

Article

Discrimination against Veiled Muslim Women in Switzerland: Insights from Field Experts

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Abstract: Although the *hijab* has recently attracted much attention from social scientists, the discrimination experienced by *hijabis* has been insufficiently investigated. Data are difficult to obtain, partly because surveys usually do not have items on this practice and victims are difficult to reach. However, field experts, namely active agents in governmental racism-prevention institutions and in Muslim associations, can provide rich insights into processes of discrimination. Based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews, I answer the following question: how do governmental and non-governmental experts describe discrimination against *hijabis* in Switzerland? The results reveal that, according to the experts interviewed, the *hijab* is the most important marker leading to processes of discrimination; this discrimination takes a variety of forms and affects a wide range of life domains and profiles of *hijabis*; such discrimination leads to a segregation of the social space of *hijabis*; many women are unwilling to report discrimination to governmental services for different reasons.

Keywords: headscarf; *hijab*; islamophobia; Muslims; gender; expert interviews; discrimination; racism; stigma; religious minority



Citation: Lindemann, Anaïd. 2021. Discrimination against Veiled Muslim Women in Switzerland: Insights from Field Experts. *Religions* 12: 500. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070500>

Academic Editor: Halim Rane

Received: 1 June 2021

Accepted: 29 June 2021

Published: 5 July 2021

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1. Introduction and Research Questions

The *hijab*¹ is currently at the center of countless political and theological debates. Social scientists have investigated the practice of wearing the *hijab* from two main perspectives: the individual meaning that Muslim women attach to the *hijab*, and what it symbolizes for the majority society. However, far less attention has been given to the concrete consequences of wearing the *hijab* in Western societies. Data on the discrimination experienced by women who wear the *hijab* (*hijabis*) are particularly difficult to obtain, as official surveys usually do not ask questions on this practice, and accessing victims of discrimination is often challenging for researchers (Allen 2020, p. 42).

One other way of obtaining such data is to investigate the knowledge that field experts have gained on the ground from activities aimed at addressing discrimination. Such field experts can be part either of state-funded services or of Muslim associations. In Switzerland, there are centers funded by the state to support victims of racism and to record the racist incidents that are reported to trained staff (governmental experts), and there are also Muslim associations (non-governmental experts) that provide support to their members if they experience discrimination. Insights from both types of experts are valuable and complement each other.

This paper asks the following question: how do governmental and non-governmental experts describe and explain the discrimination experienced by *hijabis* in Switzerland, and how do they differ in their knowledge? More specifically, this study seeks to (1) determine the importance and role that field experts discern in processes of discrimination of this “marker of Muslimness” (Chakraborti and Zempi 2012, p. 271); (2) identify the forms that discrimination takes, and the life domains and socio-demographic profiles affected; (3) understand the particular way that this discrimination configures the social space that *hijabis* navigate; and (4) reveal how governmental and non-governmental experts differ in their knowledge.

To answer these questions, I draw on 23 semi-structured interviews with governmental and non-governmental experts across Switzerland. It is important to draw on both types of expert for two main reasons. First, governmental experts hear a diversity of victims of racism. Second, non-governmental experts are in contact with *hijabis* who are perhaps unwilling to testify to governmental experts. Interviewing the latter partly addresses the issue of under-reporting, i.e., the fact that victims of discrimination may not be willing to testify to government-funded centers or may not be aware that such centers exist.

2. The *hijab* in the West

An important body of qualitative research, which can be called “herméneutique du voile” (Pelletier 2005), investigates the significance and agency that women who wear the *hijab* ascribe to the garment. Studies using focus groups or interviews in Great Britain and North America reveal that the *hijab* works as a means to achieve empowerment, respectability or modesty; to perform and confirm identity; to represent a political strand such as anti-colonialism; or even to negotiate spaces (Haddad 2007; Hopkins and Greenwood 2013; Ruby 2006; Siraj 2011; Tarlo 2007). Other authors have tried to create typologies of the *hijab* according to what motivates women to wear it (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995). A consensus has emerged from this literature: namely, the polysemy of the *hijab* across all national contexts.

Another category of research shifts the perspective and examines the perceptions and attitudes of the majority society with regard to the *hijab*, with these perceptions and attitudes being either expressed on the individual level or translated into national policies and media representations. Social psychologists have demonstrated that different individual and collective variables predict anti-*hijab* attitudes (Fasel et al. 2013; Saroglou et al. 2009). More generally, Helbling (2014) has demonstrated that majority attitudes are more negative towards *hijabis* than towards Muslims in general. Other scholars have argued that hostility towards veiled women is the gendered aspect of Islamophobia, and that it can be explained by stereotypes linked to the post-9/11 context (Amiraux 2007; Chakraborti and Zempi 2012) or to a particular conception of laicity in which the *hijab* is constructed as a threat to the latter and to republican values such as gender equality (Benelli et al. 2006).

Finally, relatively recent studies have started to look specifically at the practical consequences of wearing the *hijab* in such socio-political contexts. This has been done mainly by investigating the economic impact of wearing the *hijab*, which could be called the “*hijab* penalty” just like authors reveal the existence of the “Muslim penalty” in other studies (Khattab and Modood 2015): studies have shown through statistical analyses or field experiments that veiled women are significantly less likely to be employed than non-veiled women and non-Muslims (Unkelbach et al. 2010), and have a significantly lower chance of being offered a job than similar applicants without the *hijab* (Ghumman and Ryan 2013; Weichselbaumer 2020). Very few studies have examined other life domains, however. Zempi and Chakraborti (2015) show that hostility towards veiled women has negative consequences in individual, community, and societal terms. Drawing on the testimonies of victims of discrimination in the United Kingdom, Carr (2016) and Allen (2020) offer detailed investigations of the experience of discrimination for Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, especially in the form of street-level attacks and minor incidents. As for the American context, a qualitative study has shown how the *hijab* plays a prominent role in processes of racialization in Dallas and Chicago (Selod 2015), while a quantitative study has found that the *hijab* is the most important predictor of perceived discrimination among Muslim women (Dana et al. 2019).

These studies make important contributions to understanding the impact of wearing the *hijab* in Western countries in specific life domains. However, they focus on street-level incidents, and usually limit their analysis to one life domain or one area. Drawing on different types of field experts who have heard and collected numerous testimonies allows us to widen the analysis to include a variety of life domains at a national scale.

3. The Swiss Context

Switzerland has a sizeable Muslim minority, amounting to 5.3% of the resident population; of these, approximately one-third have Swiss citizenship, and most have a migration background.²

Due to the system of direct democracy in Switzerland, referendums have introduced structural discrimination in the country: the interdiction with regard to the building of minarets that is inscribed in the Constitution, and the banning of face coverings in the public space by two cantons (Eskandari and Banfi 2017) that has just been inscribed in the Constitution after a referendum in 2021. Discrimination on a more local level has also been documented (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013; Incidents Racistes Recensés par les Centres de Conseil. Janvier—Décembre 2019 2020).

Rates of perceived discrimination on the part of Muslims in Switzerland are also comparable to the rates in other European countries and the US, with approximately one-third of the Muslim resident population perceiving discrimination (Enquête sur la Langue, la Religion et la Culture 2019 2020; Lindemann and Stolz 2020). A survey has documented important levels of stereotypes of Muslims expressed by the majority population and hostility towards them (Enquête sur le Vivre Ensemble en Suisse (VeS): Résultats 2018 2019). Research has also shown that Switzerland has a Muslim employment gap that is quite similar to the gap in other European countries (Lindemann and Stolz 2018).

Moreover, the headscarf controversy has animated public and political debate since 1997, when the federal court banned a schoolteacher from wearing the *hijab*, a decision supported by the ECHR (Dahlab vs. Switzerland case). Conversely, attempts to ban schoolgirls from wearing the *hijab* have often been discussed by the media, but have never succeeded legally (Angst et al. 2006, p. 8). These debates take varying forms and intensity, depending on the regulation of religion and the extent to which laicity is or is not applied in each canton, Switzerland being a federal State (Ossipow 2003). Scholars have also demonstrated how the “veil” is used in Swiss media as a symbol of radical Islamism, oppression of women (echoing a process of attribution of extraordinary sexism to the Other described by Roux et al. 2007), or incompatibility with democratic values (Parini et al. 2012).

Finally, after adhering to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1971, Switzerland adopted a legal provision against racial discrimination, commonly known as the “anti-racism law”, including discrimination based on religion, in 1995 (Art. 261bis of Criminal Code): anyone who publicly discriminates or incites hatred against individuals because of their racial, ethnic or religious affiliation or sexual orientation shall be punished by up to three years of incarceration or by a fine.³ Victims of discrimination can file a complaint that will automatically launch legal proceedings.

This enactment gave birth to a network of government-funded centers supporting victims of discrimination. It is partly individuals who work in these centers that I have interviewed for this paper. Since 1995, out of 935 procedures filed as part of the “anti-racism law” and compiled by the Federal Commission against Racism,⁴ 52 involved Muslims. Out of these 52 cases, only 2 concern direct discrimination against women wearing the *hijab*, both in 2010 (one was insulted and the other got her *hijab* torn off, both in the street), and 2 others were linked to communications inciting hatred and violence against women wearing the *hijab*. The small number of legal cases involving direct victims might suggest that *hijabis* very rarely report experiences of discrimination, which will be discussed in the analysis.

To sum up, Switzerland is quite similar to other European countries, although the level of structural discrimination is somewhat higher due to its system of direct democracy.

4. Theoretical Framework

There is an extensive theoretical literature that attempts to conceptualize and explain discrimination, and I only select three points here that will help me interpret my subsequent findings.

4.1. Terminology

In the literature, the terms *veil*, *hijab* and *headscarf* are often used to refer to the same garment, namely a scarf covering the hair, neck, and shoulders. In this study, I chose to use the terms *hijab* and *hijabis* for two main reasons. First, it constitutes a neutral alternative to the various emic terms that I came across during the expert interviews. Depending on the linguistic region, the respondents spontaneously referred to the “veil” in the French and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland (*il velo/le voile*), and sometimes to the headscarf in the French part (*le foulard*), and exclusively to the “headscarf” in the German part (*das Kopftuch*). Any discussion on other types of garments in the interviews is not analyzed in the present study. Second, *hijab* is the most precise term, as it allows differentiating from other types of garments worn both in specific Islamic traditions and other religions (Almila 2017). In this study, the term “veiled women” is rarely used but, if so, it refers to *hijabis* and not to women wearing full-face coverings such as the *niqab* or the *burqa*.

4.2. Racism, Islamophobia, and Intersectionality

Discrimination can be defined as behaviors that create unequal treatment based on presumed individual or group characteristics, resulting in disadvantages and negative outcomes of the targeted individual or group of individuals. These behaviors are usually, but not necessarily (Merton 1949), motivated by prejudices, defined as negative and generalized beliefs towards an outgroup (Allport 1954; Quillian 2006).

When we talk about discrimination against women who wear the *hijab*, which can take the form of social exclusion, violence, or stigmatization, the question that automatically arises relates to the type of prejudices on which this discrimination is based. Is it Islamophobia, racism, or gender-based discrimination? The answer to this question depends on the definition of these concepts. Of course, adherence to a religion is not a “race”. However, the process of targeting individuals based on their (supposed) adherence to a religion can be considered a process of racialization (Carr 2016; Meer and Modood 2009, p. 344), in the sense that it seeks to undermine and “other” these individuals based on their belonging. From this perspective, Islamophobia may be defined as a specific form of racism that motivates discriminatory behaviors targeting individuals based on their (supposed) adherence to a specific religion, namely Islam. Indeed, Islamophobia functions identically to racism: namely, through ideologies based on a set of prejudices, opinions, and attitudes that are manifested through exclusionary discourses and practices (Allen 2020).

To complicate matters, it is difficult to disentangle the motives based on gender, ethnicity, race, skin color, and religion. Authors refer to “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1993) or “multiple-discrimination” (Ruwanpura 2008) to describe processes of discrimination where the accumulation of different social positions and attributes (race, gender, religion, migratory status, etc.) creates specific experiences of discrimination. In this regard, a growing number of studies focusing on the discrimination of Muslims women resort to this theoretical framework (Eijberts and Roggeban 2016; Weichselbaumer 2020).

4.3. Social Stigma and Markers of Muslimness

Studies on discrimination frequently cite the work by Erving Goffman on Stigma. Goffman’s concept is very useful for the interpretation of my results, because, in Western societies, the *hijab* fits his notion of social stigma, especially in terms of how its visibility or “evidentness” (Goffman 1963, p. 48) works. Goffman posits that society produces the means to categorize individuals into groups based on attributes thought to be ordinary or natural for their members. Some of these attributes become stigmas when they differ from normative expectations and when they discredit the individual who possesses them.

However, an attribute is never creditable or discreditable in itself; rather, it is the special relationship between stereotypes and the attribute that makes it a stigma. According to Goffman, there are two types of social stigma: the discreditable, which is invisible or not yet known, and the discredited, which is visible (“evident”) or already known (Goffman 1963, pp. 41–42). In this regard, the *hijab* falls under the second category of stigma, as it is visible and functions as a marker of Muslimness or otherness.

4.4. Social Stigma and the Configuration of Social Spaces

Another important insight provided by Goffman (1963, pp. 81–82) is that the stigmatization of certain individuals tends to configure their space into three types: the out-of-bounds places, where stigmatized persons are forbidden and where exposure leads to expulsion; the civil places, where they are tolerated, but in fact disqualified; and the back places, where they can freely navigate their world without any social costs. This idea seems to be very useful when it comes to making sense of how the field experts interviewed describe the effects of discrimination for *hijabis* in Swiss society.

5. Methodology

5.1. Expert Knowledge

The concept, validity, and reliability of expert knowledge have been much debated (Collins and Evans 2002). Following Meuser and Nagel (2009), I conceive of experts as individuals who are active agents in a specific field and who, through their social positioning and experience, have acquired practical knowledge on particular issues. More specifically, I identify individuals as experts when they are active agents in the field of anti-racism in general or of anti-Islamophobia in particular. In Switzerland, this includes both governmental agents who assist victims of discrimination and gather data on racist incidents, and non-governmental actors who receive testimonies from and give informal support to victims who are unwilling to contact state-funded centers or are unaware that such centers exist. These experts are points of crystallization for multiple testimonies of victims.

The combination of these two types of expert permits us to widen our understanding of discrimination against *hijabis* in Switzerland for three main reasons. First, it allows us partly to address the issue highlighted by scholars of under-reporting (Carr 2016, pp. 137–39; Fanning et al. 2011), since victims are often reluctant to testify to state services or are simply not aware that they exist. Active agents in Muslim associations therefore have access to the testimonies of women who are unknown to governmental experts, and have particularly strong ties to the population of *hijabis*, since data suggest that veiled Muslim women are much more likely to be members of an ethno-religious association.⁵ Second, some incidents could be considered not serious enough to be reported to state services, but are still discussed in the Muslim associations. Third, and conversely, *hijabis* who do not belong to Muslim associations might not report their experiences to non-governmental experts but might contact state services instead. While this methodology aims at being as inclusive as possible, a selection bias still remains: namely, the lack of knowledge with regard to the experience of women who are both unwilling to testify to state experts and absent from Muslim associations.

Finally, not drawing on the direct experience of *hijabis* and privileging field expert insights is a methodological choice. Although this choice involves resorting to respondents who “speak for” these women, it has important benefits: it provides a more general overview of the issue, since these respondents are in contact with many individuals from very diverse horizons and who have experienced discrimination in a wide range of domains. To reach such an overview with interviews of *hijabis* would have required conducting far more interviews and convincing people to confide on sensitive experiences. Focusing on the limited viewpoint of victims would have necessarily limited the scope of the inferences. Finally, some of the non-government female experts wore the *hijab* and they sometimes shared their experiences during the interviews. To avoid dealing with data from a different

nature (expert knowledge vs. personal experiences), I excluded personal experiences from the analysis.

5.2. Data Collection

A total of 23 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with experts in the three linguistic regions of Switzerland between August 2019 and May 2020. We conducted the interviews in the language spoken in the canton where the expert lived, and used topic guides avoiding closed questions (Meuser and Nagel 2009), these topic guides being structured around three main axes: how the entity to which the expert is affiliated defines and deals with discrimination; the nature of the discrimination identified by the expert (frequency, life domains, types of discrimination); the profile of the victims who contacted the expert (where we avoided mention of *hijabis* so as not to give the answers a particular orientation); and mechanisms of discrimination and coping strategies that the expert identifies in the testimonies.

The non-governmental experts (14, named N01 to N14) were mostly drawn from Muslim organizations, i.e., representatives from both local and umbrella organizations. As for the governmental experts (9, named G01 to G09), these are persons in charge of counselling in government-funded centers for victims of racism. These centers are either part of the cantonal administration, usually belonging to the “Offices for the integration of foreigners”, or are hosted by civil organizations but still funded by the canton. Overall, 48% of the experts interviewed were women.

I used a hybrid approach to build the sample: I listed all the organizations and government-funded centers in Banfi’s exhaustive cartography (Banfi 2013), as well as the public reports of the centers (Incidents Racistes Recensés par les Centres de Conseil. Janvier—Décembre 2019 2020), and then added all other actors that might be of interest; I then used a snowball procedure to confirm and/or expand the list. Overall, I contacted 47 experts, and achieved a response rate of 49%. The interviews lasted between 30 and 150 min, with an average duration of 63 min. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

5.3. Analyses

I used a hybrid approach of thematic content analysis consisting of an iterative process between inductive and deductive coding similar to the methodology of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). I first coded a selection of interviews inductively to identify key themes and patterns using MAXQDA12 software. I rearranged the list of codes before adding codes that I thought would be useful for the rest of the corpus, based on the research questions, the literature, and my field experience. Finally, I reran the analysis on the selection using this fixed list accompanied by rules of coding (available on request by the author) and then applied it to the rest of the corpus. The main codes analyzed in this paper are those attached to victims of discrimination discussed by the experts: markers of Muslimness/otherness (*hijab*, origin, name, other religious signs); life domains (private sector, public sector, public life, private life); forms of discrimination (exclusionary practices, verbal abuse, physical violence); types of ideology underlying the discrimination (xenophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, etc.); socio-demographic profile (migratory status, level of education); and strategy (testify, not testify).

Using this coding scheme allows me to identify (1) how the experts evaluate the importance and role of the *hijab* in processes of discrimination; (2) the life domains in which discrimination occurs, as well as the forms that such discrimination takes and the socio-demographic group to which discriminated women belong; (3) how the experts describe the configuration of the social space for *hijabis*; and (4) how the two types of experts differ, especially in their understanding of individual reasons for not reporting incidents.

6. Results

6.1. The hijab as the Most Important Marker of Muslimness

Drawing on the multitude of testimonies given by individuals who had experienced discrimination, both the governmental and the non-governmental experts discussed the importance of this garment and the role that it plays in processes of discrimination. Analyzing the interviews reveals that the *hijab* is seen as the most important marker of Muslimness, which makes *hijabis* especially vulnerable to discrimination.

For example, one non-governmental expert claims:

“But the only negative point in this system are not Muslims; it is the Muslim woman. Muslims, I don’t know, there are prejudices sometimes in the workplace or hiring process. There are some stories linked to eating halal, etc. But the discrimination that is clear is against Muslim women, especially the veiled woman. This is really, this is the thing that sticks out the most”.

(N03)

Similarly, some of the other experts indicate that *hijabis* are the most vulnerable Muslims when it comes to discrimination. They mention that cases of discrimination reported to them “concern all veiled women” (N06), that they are “more affected” (G09), and that “women with the headscarf have the most difficulty, I think, without a doubt” (G07). Both the governmental and the non-governmental experts share this perception.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the *hijab* is a very salient topic when the experts discuss different markers of Muslimness. As Figure 1 shows, the experts mention the *hijab* spontaneously more often than other markers (left axis), as they bring up the issue themselves in 21 of the 23 interviews (91%). In contrast, they spontaneously mention other markers of Muslimness (right axis), such as name, origin, or signs seen as religiously motivated (Ramadan, beard, special diet), in only 12 (52%), 13 (57%), and 14 (61%) interviews.

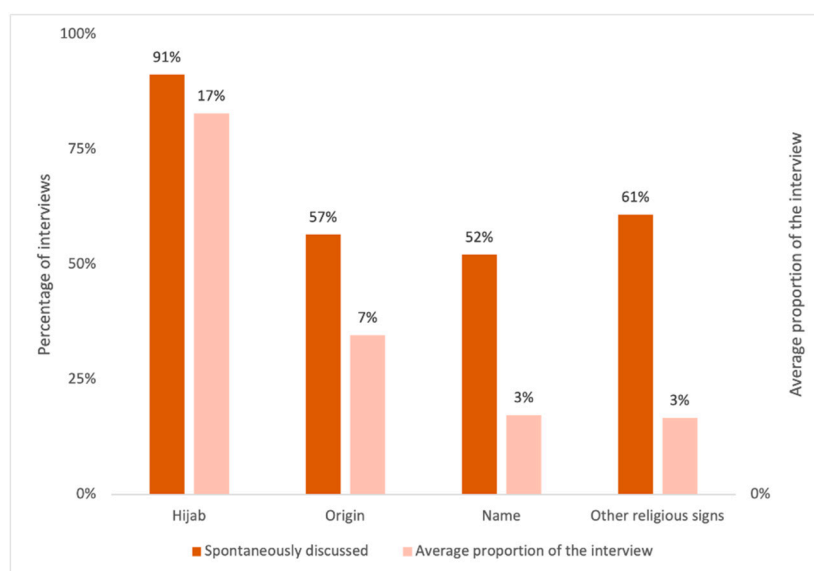


Figure 1. Spontaneity with which the experts raise an issue (left), and average proportion of the interview that they give to markers of Muslimness (right).

Figure 1 also indicates that, in terms of the extent to which each marker is discussed, the *hijab* is given more attention than other markers. On average, the *hijab* takes up 17% of an interview, with a maximum of 40% and a minimum of 2%. Comparing these results to other markers (7% for origin, for example) shows clearly the prominence of the *hijab* in the expert interviews.

Additionally, the *hijab* appears at a very early stage in the interview, with the issue cropping up after less than 13 min on average; it sometimes crops up in the first three minutes of the interview, and almost always within the first 20 min. However, the governmental experts were slower to mention the issue (17.4 versus 9.8 min on average).

6.2. Why *hijabis* Are Targeted: Visibility, Gender, and Racialization

In line with Goffman's theory of "discredited stigma" (visible marker of otherness) and intersectional approaches, most of the experts explain that the vulnerability of *hijabis* is due to three main mechanisms: (a) the *hijab* makes their belonging to Islam directly visible; (b) gender and religious belonging intersect in the experiences of discrimination; (c) *hijabis* are racialized as they are often (wrongly) perceived as foreigners. These mechanisms are highlighted by both types of expert.

(a) According to the experts and in line with previous studies, the *hijab* "makes things a lot worse, because it is very visible" (N01, G09). As an illustration, one expert explains the difference between men and women as follows:

"With women it is more difficult; in most cases it is obvious that they are Muslims. For men, a beard is not sufficient anymore, unless you really wear religious clothes, but no one wears such clothes for a job interview. So, with men, other things cause problems like surname or first name. Or in a job interview when you say something. Or at work, you're bullied by your colleagues, you hear certain stories or those bad jokes about Islam, about Muslims, but often also the countries of origin [are involved] like Turkey, Kosovo ... With women it's different, especially when they wear headscarves it's obvious. She doesn't have to say anything, she's just ... Her clothes speak".

(N09)

(b) Additionally, the experts highlight how gender and religious belonging intersect in processes of discrimination. Apart from the obvious fact that the *hijab* is only worn by women, those women who do wear the *hijab* can be exposed to sexist comments in the public space. Examples were given of women who had been asked in public about why they hid their hair despite being "so beautiful", and about their supposed difficulty in dating men (N07), as well as of sexist insults thrown at *hijabis* by strangers in the street and by neighbors.

The experts gave other examples of *hijabis* facing verbal attacks with regard to their maternal role, such as being told that what they are "doing with the veil is unacceptable, your child will suffer all his life because of your choice. Are you thinking about your child? Are you thinking about the suffering you're causing him?" (N05). Other experts explain that, "when *hijabis* take a walk, some women even talk to the kids, telling them, 'your mother with her headscarf ...'" (N07); that *hijabis* are intentionally kicked on the bus when they are looking for something in the stroller (N05), or physically assaulted by a man trying to pull the *hijab* off (N09).

All these examples reveal how the injunctions made to women in different gender roles attributed to them by society are added to the prejudices and stereotypes linked to the wearing of the *hijab*.

(c) Finally, the experts highlighted how *hijabis* are racialized through xenophobic comments, as women wearing the *hijab* are often wrongly perceived as foreigners and attacked for this reason. They report situations where the victim is reduced to her (supposed) "foreign" identity. This can take different forms, such as direct insults or attributions of "otherness", for example "go back home" (N02, N06, N07, N10, G02) or "dirty Arab" (N07); the implication that the world is divided between "us" and "you", such as "in our country you can't do this" (N07); and more subtle insinuations, such as being surprised that the woman speaks the local language, when she is asked, "Do you understand French?" (N04, N07, N14). The experts often highlighted the fact that these incidents had occurred with regard to Swiss citizens or second-generation individuals born in the country.

This process can be called “double-othering” (Allen 2020), as women wearing the *hijab* are attacked because they are Muslims *and* because they are conceived as being “other” or as not belonging to the country.

To sum up these results, the experts explain that *hijabis* are especially targeted by pointing to the fact that they are more visible as Muslims, and that *hijabis* experience multiple discrimination where gender, belonging to Islam and (supposed) foreign origins intersect.

6.3. Pervasive and Multifaceted Discrimination

In addition to their specific vulnerability, another important dimension of discrimination against *hijabis* highlighted by experts is its pervasiveness: it (a) occurs in a variety of life domains, (b) takes different forms, and (c) affects a wide range of socio-demographic profiles.

(a) First, the experts interviewed identify different life domains where such discrimination occurs, especially the labor market, public spaces, and state schools.

As for the labor market, there seems to be a double glass ceiling for women wearing the *hijab*, as they find it almost impossible to access the labor market (G09) despite a good, and sometimes very good, level of education. The experts often highlight the fact that “there are veiled women who are hyper qualified, women who have a PhD in medicine, but who are housewives. With a master’s degree, a PhD, in educational sciences, journalists, teachers, there are a lot” (N03).

For example, they explain that students are unable to find internships in law or pharmacy (N02, N06, N11, N04), that women are fired as soon as they decide to wear the *hijab* at work (N03, G04), or are faced with the choice of either removing the *hijab* or quitting their job (N06, N07, G07), and that they have been refused a position explicitly or implicitly because of the *hijab* (N05, N07, N09, G08). Especially affected are the medical sector, teaching, jobs involving direct contact with customers, work in cantonal administrative offices, and universities.

As for public spaces, the experts talk about discrimination in different public situations, such as insults or physical assaults in the street (N02, G03, N04, N06, G07, N10, G09), in supermarkets (N07, N10), at the airport (N01, N04) where women are forced to remove the *hijab* in front of other passengers, at the post office or bank (N02, N04), on public transport (G02, N05, N08, N09), and in car parks (N07):

“Otherwise, most of the problems that arise are in car parks. Or at the till in shops. Or on the street. Sometimes it means looks, insults. Insults saying “go home”, things like that. That’s the majority of it, it’s in the street. Someone who says something quickly and leaves”.

(N07)

As well as the labor market and public spaces, schools, although mentioned less often, are no exception to the rule. Situations range from harassment by other children to degrading treatment by teachers. For example, one of the experts relates the testimony of a mother whose daughter had put her *hijab* back on after school and then bumped into her teacher on the street. Expressing her negative view of this practice, the teacher then completely changed her attitude towards the girl in class for the worse (N07).

Other examples are that girls who wore the *hijab* at school ended up taking it off (although legislation does not prohibit pupils from wearing it in Switzerland), or asked to change colleges because of harassment: “There was no way to talk to the teachers, it was always like closed doors. They (the schoolgirls) felt demeaned. They were losing their self-esteem” (N04).

(b) The variety of forms taken by discrimination is also important. Indeed, the incidents can range from verbal to physical attacks, be implicit or explicit discrimination, or take the form of practices of exclusion. The experts most often report practices of exclusion such as bullying or withholding a service (61.9%) and verbal abuse (31.0%), but physical

assaults (7.1%) are not exceptional, with examples of women being spat at (N04), jostled and hit (N05, N09, N07), and having their *hijab* torn off (N06).

(c) Finally, the examples described by the experts show that the experience of discrimination affects all socio-demographic profiles, be they Swiss citizens or asylum seekers, born in Switzerland or abroad, with a high level of education or from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. One of the experts explains, for example, that no matter the status, exclusion from the labor market is commonplace: “Can you imagine, 200 rejections! . . . Just for an initial internship. They don’t succeed. It’s not easy, even though they were born here, they are Swiss, they are naturalised. But, in spite of that, they are marginalised, they are excluded from the system. They feel like second-class citizens” (N03). The analysis of discrimination in schools or kindergartens also points to the fact that the women affected by discrimination are of widely different ages.

In other words, the experts describe the discrimination faced by *hijabis* as pervasive, since it affects a wide range of life domains; multifaceted, since it takes a variety of forms; and it affects a wide range of socio-demographic profiles.

6.4. A Segregated Social Space

Analyzing the expert interviews also allows us to identify three kinds of space for *hijabis* that are similar to the “out-of-bounds, civil and back places” coined by Goffman (1963).

First, the labor market is a quasi “out-of-bounds place”, as it appears to be almost forbidden for women wearing the *hijab* in Switzerland, in a variety of sectors. Several of the experts explain that “it is almost inaccessible for a woman who introduces herself veiled in a job interview”, be it in industry, in more social-oriented jobs (G09), or in local administration (N13, N05). The exclusion of *hijabis* can be formulated either explicitly or implicitly: the experts signal that many companies explicitly state that they “do not want to hire women who wear the *hijab*” (N11), and make a condition of employment the removal of the garment (N02, N03, N05, N10), or develop written guidelines to prohibit the wearing of “headgear” in the workplace (N02, N03, N11). The usual argument highlighted by the experts is that, if confronted with someone wearing the *hijab*, customers or patients could be “shocked” or “disturbed” (N02, N03, G07, N10). In some implicit situations, *hijabis* point to different clues as evidence of their lack of success in the process of applying for a job, such as repeated rejections, a sense of discomfort during the interview, and a sudden change of tone. To some of the experts, the only solution seems to be to remove the *hijab*, which some government workers at regional employment offices seem to encourage (N04, N09):

“And yes, there are many of them. To tell you the truth, there are quite a few who actually take off the veil. Because they were unemployed for years, devalued... And it’s true that at some point—for a matter of survival, too, for socio-economic reasons, they had to take the step, and I think that’s the case for many women”.

(N05)

Second, public space and state education could be described as “civil places”, where stigmatized individuals are treated as though they were not officially disqualified when in fact they are. Indeed, although Swiss legislation does not prohibit women from wearing the *hijab* in public spaces, or pupils wearing the *hijab* at school, the experts claim that practices of exclusion and stigmatization do in fact target women wearing the *hijab* in such places. In public spaces, this can range from verbal and physical aggression, to unfriendly looks that are sometimes difficult to decipher: “maybe you can say that’s not discrimination or that’s just a look. . . . when you stare at people, that would probably bother others as well” (N10). The frequency of such incidents depends on what is currently happening in the international context, as the incidents appear to increase immediately after a terrorist attack (N02, G03).

Examples at school also highlight how certain spaces are officially inclusive but are nonetheless sites where stigmatization is still at work: a teacher repeatedly calling a schoolgirl “scarf” instead of her name; a school head criticizing the parents for allowing

a pupil to wear the *hijab* after returning from the holidays; girls forced to take off the *hijab* when photographed for their pupil ID card. Some schools, especially in cantons where laicity has become the subject of heated political debates, are known to be more problematic:

“And this school, unfortunately, is not the only one. I can easily think of a dozen girls who went to that school and really suffered. Girls who were veiled and ended up removing their veil, so much pressure”.

(N04)

Indeed, this could be explained by political contexts at the cantonal level. The federal nature of Switzerland implies important variations in the way laicity is (not) applied. For example, the new *Law on the laicity of the State* (A 2 75) came into force in 2019 in the canton of Geneva, prohibiting the wearing of “ostentatious religious signs” for state employees, which is symptomatic of an especially tense context surrounding the “veil”. “The proximity of Geneva to France entails similarities in its political debates and understanding of laicity, namely in terms of invisibility of religious belonging and practices in the public sphere. As Amiraux points out, the *hijab* is situated between the private and public spheres, and is often presented in public debates as a threat to laicity (Amiraux 2007). Several experts, government as well as non-government ones, highlight a particularly hostile context towards *hijabis* in Geneva (N03, N05, G07) and explain it by two main factors: a conception of laicity that is exclusive, contrary to Neuchâtel where it is inclusive (N02, N05, N08), and its proximity to France (N02, N04, N05, G02).

Finally, social exclusion, be it explicit or implicit, official or unofficial, leads *hijabis* to invest in “back spaces”, where they can navigate without experiencing discrimination or having to conceal their “social stigma”, with different experts often mentioning such spaces as being the household, low-skilled jobs, and voluntary work in Muslim organizations. For example, highly qualified women such as lawyers, legal experts, doctors, who unwillingly end up doing cleaning work (N02, N07), being full-time mothers (N03), or doing voluntary work (N05).

The interviews suggest that discrimination shapes the social world in three kinds of places for *hijabis*, although the boundaries between the places are not as clear-cut as Goffman’s theory might suggest: except for some low-skilled jobs and for businesses owned by Muslims, the labor market can be seen as an “out-of-bounds place” for women when they expose their religious affiliation through the *hijab*; public space and education can be seen as “civil places”, since officially they are inclusive, but unofficially exclusive in day-to-day experience; and voluntary work in Muslim organizations, low-skilled positions, and being a housewife are close to “back places”, where these women, by force of circumstance, can navigate these spaces without having to conceal their social stigma.

6.5. To Report or Not to Report?

With one exception, the governmental and the non-governmental experts provide broadly similar insights into the prevalence, nature and effects of discrimination against *hijabis*: namely, the non-governmental experts have a better understanding of the phenomenon whereby *hijabis* under-report to state services. The governmental experts are usually aware that just a minority of victims of discrimination report to their services and provide explanations (albeit at a general level) as to why that might be the case. For example, one of the experts enumerates possible reasons why victims of discrimination do not report to them: unawareness, fear and shame:

“So sometimes people don’t even know we exist; I think about people with a precarious status, people who have just arrived in Switzerland. Another reason is the fact that they are afraid to report because they fear possible repercussions for their illegal or precarious status in the country. Sometimes they are ashamed to talk about certain episodes with someone they don’t know well and there is also the fear of not being perceived as integrated. For people who have been here

for a long time, recognizing that they are victims of discrimination represents a personal defeat”.

(G09)

In contrast, the non-governmental experts provide specific explanations as to why *hijabis* in particular do not report to state services, these explanations falling into three main categories: a sense of fatalism, the fear of being blamed, and the complexity of legal procedures.

As to the first category, the non-governmental experts explain that, if many *hijabis* do not report their experiences, it is because “some of them think that there is no point in talking. Even if she speaks, she won’t get anything. That’s a very strong reason” (N06). Others point to the attitude of resignation among *hijabis* with regard to discriminatory practices in the labor market, where women “know that they did not obtain a position because of the headscarf; they know and say, ‘alright, I accept it, I move on’” (N09).

As to the fear of being blamed, the non-governmental experts suggest that reporting discrimination that is linked to the *hijab* may involve a double stigmatization, with the person to whom the incident is reported judging the victim negatively for wearing the *hijab*. For example, one of the experts says that victims fear reporting discrimination because this might backfire on her (N04), and another says:

“I understand these women who don’t go because they are immediately told, ‘yes, you know, in our country, you shouldn’t wear . . . ’ We make them feel guilty. Not only do we judge them; we also make them feel guilty, ‘it’s your fault, you’re dressed like that, well that’s what happens’”.

(N07)

These past experiences or concerns would explain why *hijabis* are sometimes reluctant to contact state services and would rather turn to Muslim associations comprised of Muslim peers who would better understand them. As one of the experts suggests: “So I come back to the reason why they come to us, because we don’t judge them, maybe we understand them because we have also experienced it”.

Finally, the non-governmental experts mention the fact that the complaint mechanisms and legal procedures are complicated. Indeed, if a victim of racism wants to defend his or her rights within the legal framework of provisions against racial discrimination, a framework that includes discrimination based on religion (Art. 261bis of the Swiss Criminal Code), then different criteria must be met, one of which is that there are witnesses to the racist incident and that the incident took place publicly. Both the governmental and the non-governmental experts highlight the difficulty here when talking about racist discrimination in general (G02, G05, G06, N09, N11): “most of the time, the case is closed. Word against word, lack of conclusive evidence, no witnesses, that’s it, the perpetrator can tell barefaced lies and that’s the end of it. And it’s a double punishment for the victims, so it’s a pretty traumatic process” (G02).

This means that *hijabis* tend to be reluctant when it comes to contacting a state-funded center for help in criminal procedures; they regard a positive outcome as being unlikely. This could certainly explain the very low number of legal cases involving *hijabis* recorded in the database presented in Section 3: two cases of direct discrimination against *hijabis*, concentrated in the year 2010, out of a total of 52 cases where the victims are Muslims since 1995. For example, one non-governmental expert describes the situation in these terms:

“After years of working in this company without any problems, she decided to wear a headscarf, and then this became a reason for her dismissal. Often it is clearly said, but not recorded, and that is not racial discrimination, according to criminal law, because this is a private relationship and there is no evidence, or no witnesses. Then maybe they can sue for defamation, but that will cost money”.

(N09)

Some of the experts also report that the police sometimes constitute another obstacle for *hijabis* when they wish to file a complaint, because the police either do not take the case seriously (N10), or immediately claim that there were no witnesses (N09).

In short, while the governmental experts have a general idea of why many victims of discrimination do not report to official centers, the non-governmental experts provide more detailed and specific reasons why that is the case, the three reasons that they mention being a fatalist attitude towards the situation, the fear of being blamed instead of supported, and the obstacles to initiating legal procedures.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I set out to answer the question: how do governmental and non-governmental experts describe the discrimination experienced by *hijabis* in Switzerland? More specifically, I sought to (1) determine the importance and role of this “marker of Muslimness” that field experts discern in processes of discrimination; (2) identify the forms that discrimination takes, and the life domains and socio-demographic profiles affected; (3) understand the particular way that this discrimination configures the social space that *hijabis* navigate; and (4) reveal how governmental and non-governmental experts differ in their knowledge.

We can provide four answers to these questions. First, both the governmental and the non-governmental experts state that the *hijab* is the most important marker of Muslimness in processes of discrimination, which makes *hijabis* especially vulnerable to discrimination. The experts explain the specific vulnerability of *hijabis* by pointing to the fact that their affiliation to Islam is visible (like the discredited stigma described by Goffman); to the way that gender and religious belonging intersect in the experiences of discrimination; and to the processes of racialization and othering based on the (often false) perception as foreigners.

Second, the experts describe this discrimination as being widespread and multifaceted, since it occurs in a variety of life domains, takes various forms, and affects a wide range of socio-demographic profiles.

Third, the expert interviews suggest that the social world is configured around three kinds of places for *hijabis* (also highlighted by Goffman): the out-of-bounds places, such as the labor market, where the *hijab* is very rarely tolerated; the civil places, which are officially inclusive but actually marked by exclusion in day-to-day experiences, such as schools and public spaces; and, finally, back-places, which *hijabis* can navigate freely, mostly through voluntary work in Muslim organizations, in low-skilled positions, and in the household.

Fourth, the governmental and non-governmental experts converge with regard to the prevalence, nature, and effects of discrimination against *hijabis*. However, the non-governmental experts show a better understanding of the phenomenon of under-reporting, explaining the reluctance of *hijabis* to report their experiences to state services by pointing to their sense of fatalism, their fear of being blamed rather than supported, and the complexity of criminal procedures.

These results have several implications with regard to the current state of research and to recent events. For one thing, many studies that measure discrimination against Muslims show no significant difference between Muslim men and women. For example, they face unemployment in the same extent (Connor and Koenig 2015; Heath and Martin 2013; Lindemann and Stolz 2018) and do not significantly differ in their perception of discriminations (Lindemann and Stolz 2020). However, my results point to the specific difficulties faced by Muslim women who wear the *hijab*. These difficulties do not appear in statistical analyses, either because such women constitute a minority of the Muslim population, or because they are under-represented in surveys. My study also suggests that existing field studies that rely on controlled situations and focus on specific life domains have not yet captured the pervasiveness and importance of discrimination against veiled women, welcoming further qualitative studies or new surveys that include items on veiling practices.

For another, passionate debates have broken out in the public and academic spheres regarding scientific research on minorities, debates that have culminated in the accusation of Islam-leftism levelled at social scientists working in these fields, especially in the French context (Fassin 2021). At the same time, laws are being passed that ban different veiling practices in the public space in Europe, the latest being the banning of full-face veils in Switzerland, which was voted for in March 2021. During the campaign, it was not unusual to notice a quick slip from the niqab (full-face veil) to the *hijab* in TV and radio debates. In such a context, there is still a clear need for dispassionate and serious empirical research to document and understand social injustices scientifically.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The anonymized interviews and the codebook can be provided on direct request by the author.

Acknowledgments: I thank Jörg Stolz for his regular and insightful comments during the writing of the paper; David West for his attentive proofreading; and my student assistants for their precious help in collecting the data.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The *hijab* refers to a simple head covering worn by Muslim women.
- ² Source: Federal Statistical Office: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/population/langues-religions/religions.html> (accessed on 24 June 2020).
- ³ <https://www.admin.ch/opc/fr/classified-compilation/19370083/index.html#a261bis> (accessed on 24 June 2020).
- ⁴ These numbers and descriptions come from a thorough reading of all cases involving Muslim victims in the database of procedures filed in Switzerland as part of art. 261bis of the Penal Code, compiled by the Federal Commission against Racism: <https://www.ekr.admin.ch/prestations/f518.html>. (accessed on 18 August 2020).
- ⁵ The data gathered for the study “Between Demands for Recognition and Politics of Accommodation: The Cultural, Social, and Political Orientations of Muslims in Switzerland” indicate that 42% of Muslim women involved in an ethno-religious association wear the hijab, while only 18% of those not involved in such association do so. However, the sample is representative of Muslim foreigners and does not include Swiss Muslims. Information on this study is available at <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:73809>. (accessed on 15 May 2021).

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