into activities carried out mainly by women and mainly by men. The division of activities sometimes goes beyond the patterns of Muslim communities in other countries. The specificity of the Muslim community in Poland is related to: the historical context of the origins of its creation, i.e. the presence of Polish Tatars, a small number of Muslims living in Poland, and their diversity in terms of countries of origin.*

*Keywords: Muslim community; ummah; gender; Polish Muslims; Muslims on-line*

## Introduction

Muslim communities and their rules and ways in which they form are not only a very important and timely issue, but they are also often used in the sphere of politics. The Muslim community in Poland, albeit small, is gradually becoming the subject of an increasing number of analyses. This report highlights the activities that promote the formation of a Muslim community in Poland. The process itself is subject to some difficulties; moreover, it often deviates from the community activity patterns that Muslims are familiar with from previous experience in their home country. The report examines the activities of Muslim men and women who are migrants, although converts are often involved in Muslim communities as full-fledged and often very active members of local communities, and sometimes even leaders in the community. The report is based on the analysis of interviews and social media content. Interviews were conducted with Muslim men and women living in Poland, mostly in large Polish cities, although there were isolated cases of interviews with people living at significant distances from large cities. The respondents were part of various waves of migration, both

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from the 1970s and recent. The reasons for their migration were very diverse. Some had come to Poland because of conflicts in their countries of origin, others because of poverty, or because their spouse lived in Poland. The number of Muslims sent by corporations to work in Poland on a temporary basis is also low. The analysed content of social media comprises profiles run by official Muslim centres, e.g. local centres in large cities, and profiles and groups aimed at Muslims living in Poland. Nowadays, in the public space, much attention is devoted to the category of community. When speaking about community, we tend to emphasise its positive aspects of emotional acceptance and closeness, and the fact that it is the backbone of traditionalism.

### **Ummah – the concept of Muslim community**

For the last dozen or so centuries, the Five Pillars and related religious observances have been the most important elements holding the Muslim community together (Toronto 2001: 47). The basis of Muslims' identity is their affiliation to the ummah, a community of Muslims, which connects all Muslims regardless of the differences that naturally occur. The specificity of Islam urges those who follow it to create a community. Islam is a social religion, not an individualistic one. It encourages people to live in a community rather than in isolation by, for example, prescribing such communal activities as Friday prayers and rituals associated with various holidays (Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1988: 415).

The emergence of Islam influenced the emergence of the idea of a community that, however, did not overcome the divisions that existed in this world and, to some extent, continue to exist today. The emergence of the concept of ummah brought about a further, significant change in the lives of Muslims; relations between individuals and the society lost their mere social meaning, gaining a moral dimension. Abandoning the community has become a more difficult choice, as it is tantamount to abandoning God (Danecki 2007: 33), this is one of the strengths of Islam as an idea that binds the faithful together. Furthermore, it must be noted that the emergence of the ummah introduced a very strict and distinct demarcation between Muslims and non-Muslims, who were different, alien, not of the chosen community. This significantly reduced the freedom of action of the individual and emphasised collective action (Danecki 2007: 34). It should also be noted that the community of followers was separated from others on many levels, e.g. economic, social, and cultural (Karamustafa 2010: 94).

The idea of group solidarity – referred to as 'asabiyyah' – emphasised by the Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun played an important role in understanding the Muslim community (Danecki 2007: 35; Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1988: 415). Moreover, the community dimension of Islamic identity should be considered the basis of the Muslim community (Karamustafa 2010: 94). The issue of community/ummah appears both in the Quran and the Prophet's sunnah. The Quran itself draws attention to the various forms of human association; however, it reserves a special place for religious groups. This community can also be seen in the law-making process, where consensus or communal agreement – the so-called *ijma* – is one of the foundations of the law. Naturally, the various Muslim law schools have different perspectives on this element of law, which is usually implemented based on the consensus of recognised scholars. Community identity also includes some aspects of Sharia, which makes Muslims visible, e.g. dress, Friday community prayer, fasting during Ramadan and annual pilgrimage to Mecca. These mechanisms further enhance the sense of community (Karamustafa 2010: 99).

When analysing the writings of many Muslim scholars, one can get the impression that the ummah is a real entity with widely spread, interconnected, active networks, and relatively homogeneous elements. However, researchers disagree as to whether this image corresponds with reality, both now and in the past. Some researchers argue that it is an idealised image of the Muslim world, created by the elite of the Muslim world, but in reality, such a community has never existed. The Muslim communities that do exist are local communities,

and talking about a global community is to exaggerate their nature (Karamustafa 2010: 95). The ummah is a normative/standard-setting concept used to impose common values and motives for action, regardless of social background; it is a certain idea, a certain vision of the community (Karamustafa 2010: 95). The ummah has always existed in some specific historical and socio-political context; its dominant paradigm was the product of the dominant culture created by the elite of Muslim society, and was subsequently reshaped by their successors.

In modern times, we must also take into account such new phenomena as translocal spaces, which represent sites through which a great many cultures travel (Mandaville 2004: 85). It is an important question while talking about ummah in Europe. In the case of Muslim transnationalism, a politics of authority is important because the canon of Islam is increasingly 'forced to account for and reconcile itself with any number of competing self-interpretations within translocal spaces' (Mandaville 2004: 101). As Mandaville states, the politics of identity is based not only on the presence of an external other against which communities and cultures define themselves, but also on the process of negotiation and debate taking place within a given community. In translocal spaces, difficult questions about the viability of various Islamic political discourses become more and more popular, traditional sources of authority and authenticity are fragmented and Islam, which Mandaville describes as a travelling theory, comes face to face with its own otherness (Mandaville 2004: 106). The social reality of Muslims living within non-Muslim majority societies has pushed some scholars to rethink the categories through which identity and community are represented in Islam. The creation of these communities involves new strategies; the created communities are not simply replicas of community in the societies of origin.

### **Differences arising from the gender role**

Islam emphasises the division into gender roles of men and women. It assumes that men and women have different nature, strengths and weaknesses, and therefore it prescribes different but complementary social roles for men and women. With the assumption that all work needs doing, the division of duties and social roles according to Islamic hermeneutics is based on the principle of what role fits what gender best, and what gender is best at doing which job. Islam attributes the area of rule-making, management of the community, providing for the family etc. to men, and the provision of care and comfort in various forms to women (Haneef 1994: 111). The social roles of men and women are a reflection of roles they play in the family. Within the family structure, the man fulfils the role of the head and overseer of the family. His most important duties are to provide financial security, manage the family's relations with society and ensure family discipline. The duties of a woman exist *within* the family. Spouses are encouraged to ensure that the functions of the family are fulfilled with 'fairness and equality' (Hubsch 1997: 15). According to Muslim theology, there is an equality of rights and a principle of mutual obligations, which are in the interest of the family. However, social practice can be different. The surveyed Muslims came from different cultural backgrounds, as a result of which they displayed minor differences in perception regarding the social roles of men and women. Traditional female roles include many responsibilities that are not considered professional work. The customary division of responsibilities and the authority of men over women mean that even if certain duties would be considered work if performed by men, they are not considered as such when performed by a woman. In traditional Arab society, the obligation to maintain a family rested on the husband and he was obliged to take up paid work. Work was considered a male domain, one that women were not to be allowed to participate in, as that could have led to the breaking traditional rules and a blurring of the idea of social roles. Naturally, exceptions were allowed in specific situations. The role of midwife, doctor, or witch doctor was entrusted to women, in order to prevent women from having contact with stranger men (Hijab 1988: 95). Another argument why women should not

work was that it put them at risk of losing their virtue. This was particularly the case outside the home, where the likelihood of encountering men was much higher. This argument essentially made it impossible for young unmarried women to work. The only important argument in favour of women working was poverty. Otherwise, in order for men to preserve their own authority, and for the good of women themselves, the women ought to remain at home. Also, it was often not up to the women to decide whether they should work or not; the decision was made on their behalf by their father, brother, or husband (Saud 1993: 477; often, however, women undertook employment not fully understood as work).

In modern times, the situation of women in Muslim communities has undergone, and is still undergoing, significant change. The position of women is no longer determined primarily by the rules of Islam, but by social practices. In order to attempt to determine contexts of the social role of women in the Muslim world, it is also important to study the economic power of women and the difference between ideas on the one hand and practices on the other in Islamic societies and Muslim communities in non-Islamic countries. Islam offers some economic space for women when it comes to property and the exercise of control over it, but in practice there were times when these laws were not fully put into practice. Muslim women living in Poland come from countries where women's activity is not always accepted, but these are traditions and not religion.

### **Muslims in Poland**

Since no statistics are available in this area, it is very difficult to determine the number of Muslims living in Poland. There are various reasons for this lack of information, primary among them being the fact that data from the Office for Foreigners classifies citizens according to country, not religion. We can therefore only estimate the number of Muslims living in Poland, and these estimates range from 11 000 to 40 000 (Jarecka-Stępień 2010; Pędziwiatr 2014; Switat 2017). Furthermore, Muslims make up a highly diverse social category. The Muslim population in Poland includes Tatars, who have existed in the country since the 17th century;<sup>1</sup> migrants from Muslim countries, who came to Poland in various waves of migration from the 1970s to the 1990s; and converts. Poland, like Central European countries, was never a popular immigration destination; it was isolated by the iron curtain after the Second World War, and the Polish language is considered to be extremely difficult to learn. Poland did attract the interest of immigrants – primarily students – from politically friendly countries in Asia and Africa, however, many of whom remained in Poland after graduating, marrying Polish citizens (generally women, as most of the students were male, and male students were more likely to marry and remain in Poland). These countries consisted of those which were cooperating with Poland during the time of the Polish People's Republic, as well as countries in conflict areas, namely the Middle East and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa (Switat 2017; Włoch 2009). The 1990s saw an influx of refugees, mainly from Chechnya. Since there is no effective way to collect data concerning their actual residence in Poland, it is impossible to estimate how many refugees (e.g. Muslim refugees from Chechnya) have in fact remained in Poland. Estimates from non-governmental organisations speak of several thousand protected foreigners (Wojtalik 2016). Contemporary Muslim migrants consist primarily of economic migrants and individuals who migrate for personal reasons, i.e. due to a relationship with a Polish citizen. These people come from different countries, from different Islamic factions (Shiites and Sunni) and traditions, living in accordance with different Islamic schools of law. The final category consists of the converts, who also do not form a homogeneous category. Conversion patterns varied widely, but most commonly it concerns partners who convert due to or under the influence of their spouse, often adopting the tradition and practice of Islam from the region of origin of the spouse. The second most common pattern of conversion involves conversion pursuant to the individual study of Islam; here, the subsequent choice to convert to Islam depends on other factors. Due to the small number and considerable diversity of the Muslim community in Poland, this community does not appear

in scientific discourse concerning Islam and Muslims and the borders of Poland. The Muslim community in Poland shares few similarities with communities living in the countries of the 'old' European Union, meaning that it is quite risky to apply Western findings to the Polish situation (Górak-Sosnowska 2011: 13). These issues are extremely important from the perspective of the phenomenon researched in this report, because they hinder the formation of a Muslim community in Poland, and this community is very diverse to begin with. In Western countries, since the numbers of Muslims are larger, communities are made up of Muslims who share certain similarities, such as region of origin, specific school of Islamic law or faction (e.g. Shiite or Sunni). In Poland, there are clear divisions between the Tatars and immigrants; they have established separate organisations, have different goals, are struggling against each other for leadership in the Polish Muslim community. There are two Muslim organisations that play a significant role in Poland: the Muslim Religious Association of the Republic of Poland and the Muslim League in Poland. The first organisation includes, among others, Polish Tatars. At the head of this religious organisation there is a mufti whose activity is not limited to religious issues, but also includes administrative functions. The Muslim Religious Association gathers Hanafi Sunni of Polish origin, and has the following parishes: Białystok, Bohoniki, Kruszyniany, Warsaw, Gdańsk, Bydgoszcz, Poznań, Gorzów Wlkp. ([www.mzr.pl](http://www.mzr.pl)). For decades, it was the only official Muslim organisation representing the interests of all followers of Islam, both natives and immigrants representing different varieties of the religion. Despite the relatively small number of Muslims in Poland, they are divided in terms of religion and culture. Each of the local cultures of immigrants from the Maghreb, Iran, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the Polish converts, have encountered Islam in a different way; they also understand it differently and are differently 'rooted' in that religion. For this reason, one Muslim organisation could not satisfy the needs of all Muslims in Poland (Buchta 2011). The Muslim League in the Republic of Poland was established in 2001. This organisation was created on the initiative of Muslims in Poland in response to their increasing numbers and the new needs of the Muslim community (Skowron-Nalborczyk 2005: 230). The Muslim League brings together the Muslims of different Sunni factions (including the supporters of conservative Islam) and some of the Polish converts. Its members are predominantly Arabs (from Algeria, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia), as well as Turks. Apart from these two associations, there are small minorities who also play a role in the integration and formation of the Muslim community. Another Muslim organisation in Poland is the Muslim Students Association (SSM – *Stowarzyszenie Studentów Muzułmańskich*), which has existed for more than 20 years. There are Islamic Centres, which have SSM branches, in the main cities of Poland, as well as the Muslim Association for Cultural Education in the Republic of Poland, which was officially established in 1996. The founders of this organisation previously co-created and developed the Muslim Students Association. The Muslim Unity Society (SJM – *Stowarzyszenie Jedności Muzułmańskiej*) brings together Shi'ite Muslims (Kościelniak 2015). Under the auspices of the Muslim League, Muslim centres are established in almost every major city, which organise the local life of the Muslim community; the centres are located in Warsaw, Wrocław, Katowice, Cracow, Gdańsk, Poznań, Lublin, etc.

Polish Muslims are not as socially and politically active as those who form communities in Western countries. For example, the Muslim community of Western Europe drew attention by lobbying NATO to send troops to Kosovo (Khan 2000: 32), although such actions are taken only locally and, moreover, only sporadically. The Polish Muslim community, on the other hand, is too weak to take such action. Communities that have been detached from their culture of origin need to create new identities for themselves, following which they seek social and political recognition in the host society (Khan 2000: 37). The Muslims community in Poland is faced with certain problems; according to one of the official websites, it is poorly organised. The Polish ummah does not have a leader, nor any headquarters where work can be coordinated. There is a lack of co-operation between Muslims and their respective organisations.<sup>2</sup>

## Methodology

This report focuses on the actions taken by Muslim migrants towards creating their own community in Polish society. In the first stage of the study, interviews were conducted with 10 women and 10 men in the period from July 2016 to March 2017. Interviews were selected according to the principle of the snowball sampling. The effort was made to ensure that the sample would include people from different origins and different levels of education and wealth who have resided in Poland for a minimum of five years. The first respondents were recruited in Muslim centres. The respondents lived in Cracow and its vicinity, in Katowice, Kielce, Warsaw, Gdańsk, near Gorzów Wielkopolski, and in Poznań and its surroundings. The respondents were from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Bangladesh, India and Uzbekistan. Naturally, this sample is not sufficient for the study to give a full picture of the Muslim community living in Poland, but it can serve as a basis for further investigation. The study focused exclusively on Muslim migrant communities, although converts, many of whom are very active participants of the community, also play a part in shaping the Muslim community in Poland. The second stage of the study consisted of an analysis of the content of posts placed on social media profiles and groups – addressed to Muslims. It has covered all of the materials published on the studied profiles and groups until September 2017. I openly communicated about my intent and purpose in each Facebook group I joined. The profiles selected for the study were those that were the most popular in terms of the number of visits and the publication frequency of new posts. The analysis covered content published on Facebook, as there exists a significant number of groups for Muslims on this platform. Only Polish-speaking groups were taken into account – although many posts published in these groups were in English or other languages, the profiles and groups analysed were limited to those where Polish was the main language. The category of analysed profiles and groups on Facebook includes: the Women's sections of various Muslim Centres, Muslim Centres Profiles, Sis in Islam, Discover Islam, Arabs in Poland, Sympathetic Muslim Messages. The analysis of social media content comprised both posts and comments under them. In the space of the Internet it is quite difficult to distinguish between so-called funpage profiles or groups whose members consist exclusively of Muslims living in Poland. Some members are, for example, converts who live abroad. The analysis took into account only posts regarding the community in Poland. The content used in the study was information about the functioning of the Muslim community and the role that Muslim immigrants play in it. The analysis began with an examination of the role of gender in the building of Muslim communities, focusing on the activities of women.

The first important issue in the analysis is the indication – based on the conducted interviews – what community-making activities are undertaken by women and which by men. As stated before, Islam emphasises the division of men and women into gender roles – men and women have different natures, strengths and weaknesses – and, pursuant thereto, different but complementary social roles; rule-making, management of the community, providing for the family, etc. is the role of men, and providing care and comfort is the role of women. The results of this study showed that when women come to Europe, they often become more socially active; in many cases, however, they do not take up employment, meaning that their actions on behalf of the Muslim community are the only form of social activity they engage in. As a consequence, much of the activity of the Muslim community in Poland is linked to the activities of women, even if in their country of origin, some of these activities would normally be undertaken by men. The dividedness along gender lines of activities related to the functioning of the Muslim community in Poland is noticeable. Religious matters are the domain of men. It is men who become imams, men who hold most of the religious meetings, and the guests invited to those meetings – imams, interpreters, thinkers – are predominantly men. Interestingly, few of the respondents viewed imams as the leaders of the community, but rather as representatives of an institution. This is probably due to the fact that, in Poland, imams mostly act only as guides in the world of religion and spirituality, of

prohibitions and orders, while the issues involved in the organisation of community life rest on the shoulders of women. There is a clear difference, according to the respondents, between life in Poland and in their countries of origin, where leadership in the community is primarily the province of men. Some respondents noted that they or their husbands initially found it difficult to ask for help or mediation from a woman, as in many Muslim centres, it is women who provide such services. Women are responsible not only for the activities that Islam traditionally attributes to women, but for a much broader spectrum of actions. Interestingly, women also take initiatives pertaining to religious issues; in Cracow, for example, they initiated an interreligious Christian-Jewish-Muslim prayer for peace.

### **Muslim centres and Muslim community**

First of all, it must be recognised that Muslim centres in Poland play a fundamental role in the creation of the Muslim community. The activities of the Muslim centres are based on common principles, although the specifics of the activity of a particular centre depends on the engagement of its members. The centres engage both migrants and converts. There are strong gender-based differences in these centres' activities; local centres are dominated by women, while transregional associations are dominated by men. This applies with regard to both migrant Muslims and converts.

Most of the respondents admitted that the existence of the community is important to them, and that it helps them in their lives in Poland. Cultivating customs, holidays, rituals and going through everyday life with people who understand the respondents' situation, because they are in similar situations themselves, is extremely important. Especially in these times, when prejudice against Muslims is more and more evident, according to the respondents. Examples of relevant quotes from the interviews here are 'Someone whose hijab was pulled off will more easily understand what it means when yours was pulled off' (Interview 5, woman) and 'The more the merrier' (Interview 9, man). Some of the respondents, regardless of their place of residence, said that they regretted that their centres could only integrate them into the community to a certain extent. They desired more contact with each other, but admitted that they were not personally able to establish this contact.

A matter that was often mentioned in the interviews was the organisation of social activities for the Muslim community. One of the most important of these is a congress of Polish Muslims organised by the Muslim League, which takes place every year in the second part of July. It is an opportunity to meet and get to know other Muslims from different parts of Poland, both those who live in Poland permanently and those who are there only temporarily, and both people born as Muslims and converts (Interview 3, 5, 7, all women). During the congress, thematic lectures on Islam and activities for children are held. The lectures cover various topics, mainly related to theology and the practice of Islam, and the speakers are not restricted to Polish Muslims. The congress visitors are a very diverse group, and the idea of getting to know each other is quite important. As one of the respondents states when talking about Congress and getting to know new people there: 'It is not like in the Alcoholics Anonymous group, where someone gets up and introduces themselves. Here, there are acquaintances of friends, which helps to feel a part of something bigger' (Interview 9, man). The emerging social networks are quite wide, and as many people are already acquainted, there are no activities aimed at getting to know each other. For the purpose of the convention, a holiday resort is usually rented, most often exclusively, which on the one hand preserves privacy, but on the other hand contributes to the self-isolation of Muslims in Poland. This is strengthened by the fact that, as the respondents admit, 'unfortunately the area is guarded by the police and the facility is closed' (Interview 5, woman). These conditions of isolation are, on the one hand, a necessity, as counterdemonstrations are often held during the convention, so the sense of separation and being trapped is noticeable. On the other hand, however, it 'evokes a sense of community and a sense of common destiny' in the people who have gathered at the convention (Interview 9, man). A frequent topic of

discussion at the conventions, apart from religious matters, is the social situation of Muslims living in Poland and struggling with a sense of exclusion and non-acceptance.

Both male and female respondents indicated that the activities organised by a particular Muslim institution, most often in the form of a Muslim Centre under the aegis of the Muslim League, were important to them: 'Here, I'm at home' (Interview 7, woman). The respondents described many activities that these centres undertake, which are primarily aimed at helping Muslims meet other Muslims and integrate into an unfamiliar society. An interesting initiative that helps the formation of local communities in a number of major Polish cities is the establishment of a kindergarten for children in the Muslim Centre, where Muslim children from three to six year old can spend time together once a week, allowing young children to make friends and providing a environment where children can pass the time while the adults are otherwise engaged in meetings or prayers, for example. There are spaces for children in most of the Muslim Centres as well, making these centres inviting for both adults and children. Childcare is customarily the province of women – not only in Muslim communities – and in these centres, it is indeed Muslim women who organise and act as the initiators of such activities. Occasionally, other activities for children are organised, such as arts classes. One of the activities that unites the community is also the activity aimed at the youngest Muslims. In 2017, for the first time, the Muslim League organised a Qur'an recitation competition for children aged 4 to 17, following the contests held in many places in the Muslim world. Community building also involves the joint celebration of holidays and rituals; the Muslim community organises such celebrations through the local centres. Muslim centres and communities organise *iftar*, the first meal that Muslims eat after the end of fasting in Ramadan, following a communal prayer at sunset, for Muslims from the area. The initiators and main organisers of these events are, in most cases, women. A similar situation exists with regard to the organisation of joint activities that do not directly relate to Islam, but are primarily focused on the building of relationships between members of the community. 'My favourite example: picnics' (Interview 8, woman). Such events are organised by local Muslim culture centres or Muslim organisations in a variety of cities, the goal being not only to unite people through common activities, but above all to bring Muslims and their families together. The centres often invite people or groups of people from Muslim countries who are temporarily residing in Poland; for example, the Muslim Centre in Cracow invited a group of Malaysian students. The centres primarily organise these kinds of activities, which in the Muslim community are viewed as being the province of women. It is Muslim women, especially those raised in Muslim countries, who teach converts about Islam. The surveyed Muslim women said that they often took on a mother-like role, teaching their younger friends how to live in accordance with their faith (Interview 2, 5, 7, women). Many of the female respondents stated that they found it easier to pass on their experiences regarding practical aspects of life than to enter into theological debate. In general, men do not participate in such activities. The interviewed women indicated that they felt a responsibility towards other women and the community. This aspect was much less evident in the men's responses.

Muslim Centres and associations, such as the Muslim Students Association, organise various academic events, such as lectures and meetings with Islamic academics, to familiarise people with the Islamic community's activities; these events involve not only religious authorities and Islamic academics, but also ordinary Muslims sharing their experience. Since the giving of alms is one of the most important pillars of the Islam, it also plays an important role in the Polish Muslim community, uniting everyone, from migrants to converts and Polish Tatars. The initiators of the majority of activities are women. Men take part in them either passively or as patrons and representatives; both the idea and its implementation lie with the women, who are also more inclined to cooperate beyond their own Muslim environment. According to respondents, typical activities include aiding Muslim refugees, e.g. through the 'Dzieci z dworca Brześć' campaign, or by helping unemployed Muslims find jobs, both within the Muslim community itself (through a kind of bulletin board system) and outside it.



## **Muslims online**

The aim the content analysis carried out in the study was to show how Muslim presence on social media contributes to the formation of a Muslim community. An analysis was carried out of the most important topics of posts in various types of Facebook groups for Muslims living in Poland. Contemporary communities often take on a virtual dimension, as some of their activities are transferred into virtual space. This applies to both individual and group activities (van Dijk 2010: 57). Virtual communities can connect individuals that would otherwise be left out (Putnam 2008: 292). This is very evident in group pages formed by Muslims living in Poland. The analysis of content posted on these group pages shows that if not for these virtual spaces, it would be difficult for Muslims living in Poland to find their way in Polish society. With virtual communities, it is possible to overcome geographical and, sometimes, financial barriers to interaction between members of the Muslim community. The coexistence of the virtual and the real space of the Muslim community in Poland is evident. One can see the organisation of tasks, flow of information, and transfer of knowledge from the virtual space to reality. Comments and posts show that people who have got in touch, for example, in closed groups on Facebook, after realising that they live in the neighbouring areas, tend to meet in 'real world' and afterwards publish images or posts from the meetings. Internet space is also important for people living in isolation, e.g. at a distance from larger cities, in which case Internet is the only or most common form of contact with the Muslim community. The respondents emphasised that it was very important to them to be able to share their own problems and talk about situations which can only be understood by others who have had similar experiences. The latter does not refer to their family members who have remained in their native country and non-Muslim Polish people with whom they are in touch on a daily basis. Essentially all Muslim centres operating in the larger cities have their own Facebook profiles and strive to create local virtual communities. However, there appears to exist a lack of cooperation between these centres in the virtual sphere; there is no tagging, linking and sharing of other centres' initiatives – even, in many cases, when these other centres are listed as friends (on Facebook). This shows that the communities that are formed are strongly localised, both in reality and in the virtual space. Posts are written both in Polish and in English; members post in the language they are most fluent in, and administrators ensure that important posts are translated – primarily to English, but also e.g. French or Arabic. Groups for women have more posts, as Muslim women post more often than men; most of these posts are published by the group administrators, and users comment often on the posts. They include information about current activities organised by specific centres in specific cities, such as open days in temples or charity collections. Social media groups also function as information boards on which a variety religious information is posted, such as the prayer hours of each month, the first day of the month Dhu al-Hijjah, 'The Month of the Pilgrimage', the day of Eid al-Adha etc.; this has to do with the fact that the Muslim holiday calendar is based on the lunar calendar, meaning that the start and end of months and holidays are mobile. During holidays, such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, many people, especially women, would post wishes on the occasion of Eid Mubarak (Muslim holidays), and inspired people to send wishes to each other and comment on posts. Some of these posts and comments were very personal and suggested that many of the members of particular groups know each other personally.

Another issue raised in groups is the issue of the implementation of the Muslim diet in the Polish context. Posts about how to prepare halal dishes and find halal products in Poland often attract a lot of comments. Information is shared about stores and direct sellers who provide such products. Several times in the analysed groups there appeared the idea of shopping together to facilitate the fulfilment of this obligation. Such initiatives were most commonly raised by women contributing, it can be argued, to the building of a sense of a community based on struggling with similar problems. The subjects of posts are often very mundane things. For example, in the women's sections of Muslim Centres' Facebook profiles, members exchange information

on their plans for the near future, and others post comments about how busy they are and what they are going to do when they get home. Posts of this kind often attract many comments; many women are eager to share their concerns and everyday experiences. These stories connect both converts and immigrant women. Many posts consist of thoughts or simple statements, often relating to the Muslim calendar; these tend to attract many comments and are often shared on private profiles. Other frequent post topics relate to daily life, e.g. sharing favourite halal (e.g. nail polish) or discussions on burkinis, hijabs and burqas. Invitations to sports activities are occasionally posted, e.g. for a football tournament organised in the context of Football Against Racism in Europe.

Posts about oppression targeting Muslims, not only in Poland but also abroad, were very common in both men's and women's Facebook groups, attracting a lot of comments from group members. Much attention is devoted to members' fears associated with the current situation of Muslims in the world, but there is also information about meetings, accounts of them and comments on what issues were addressed at the meetings, e.g. about a meeting with a specific imam, members of organisations dealing with combating violence against others e.g. the Never Again association, etc.

Many posts relate to religious matters, especially the month of Ramadan, Ramadan preparations, and pilgrimage. Such posts are also published more frequently by the spiritual leaders of the community during the month of Ramadan. Videos with messages, prayers, etc. are also posted by religious authorities from outside the local community or outside Poland. Such posts are about how to prepare for Ramadan, what practices should be part of daily routine, or how and according to what rules to fast. There are also comments in which people explain how they personally approach certain practices, problems they encounter in fulfilling them and how they deal with those problems. This is an area where men are more active.

As the giving of alms is one of the pillars of Islam, requests for donations for a particular person, family, or initiative are often posted in social media groups. In one of the closed groups, a spontaneous collection of money and supplies was organised for one of the female members of that group who was in a difficult financial situation. This collection was a great success, not only in terms of the money and goods raised, but also in that it provided psychological and social support. People visited the woman in question at home and included her in active work for the community. Job offers or information that someone is looking for employees are also posted on pages and groups, though very rarely, and mostly on pages and in groups aimed at men.

### **Closed Muslim virtual world**

Groups for Muslims usually segregated by gender, are closed. Oftentimes, the descriptions of the groups themselves indicate that only specific types of persons are accepted as members. Administrators ensure that no unauthorised people are accepted, using verification methods like control questions that prospective members must answer, e.g. regarding their conversion, or nomination by an existing group member. As mentioned by respondents who were creators and administrators of such groups, the need to be selective when accepting new members is growing, since non-Muslims joining the group are less and less often simply interested in Islam, but more and more often they attack Islam. As one of the respondents explained, 'we have to deal with unceasing squabbles' (Interview 12, man). As a result, Muslims tend to keep to their own environment, which on the one hand leads to greater cohesion and a deeper sense of community, but on the other hand further isolates these Muslims from the rest of society. The Internet gives Muslims, like other minorities and excluded groups, the ability to post and control content of importance for the community (Zames-Fleischer and Zames 2011: 232). Technological developments have brought an increase in interactions between individuals that are not affected by time or distance. These interactions do not supplant or substitute direct interactions, but they do complement and, in many cases, reinforce them (van Dijk 2010: 56–61). Although the bonds created through

these interactions are weaker, they allow Muslims to come out of isolation. Polish Muslims are also adept at use other channels of communication. Another way in which the Internet is being used to create a community can be seen in the formation of Internet *Radio Islam*. *Radio Islam* is still in development, but its website already hosts podcasts, through which listeners can listen to the khutbah – the Friday sermon – in two languages, Polish and English. The website also contains videos related to various topics, such as Jesus in Islam, the history of Islam, Abraham, analysis of jihad, etc.

## Conclusions

The community of Polish Muslims, though small, is very diverse. It consists primarily of Muslim migrants who arrived in Poland at various times from the 1970s onwards, as well as Tatars and a small group of converts. The analysis of the activities of Muslim migrants in Poland shows that men and women are engaged in different ways. Men fulfil roles of leadership and strictly religious roles. Women organise the majority of the aspects of community life, including aspects that, in traditional Muslim communities, are the province of men. The activities of men and women also differ with regard to time spent on community work. Although women take care of the household and often work professionally, the activities they undertake in the Muslim community are intensive and time-consuming. Most of the activities carried out in the Muslim community are performed by women; men are much less involved. The activities in which men are involved tend to be less time-consuming than the activities of women.

It can be argued that the way in which the Muslims community in Poland functions is influenced by the environment; more specifically, by the environment's hostility towards Muslims. As a result, most of the activities – both real-world and in the virtual space – that men and women in the Muslim community undertake are directed inwards. These activities are often intended to unite the community, but often also lead to self-isolation; many initiatives relate to traditions from migrant Muslims' countries of origin, and are therefore exclusive to the Muslim community. Muslims are thus becoming an increasingly closed social group that has no contact with the majority of society; the social networks of certain individuals – especially those who have migrated to Poland relatively recently – consist exclusively of members of the Muslim community.

## Notes


1 In the 14th century, the Tatars settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, mainly around Vilnius, Trakai, Grodno and Kaunas; starting from the 17th century, they also settled in the Crown, mainly in Volhynia and Podolia, as well as in the Suwałki Region of Poland in the late 17th century.

2 <http://islam-krakow.pl/eng/2014/02/17/the-muslim-community-in-poland/> (accessed: 30 November 2018).

## Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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