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Transnational Solidarity with Which Muslim Women? The Case of the My Stealthy Freedom and World Hijab Day Campaigns[1]

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The hijab has been the subject of public and academic debates that have polarized scholars, politicians, and activists. Opinions on veiling range widely: while some view veiling as an oppressive practice, others regard veiling as an expression of women's agency and empowerment. Solidarity practices, such as movements against compulsory veiling or actions encouraging non-Muslim women to temporarily wear the hijab, are some of the ways in which activists have tried to show solidarity with Muslim women. In this

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qualitative study, data from the content analysis of the online platforms of two media campaigns, together with in-depth interviews with Iranian women living in Belgium, were triangulated. Women's perceptions of two solidarity campaigns were explored: the anti–compulsory veiling movement My Stealthy Freedom and the pro-acceptance World Hijab Day campaign. The findings raise questions about the effectiveness of transnational feminist campaigning in solidarity with Muslim women and, more generally, how the notion of solidarity is conceptualized in feminist scholarship.

Keywords: Activism, feminism, hijab, Islam, qualitative methods, transnational solidarity

Solidarity has long been an important topic in feminist literature (Siddiqi 2014), with scholars examining the possibility of building a transnational pedagogic model (Mohanty 2003), what women share politically (Federici 2010), and the development of political commitment to the feminist movement (hooks 1986). There is also a strong feminist critique of activism based on women's common interests and oppression and the universal category of women (Allen 1999). Butler (2006) has called political solidarity among all women a false ontological promise, since it presupposes a universal cultural experience of womanhood. Yuval-Davis (2003, 2011) suggests that feminist struggles should take differences and the politics of location into account: rather than emphasizing shared identities, solidarity must be based on shared emancipatory values. The essentialist and repressive connotations of some notions of group identity, such as sisterhood, have also been exposed by feminist scholars. For example, hooks (1986) rejects the notion of solidarity defined as shared victimization and stresses the need to base solidarity on shared political commitments rather than similarities. Allen (1999) argues that collective action would be unnecessary, even superfluous, if solidarities were based on similarities.

Another line of discussion stresses that solidarity is a relatively low priority for women from minority communities (Kleinman 2007). Mohanty (2003) has warned that although transnational feminist practices depend on building feminist solidarities, it is challenging to build such alliances. It is important to articulate solidarity to avoid patronizing claims toward marginalized groups (Ortega 2006) that might mask, deflect, or compensate for inequalities (Kleinman 2007), thereby obscuring differences among women (Goldenberg 2007). Feminist theory has moved from understandings of solidarity based on sisterhood and identity politics to more critical, intersectional and postcolonial perspectives that stress the need for building coalitions across differences (Gunzenhauser 2002).

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Veiling has been at the center of many public and academic debates in both the East and the West (Ahmed 1992; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Sadiqi 2003). In the Western imaginary, the veil has been considered a symbol of women's subordination to men or a politically motivated act of resistance to Western culture (Bilge 2010). Academic interest in debates on veiling and solidarity with Muslim women in Western contexts has arisen partly from feminist scholars' attempts to subvert the skewed images of Muslim womanhood entrenched in some of these narratives (Hoodfar 1992). While the residual influences of colonial discourses on veiling and unveiling still exist (Macdonald 2006), many scholars have critiqued the ways in which Muslim and other minority women are othered (Abu-Lughod 2002) and considered to be outsiders within the feminist movement (hooks 1986). In recent years, solidarity practices in the form of campaigning with women, usually of ethnic and religious minorities, have been launched in Western societies (e.g., United Nations projects, nongovernmental organization and private initiatives; see Freeman and Goldblatt 2015). However, campaigns for "solidarity with Muslim sisters" have sometimes relied on discourses that stress the need of Muslim women to receive help from their "emancipated" Western sisters (Abu-Lughod 2002; Bracke 2012).

Furthermore, Western advocates of unveiling cannot always be considered advocates of women's rights (Amer 2014, 92); they have interpreted women's head and face covering as a political rather than a religious practice (Cesari 2009). Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that the discourse in these narratives relies more on "salvation" than on coalition forming. She invites new ways of thinking outside interventionist transnational discourses, ways that approach Muslim women as agents of change whose actions have the potential to (re)make their contexts (Abu-Lughod 2013). This approach avoids reproducing hierarchies of power or resorting to a politics of salvation (Siddiqi 2014).

This articles analyzes solidarity as it is articulated in campaigns on the contentious topic of Islamic veiling. We conduct a qualitative analysis of the perceptions of Iranian migrant women in Belgium concerning two campaigns, namely, My Stealthy Freedom (MSF) and World Hijab Day (WHD), to investigate how these women relate to global solidarity campaigns. A comparative approach is adopted to study the campaigns and to respond to the study's main questions: How do these women perceive the two media campaigns? To what extent do these campaigns contribute to building solidarity between these women and/or the women and Western campaigners and followers of the campaigns?

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Before presenting and analyzing the data, a brief outline of the topic of veiling in the Iranian and Belgian contexts is presented.

VEILING IN THE IRANIAN AND BELGIAN CONTEXTS

Iran is one of only two countries (together with Saudi Arabia) in the world that have enacted compulsory wearing of the hijab. Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, wearing the hijab has been compulsory for all women over the age of eight. Despite being part of the underclass because of their general economic and political powerlessness (Rahbari and Sharepour 2015), women in Iran have fought for the right to veil and unveil at different moments in history (Mahdi 2004). Although the veil has been high on the political and religious agenda in Iran and is a highly political matter in the everyday lives of Iranian women, Western feminist movements' interventions on behalf of Iranian women have been criticized for discrediting the Iranian people's struggle against Western intervention (Newson-Horst 2010).

Advocacy for Iranian women's rights takes place within the nation-state as well as in diasporic contexts. The practice of hijab, and of gender segregation in particular (Mahdi 2004), has prompted activism and campaigns inside and outside the country. The responses of Iranian women in the diaspora to veiling in general and to solidarity campaigns in particular have not been homogeneous. Internationally, the Iranian diaspora consists mostly of highly educated or skilled migrants of various socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, but with prevalent secular tendencies (Gholami 2016).

This study's participants were highly conscious of racial stigmatization and othering and of Islamophobia in the European and Belgian contexts. The women were also very knowledgeable about postcolonial power dynamics and the double standards deployed in normative transnational feminist discourses. Belgium, the country where they lived, has one of the largest and fastest-growing Muslim populations in Europe, almost doubling in size in the past 10 years (Teich 2016). Foreign-born Muslim migrants make up a smaller population in comparison to Belgium-born Muslim populations, whose predecessors migrated to Belgium during the labor migration waves between 1961 and 1970. During that period, more than 260,000 foreigners immigrated to Belgium, many of whom were Muslims from Morocco, Turkey, and Tunisia (De Raedt 2004).

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Despite the large number of Muslims living in Belgium, Muslim women's body management has never ceased to be a topic of social and political debates, and the discussion of women's right to hijab has been ongoing for decades (Brems 2014). Although there are actively engaged civil society organizations that have attempted to change societal attitudes, strong Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments are prevalent in the country. As in other countries in Western Europe (Farris 2017), in Belgium, popular feminists and femocrats take part in the stigmatization of Muslim women and men under the banner of gender equality. On a sociopolitical level, despite the lack of a general ban on the hijab, schools, local governments, and private employers are increasingly introducing measures to place restrictions on veiling (Coene and Longman 2008). There are also indications that Islamophobia has been rising in the last decade (Easat-Daas 2015). Public and political parties and women's organizations either support, reject, or remain reticent on veiling practices and the wearing of religious symbols, on grounds ranging from gender equality to public neutrality (Coene and Longman 2008). Some political movements that claim to be advocates of gender equality are reluctant to accept the hijab as the choice of women (Bracke 2012), and recent political and public debates regarding burqa and burkini bans in Belgium and neighboring countries reflect the restrictions on practices of privacy and modesty (Jabrane 2016).

Iranian expats and migrants in Belgium are a minority within the larger Muslim community in terms of country of origin and language. Although there is a rich literature on several aspects of the social, economic, and political lives of different migrant groups (e.g., Taran et al. 2016), studies on Iranian migrants residing in Belgium are scarce. Because of their Islamic education, experiences, and historical and migration backgrounds, Iranian expats and migrants make up a population that is affected by traditional Islamic laws and targeted by both of the solidarity campaigns discussed in this article. Based on this contextual background, Iranian migrant women living in Belgium were selected because (a) their nationality and their Muslim minority position make them the target of solidarity activism in both campaigns, something we discuss in detail in the next section, and (b) their knowledge of social and religious discrimination (Rahbari 2018) and their experiences as (mostly) skilled and highly educated Iranian migrant women gives them a specific representational burden. In the remainder of this article, after discussing the research methods, we introduce the two solidarity

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campaigns and investigate the perceptions of migrant Iranian women in Belgium.

RESEARCH METHODS

Based on qualitative research, this study explores how Iranian migrant women in Belgium perceive two social media campaigns about veiling. The campaigns were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) they are known by the Iranian audience; (b) they have garnered international attention; and (c) they emphasize Western/non-Muslim women's acts of solidarity with Muslim women. We undertook a content analysis of the campaigns' online platforms, followed by an analysis of in-depth interviews with 13 migrant women living in Belgium with Iranian or dual Iranian-Belgian nationality, through the use of a comparative approach.

The women with Iranian origin hold a unique position as the population that both solidarity campaigns specifically aim to address. MSF is focused exclusively on the Iranian women's cause and resistance to the legally enacted compulsory hijab. WHD has a larger audience but targets Iranians as a population supportive of their cause. The selected women were familiar with discourses of hijab in both Iran and Belgium. Their twofold experiences with (un)veiling provided them with exceptional insights into the dynamics of choice and compulsory veiling in Iran — one of the only two countries in the world that imposes such regulations — as well as the experience of living in a secular context that is sometimes prone to Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments. Furthermore, the participants were either first-generation migrants or minors migrating with a parent or parents and had experience of everyday life or education in both societies in different social, political, and religious contexts (i.e., Iran and Belgium). Iranian women in Belgium experience discrimination and othering at the intersection of their religious and cultural background, skin color, and language (Rahbari 2018). While this experience is shared with other minority populations, studies of Iranian migrants' experiences in Western Europe in general, and in Belgium in particular, are scarce.

This article is part of a larger research project to address Iranian migrant women's gendered embodiment in the Belgian context. All the collaborating authors have a scholarly interest in the topic of women's embodiment and, more broadly, in the field of gender and religion. The

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first author's scholarly focus on gender and embodiment of female Iranian migrants, and her own Iranian background, guided the research topic and process. Belgium is especially relevant as a location for this study since the hijab has been a frequent topic on the political agenda. An Iranian-Belgian member of Belgium's Flemish nationalist political party (N-VA) has been a prominent public figure and an active critic of veiling. Additionally, our observations of diasporic forums for Iranians in Belgium indicated that the participants were interested in the political debates about hijab.

The in-depth interviews were conducted between May 2016 and July 2017 in different cities in Belgium. All interviews were conducted in Farsi/Persian by the lead researcher (LR). Farsi was the mother tongue of all participants and the lead researcher. The analysis was carried out using Farsi data, and then quotations were translated into English by the lead researcher. The use of Farsi facilitated the recruitment of, and communication with, the participants. However, one major difficulty of translating Farsi into English is that Farsi is a genderless language, while English is gendered. The translations were therefore performed carefully and with specific attention to this issue.

The sampling of participants was conducted by a combination of snowball sampling and random sampling. Participants were initially approached individually through social media or through calls and invitations in public forums and Facebook pages directed at Iranian expats and migrants residing in Belgium. The response rate to the public calls was low; sampling continued through snowballing with the help of the first three volunteer participants. The in-depth interviews took place in public and private spaces chosen by the participants, including home and workspaces, parks, and cafés.

The participants had been residing in Belgium for 1 to 33 years and had different migration backgrounds. They had moved to Belgium as political refugees (2), as humanitarian refugees (2), for work (2), for study (4), or for a combination of social, political, and economic reasons (3). All participants initially declared their nationality and ethnic background as Iranian. Four participants later explained that they had dual Belgian-Iranian nationality. Five participants identified as Muslim, three as agnostic but with Muslim roots, and four identified as nonreligious. One participant did not want to declare her religious affiliation. Their educational backgrounds ranged from high school diploma to master's degree. Eleven participants were first-generation migrants who had grown up in urban areas of Iran and received elementary and secondary education there. The other two

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participants had moved to Belgium as children and received their primary education in Belgian schools.

This study is limited in that it does not aim to produce generalized claims about Iranian migrant women's perceptions, nor does it claim to reflect the goals and intended social effects of the campaign(er)s. The research — as demonstrated in the theoretical discussions — finds it crucial to reflect on the perceptions of the people affected by the campaigns and/or with whom transnational campaigns aim to solidarize. It was a conscious decision to focus on the voices and standpoints of some of the people who are not behind the campaigns but who are addressed in activism and possibly live the sociopolitical consequences of the campaigns. The study aims to produce in-depth knowledge about what this small group of Iranian women perceive with regard to the campaigns' themes, methods, and objectives.

As representativeness and data saturation were not within the scope of this study, these women are not to be viewed as representing the entire audience of the two campaigns. This is one of the limitations of the study's methodological choices, which restricts the reach of the conclusions. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that the participants' unique class, sexuality, marital status, and experience of migrating to Belgium might have influenced their understandings and perceptions of the two campaigns. However, owing to the small number of participants, making assumptions about the relationship between identity factors and the participants' perceptions of the selected campaigns was not possible. Further studies are thus required to establish the existence of correlations between the women's intersectional positions and perceptions of solidarity. By focusing on content analysis and interview methods, the study is also limited in terms of deeply discussing the implications of using digital technologies, social media, and online campaigning.

CAMPAIGNS FOR SOLIDARITY WITH MUSLIM WOMEN

The MSF campaign was formed specifically against the compulsory hijab in Iran, while the WHD campaign has a broader international audience and goal of addressing all women around the world and supports the right to practice Islamic veiling. There are similar themes in the two campaigns, such as the emphasis on women's choice, solidarity among women, and the focus on female embodiment in the form of (un)veiling. There are, however, differences in the campaigns' objectives

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and approaches. MSF's aim since its launch in 2014 has been to reflect the voices of Iranian women who are against compulsory hijab; the platform is thus presented mostly as a tool that facilitates ongoing everyday resistance and defiance (Kowalska 2014). To that end, MSF's platform includes videos, critical assessments of events in Iran, international coverage of the campaign, and expressions of international solidarity (Khiabany 2015). On the other hand, WHD not only reflects the existing realities of Islamophobia but also aims to create change by encouraging the practice of solidarity among women by asking unveiled women to adopt temporary veiling.

In the following sections, after introducing each campaign's history, activities, and scope, we present the empirical findings on how Iranian migrant women in Belgium perceive these campaigns and the extent to which these campaigns contribute to building feminist solidarity. While the campaigns are introduced as cases, the scope is to present them not as distinct examples but as practices of solidarity that could be subjected to comparative and relational readings and analysis, which will follow in the discussion section.

Case 1: My Stealthy Freedom

MSF is an online social media campaign that was started by an exiled Iranian journalist in 2014. The focus of MSF is the political aspects of the enforcement of the mandatory hijab. The campaign functions by calling for Iranian women to send and share unveiled pictures of themselves in public settings (Seddighi and Tafakori 2016). The content of the campaign's social media is centered around the image of women as victims of an oppressive political system and of women as a conscious and dynamic opposition group against this system. The campaign describes its mission as "ensuring that those people inside Iran … have the power and they are not alone" (Kowalska 2014). MSF's aim is for the Iranian audience to create momentum for social change and for the international audience to create awareness.

This popular campaign has a website and several social media accounts, such as a Facebook profile (with more than one million followers worldwide), a Facebook community (with more than 200,000 members), Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter. On some platforms, such as Facebook, MSF posts in Farsi, English, and French. It is likely that most Iranian social media followers of the campaign are women living in

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Iranian cities, where most internet users reside: 52% of the urban population has access to the internet, compared with 26.6% of the population living in rural areas (Jafari 2016). The images of urban landscapes on MSF's social media pages and websites and the less strict dress codes for women also indicate that most participants are from urban areas. MSF has many non-Iranian male and female international social media followers and has been awarded international prizes. The campaign clearly positions itself in the Western context, as the founder explained in an interview:

> I created a page called "My Stealthy Freedom" … If I were in Iran this website wouldn't exist. From far away those voiceless women can express themselves for the first time in more than thirty years. (Kowalska 2014)

Despite the campaign's claim to address general issues relevant to Iranian women without defining which groups of women, the social media pages are mostly attended by secular, upper-middle-class Iranians in their 20s to 40s, who are also considered the prominent daily users of social media (Koo 2016). The participants in the campaign appear to be (mostly) happy, young, and beautiful women wearing colorful clothing and makeup. They are depicted dancing, skateboarding, biking, and driving in public spaces while defying the compulsory hijab law. MSF also invites foreign visitors, including tourists and politicians, to defy the hijab and get involved in the "resistance" by using the hashtag #SeeYouIn IranWithoutHijab.

While women play the primary role in supporting the campaign by sending in their hijab-less pictures and videos, Iranian and foreign men have also become engaged in the campaign. A well-known action of solidarity organized by MSF in 2016 encouraged Iranian men to wear the hijab in solidarity with women, with the hashtag #MenInHijab. In response, some Iranian male participants shared their pictures donning the hijab and posing beside their female relatives (without hijab) on the campaign's social media platforms (Saul 2016). This campaign is an example of how, according to Sedghi (2007), Iranian women (and men) have tried to challenge and redefine the state's mandates: not by street protests but through quiet acts of rebellion (Sedghi 2007, 271).

The Iranian public's response to the campaign has not been homogeneous. This is traceable in both the comments posted on MSF's social media platforms and in the extensive news and blog posts written in response or reaction to MSF. Some opponents of the campaign have argued that it introduced "immoral" and "un-Islamic" values. This

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criticism was usually accompanied by accusations of adopting supposedly Western and Orientalist viewpoints (Seddighi and Tafakori 2016). This critique has sometimes referred to the residence of the campaigner who lives outside Iran and runs the campaign from overseas and their political alliances. Some Iranian officials, journalists, and bloggers, as well as the public, have made harsh and negative comments about the campaign and dismissed its claim of promoting women's rights (e.g., Asremrooz 2014; Rajanews 2014). In the next section, the participants' perceptions of the MSF campaign are discussed.

Iranian Migrant Women and My Stealthy Freedom

All 13 participants were familiar with the activities of the MSF campaign before the interviews. Two participants were still actively following MSF's social media and website, and another two were former followers. Other participants were not followers of the campaign but had occasionally visited the public media platforms or heard about them through their social media. The women were very informed about both contemporary gender issues and political struggles in Iran, as well as Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments in some segments of Belgian society. While the hijabi participants had experienced intolerance and had more concerns regarding rising Islamophobia in the West, most participants had had personal encounters with discrimination and othering based on their ethnic, lingual and "foreign" background.

When asked about MSF, two participants believed it could bring change to women's situation in Iran by "creating awareness" in the world and putting pressure on the state. Another participant did not believe that such change was possible but saw the campaign as a "refuge," a group-building and identity-forming practice for the young Iranian girls and women taking part. She thought MSF worked as a safety valve by giving women a moment of relief and an opportunity to be their "true selves." She explained,

> I think anything that makes women feel in control, women's parks, sports, anything that helps them feel that they belong to a group and they are not alone [is good]. (Simin)

Another participant believed that MSF did not have any "actual" effect, but she was hopeful that "it could lead to a more collective and bigger movement" in the future (Misha). Other participants (Baharak and Soudabe) found MSF a good practice because it "puts the problem on

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the table, putting the mandate into discussion" (Baharak), and because it is "a manifestation of the dual life [that the Iranians live]" (Soudabe). By "dual life," Soudabe drew on her own experience in Iran and referred to the stark differences between everyday life in public spaces, where the rules of interaction are not easy to bend, and private spaces. Some participants criticized the campaign's adopted methods and strategies, rather than its claims and goals. Ziba, who had grown up in a Muslim family but had decided not to observe the hijab, explained:

> It is a very journalistic [campaign]. It wants to pretend it is representing something revolutionary; but in my opinion, one should not think it will make a revolutionary change possible.

This critique was based on the idea that the campaign did not propose any *pragmatic solutions* for possible change in the Iranian political and social landscape, but rather represented the existing realities. MSF failed to identify and challenge the specific configurations of power and inequalities that circumscribe the conditions necessary for solidarity (see Nadje Al-Ali's discussion in Sharoni et al. 2015). Because of this, Ziba concluded, the campaign was unable to implement change in the social or legal system. She defined the value of "resistance" by the changes it brought about.

Another participant pointed out the importance of social media in giving the people a space to live their real selves in virtual space. But the way social media was used was criticized, especially since men's social activism did not necessarily reflect their "real" behavior:

> [Male followers] act like intellectuals [in social media] and then behave [in patriarchal ways] with their wives, daughters and mothers. (Bita)

Similarly, Soudabe criticized the virtual aspects of social media activism and resistance for lacking impact on people's actual attitudes:

> These are not real people; this is the virtual world . . . If something happened the following day, they might not have the courage to [act]. (Soudabe)

Bita and Soudabe referred to the possible disconnection between behaviors and reactions of men in online social media and daily life. In their view, appearing to be a supporter of women's emancipation online did not necessarily reflect the person's "real" attitudes in everyday life. Other participants indicated that MSF was based on sheer performance and self-promotion rather than socially constructive work. This line of criticism was similar to the criticism of neoliberalism by Siddiqi (2014):

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that feminist solidarity of a neoliberal kind is marketed, and individual acts of sexual liberation are valued.

The participants then drew on their experiences as migrant women and discussed the importance of "location." One participant, for example, quoted Hamid Dabashi (2011) to explain that the campaign promoted Western values and norms in the name of progressiveness. This critique mentioned that many diasporic intellectuals and activists, such as the MSF campaign, use the standpoints of their current (i.e., Western) identities to promote equality in the Iranian context. This critique is made because human rights activists in the diaspora have at times been used as a means of legitimizing the intensification of economic sanctions against Iran (Seddighi and Tafakori 2016). Some participants directly criticized the campaign for its location, being on "the outside," since it was launched by an Iranian woman living in exile. Therefore, from this perspective, the campaign could not properly and legitimately address the problems Iranian women experienced inside the country:

> I think [change] should be coming from inside, not outside the country . . . If you are not a part of the society [inside the country], you cannot talk about it. (Niloo)

Some participants were critical of this viewpoint and believed that mere geographic distance did not disqualify a person from addressing these issues. Dina explained, "I consider myself just like a person who is in Iran, just like any other citizen."

For Dina, who had come to Belgium as a refugee, leaving her country was not a "choice," and thus it was not valid to assume a divide between the diaspora and the people in Iran. Another criticism was the unrepresentativeness of the campaign in terms of socioeconomic class, because of its tendency to represent "the bourgeoisie . . . the kind of people who can afford computers, smartphones" (Misha), and because of failing to understand that Iranian "society has lots of religious people" (Charlotte) who might agree or disagree with the compulsory hijab as a state law. Charlotte explained, "I would not be surprised if they put hijab on a referendum and it passes again," pointing out that the campaign focused too much on the political aspects of the hijab. By emphasizing the political nature of veiling in Iran, MSF failed to see the hijab as a social and cultural demand by a population that needed to be acknowledged. Coming from a conservative and religious family who still live in Iran, Charlotte believed that the pathway to lifting the

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compulsory hijab mandate should occur through gradual social change rather than political opposition.

Overall, the women demonstrated great savviness about topics of state power and political agency. They showed an appreciation of MSF's goals while sharply criticizing some of its strategies. Most of the criticism by the participants was directed at the strategies that were used in the MSF campaign, and some were directed at the content. In general, there were concerns among the participants about its inclusiveness and diversity, especially in terms of class. The campaign was generally perceived as an upper- and middle-class initiative. While activism against the compulsory hijab was unanimously desired and all participants expressed that they were opposed to the enactment of veiling, some of the participants questioned the desirability of organizing a transnational solidarity campaign such as MSF. The imagery was perceived to be unrepresentative of Iranian women and sometimes even counterproductive by promoting colonialist feminism and "creating tension" between the religious and nonreligious populations. The participants generally presented rich and elaborate responses and critique of the transnational discourses on hijab that showed their interest and critical thinking on feminist narratives of oppression and salvation.

Case 2: World Hijab Day

The WHD campaign, launched in January 2013, is a solidarity campaign that started in New York City and is supported by a website and several social media platforms. The WHD campaign has an active Facebook account with nearly 800,000 followers; its Facebook event pages attract hundreds of thousands of additional potential participants worldwide. It has active profiles on Twitter and Instagram that are followed by hundreds of thousands of international users from 144 countries, as reported on its website (WHD website, 2017). The social media followers are from diverse religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds, and they are predominantly women.

WHD is an initiative that encourages non-Muslim women to try the hijab on the first day of February to show solidarity with Muslim women. The campaign's official website states,

> [This campaign is] a means to foster religious tolerance and understanding by inviting women (non-Hijabi Muslims/non-Muslims) to experience the hijab for one day. (WHD, "About Us," 2018)

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As stated on its website, WHD has yearly events in 23 countries in Europe, North America, East Asia, the Middle East, and Australia (WHD website, 2017). The campaign's social media platforms regularly post pictures and selfies shared by the Muslim and non-Muslim female participants donning the hijab. The organizers are mainly Muslim activists, while the target audience and supporters are from diverse faiths. The images and messages of the campaign emphasize that the practice of veiling is not oppressive. Debunking the notion of hijab as oppression is considered one of the important missions of the campaign:

> For many people, the hijab is a symbol of oppression and segregation. By opening up new pathways to understanding, [the founder] hopes to counteract some of the controversies surrounding why Muslim women choose to wear the hijab (WHD, "About Us," 2018).

To do this, the campaign promotes the idea of hijab as a "choice" (of modesty) but also communicates messages such as the hijab as "beautiful" and "empowering." The platform predominantly uses the image of "hijabi women" as an equivalent of "Muslim women" and promotes the hijab as an important part of Muslim women's faith.

Within the activities presented on WHD's website and social media, besides sharing images of Muslim and non-Muslim women donning the hijab and promoting its agentic aspects, the platform also discusses "the real face of Islam" by projecting a positive image of the faith and its followers. WHD also covers global news related to Islamophobia, with a focus on the maltreatment of women because of their hijab. WHD also uses endorsements by male Muslim clerics and muftis who promote the hijab. It puts an emphasis on heterosexual religious marriage (considered halal), and images of women as spouses are abundant. While the campaign promotes hijabi women's participation in the job market and in the public sphere, it maintains that men are "protectors and maintainers" of women (WHD Facebook page, 2017).

WHD has received both positive and negative responses globally. Positive responses have focused on its usage of the notion of "solidarity" among women of different faiths and on the way it challenges the idea that veiling is oppressive (see, e.g., Ali 2015; Ridgeway 2015). Negative responses include questioning the transnational aspect of "hijab as a choice" and arguing that WHD contributes to a homogeneous understanding of hijab (e.g., Izzidien 2018; Nawaz 2015; Nomani and Arafa 2015). WHD is described by some of its critics as an effort by conservative Muslims to dominate modern Muslim societies (Nomani

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and Arafa 2015). Other critics have argued that since the hijab is still compulsory in many societies with majority-Muslim populations, WHD activism does not/cannot speak for all Muslims (e.g., Nawaz 2015) and that in its representation, WHD reinforces secular-religious binaries (Izzidien 2018). In the following section, the participants' perceptions of WHD are discussed.

Iranian Migrant Women and World Hijab Day

According to our participants, WHD's approach to solidarity contradicted social realities and illustrated the power relations between the organizers and the audience. Owing to their access to higher levels of power, Westerners "give themselves the right to make a big deal out of it that they organise this [event]." One participant (Ziba) discussed the campaign's failure to address the concrete benefits for these supposed victims and concluded that good intentions do not guarantee good practice. Another participant (Bita) presented a similar critique by suggesting that solidarity practices such as WHD have nothing to do with a humanitarian philosophy but with intellectual gestures. She discussed that in fact, Western societies were practicing segregation in many official and nonofficial forms:

> These activities are only superficial. They [i.e., Belgians] have schools that don't let foreigners in ... In academia, they don't interact with you [if you are a foreigner] ... this [segregation] is what should be omitted. (Bita)

Bita drew on her own background as a migrant who had experienced segregation and othering. From her position as a migrant who had struggled with social segregation, she looked at the humanitarian projects that do not have to do with everyday social interactions with skepticism. Similarly, Baharak and Yasaman pointed out that campaigns that targeted non-Western women were a continuation of colonialist projects that projected women's problems from the West and located them elsewhere. In a similar vein, Yasaman stated that Western feminists "are in love with the problems of women in the Middle East," but they failed to see the issues women faced in their own contexts. Or, as Baharak put it, "It is ridiculous to appropriate others' battles for us [Belgians]; we should first solve our own problems."

Baharak's recognition of her current location (i.e., Belgium) — using "we" and "us" when referring to it — shed light on her acute awareness and understanding of her position within the context she lived in. In line

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with this criticism, Charlotte quoted Abu-Lughod (2002) to explain the failure of Western feminists to understand the dynamics of change and political resistance of women in Eastern contexts. She stated that Muslim, and especially local, feminists and moderate political groups in Muslim countries such as Iran were better advocates for women's rights than campaigners located in the West. This example also indicated the transnational circulation of notions of solidarity and the familiarity of the women with the academic literature on feminist solidarity.

Another criticism was WHD's claim to be a global cause, as delineated in the title "World Hijab Day," as well as the lack of a specific and contextual focus. The campaign's generalized approach to Muslimness specifically attracted the attention of participants who believed that resistance/acceptance of hijab was a specific matter, different in each context. Additionally, there were some sentiments that the temporary adoption of the hijab by non-Muslims might be undesired, and may even be seen as a form of cultural appropriation:

> Women [from Muslim societies] might see it as something sacred which they don't want others to talk about … I think campaigners might not have a clear view of [Muslim societies]. (Niloo)

Moreover, as Bita explained, the campaign claims to advocate a global cause, while it can only address contexts in which the hijab could be a matter of social and legal choice:

> This is for women who have hijab here [in Europe]; otherwise it is meaningless apart from the women who wear hijab in Europe. (Bita)

Another participant explained that she believed the support of Western organizations for these kinds of campaigns was less for solidarity than for maintaining order. She positioned it in the broader social and political agenda:

> It is just an art performance [in the West] for their own citizens to say, "don't feel unsafe by walking beside your [foreign] neighbour who wears a hijab" … an initiative for their own citizens to feel safe. They do not think how this will affect people in other countries. (Leila)

Based on Leila's comment, one could argue that the WHD campaign established its international character by using Western women (similar to the anti-veil political projects) to lend it more credibility and to make projects of social integration possible.

Overall, most participants believed in the absolute right of women to choose what they wear, including the hijab. However, the participants

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drew on contextual politics to discuss the importance of local narratives versus universalized causes. Some women perceived the representation of the hijab as a global symbol of the plight of all Muslim women as problematic and reductionist. Most participants acknowledged the problems that hijabi women faced in non-Muslim contexts, but they questioned the possibility of transnational solidarity in the form presented in the WHD campaign. Some participants suggested that it would be better if non-Muslims avoided wearing/appropriating the hijab, but instead provided support in a way such as that expressed by Charlotte: “Come with me as you are and stand beside me.”

DISCUSSION: SOLIDARITY WITH WHICH WOMEN?

This study comparatively analyzed the concept of solidarity articulated and practiced in two campaigns. We presented a content analysis of the campaigns and then reflected on the perceptions of the research participants — 13 Iranian migrant women living in Belgium — about MSF and WHD. The participants demonstrated deep knowledge of the political struggles of Muslim minority women in Belgium as well as truly transnational discursive worldviews. They had acute and critical awareness of their own standpoints and contextual positions both in Iran and in Belgium.

Both campaigns were praised by the participants in this study for addressing problems Muslim women face worldwide. However, they were criticized for their unrepresentativeness in terms of class, in the case of MSF, and in terms of the religious symbolism of the hijab, in the case of WHD. The other widely criticized aspect of the campaigns was their claims to address “global” causes. While many Muslim women do not make the “choice” to veil, WHD aimed to address a global “Muslim” issue. The findings suggest that WHD’s representation of “Muslimness” and women’s choice of attire lacks contextual historicity. Attitudes and approaches to the hijab have not been homogeneous in Muslim-majority contexts around the world. Throughout the history of Islam, Muslim women everywhere have faced different social issues. The hijab is not practiced in similar ways and does not reflect a single symbolism. While veiling can be considered a symbol of female emancipation in some contexts, it can also be perceived as a symbol of state control of women’s bodies in other contexts (e.g., Iran).

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Considering the veil a transnational symbol of women's embodiment of Islamic values is not an accurate representation of Muslim women, nor of the veil itself. WHD's use of the image of Muslim women, and of women who wear the hijab, was criticized by our participants for its homogenizing attitude. With Bulbeck (1998), we agree that the lack of attention to historical and cultural complexities stimulates the "infantilization of judgments" and makes engagement abstract, lacking real understanding. Dean (1996) also emphasizes that historicizing and locating political agency in the contexts in which they take place is a necessary alternative to universal claims of oppression or resistance. Participants argued that the resistance/acceptance of the hijab should be linked to a specific cultural context and/or religious interpretation. However, MSF spoke on behalf of "Iranian women." This was contested by our participants, who believed this universal claim undermined the diversities of women in Iran by glorifying "unveiling" as a form of resistance. According to the participants, MSF also spoke to a population that believed attracting Western solidarity by demonstrating similar values was imperative to women's rights.

The lack of reflection on historicity in both campaigns was perceived to have led to a deficiency regarding historical diversities and differences between Muslim societies. Addressing this diversity is imperative, particularly because neo-colonialist discourses continue to represent veiled women as passive, oppressed and devoid of agency (Jiwani and Rail 2010; Mohanty 2003). The static representations of Muslim women have long led to discrimination (Hoodfar 1992) and continue to affect women's lives. Within such a discourse, Azadi (2015) argues that using the plight of Muslim women by non-Muslims can be read as cultural appropriation. As Seddighi and Tafakori (2016) argue, in engaging the question of transnational mediations, we need to ask why and how specific campaigns are recognized as critical and as acts of resistance and consider the colonial and postcolonial genealogies of their recognizability.

Moreover, the MSF and WHD campaigns were both perceived to rely on individual agentic actions. Such individualism in activism is crucial for the movements to succeed, but it might mask intersectionality and the multiplicity of factors affecting the conditions of women's lives. Women living under traditional patriarchal laws, or under conditions of social and political disadvantage, might not be able to take part in (digital) individual-oriented social activism. This means that their voices will be eliminated. On the other hand, as Siddiqi (2014) and Abu-Lughod (2013) argue, neoliberal practices of solidarity which focus on

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individual self-promotion — by veiling or unveiling — undermine the underlying social and political forces that determine the ways people live.

The MSF campaign was sometimes perceived as tokenistic by our participants for including men in merely symbolic ways and without attention to gender power imbalances. This line of criticism pointed out the limitations of social media and cyberspace in reflecting real-life issues. The question could also be raised of whether reaching out to a "global" audience through social media creates solidarity across the globe. While discussions about the transnational reach of digital media are outside the scope of this article, the use of social media as a tool for feminist transnational activism has been criticized for being limited to reaching young elites in terms of education, caste, and class (Losh 2014).

This study revealed some of the representational limitations of online spaces. Despite the importance of transnational solidarity in the feminist political agenda, solidarity activism that takes place on online platforms often limits followers and participants to well-educated middle- and upper-class users. The widespread reach and intersectional nature of digital platforms is thus not guaranteed. Furthermore, as the participants discussed, digital media activism facilitates tokenism. Digital platforms were criticized for lacking impact on people's offline attitudes, and there was a perceived disconnection between the behaviors of users in online social media and in their offline daily lives. Since both campaigns use cyberspace, social media, and visual data to spread their messages, further studies are required to understand the intricate relationships between the campaigners, the participants, and the audience and, more specifically, to investigate how new technologies contribute to transnational solidarity.

Furthermore, the MSF and WHD campaigns are both indifferent to the experiences of women from minority groups. As such, they tend to essentialize womanhood by ignoring the differences within this very category (Butler 2006; Goldenberg 2007). This has taken place to some extent with homogenizing women's Muslimness as veiled (in WHD) or by subscribing to the discursive-ideological power of Muslim women's liberation through their sexuality (in MSF). It is important to form solidarity practices in ways that avoid romanticizing the Western imaginary that considers sexuality the core of female emancipation (Siddiqi 2014).

Despite different strategies toward a shared political goal of building solidarity with "Muslim women," both MSF and WHD are prone to reductionism in a twofold way. First, the campaigns ignore the diversity

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of Muslim societies' discourses of veiling and reduce their actions to simple acts of compliance or rebellion. Women's opposition to the body control strategies practiced by states goes beyond narratives of oppression and resistance. Iranian women's reaction to regulatory unveiling and re-veiling has been resistant to different forms of assigned and forced identity (Zahedi 2008) in different periods of history. Veiling and unveiling have been part of Iranian women's declaration of identity and were not always built in opposition to an external force.

As other feminist scholars (e.g., hooks 1986; Mohanty 2003) have argued, we conclude that showing solidarity with marginalized groups — such as Muslim women in non-Muslim contexts — also entails the responsibility of choosing the right means and strategies to represent shared commitments. Unless this common cause is reflected in claims, contents, and strategies, a solidarity campaign will fail to speak for the people it addresses. Common political emancipatory goals (Yuval-Davis 2006), such as the right of women to choose — including the choice of what they wear — could provide better grounds for building solidarity. Thus, informed by intersectional and postcolonial feminist critique (e.g., Nadje Al-Ali), we argue that solidarity requires identifying and challenging the specific configurations of power, injustice, and inequalities in given specific contexts — the very thing that is lacking in both these campaigns.

To conclude, the analysis of the two campaigns revealed the complexity and difficulty of representations of groups with high levels of diversity. A nuanced contextual approach to women's political struggles, a deep understanding of power differences and politics of location, and a commitment to intersectionality should be at the heart of any transnational campaign that seeks to build feminist solidarity across differences.

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