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Theme section

# Mediation of Muslim Gender Norms

## Independent and Mosque-Affiliated Religious Muslim Online Actors in Denmark

**Keywords:** Islam and gender, gender norms, digital religion, online media

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**Abstract** In this article, I examine how religious Muslim actors representing a religious institution and religious Muslim actors who are independent of such institutions mediate Muslim gender norms in online platforms in Denmark, and what modes of argumentation the actors use in their articulation of gender roles and family structures. I find that most of the actors subscribe to traditional gender norms and family structures with the main argument being the natural stature of traditional gender roles. I discuss the fluidity of the religious and secular mediation of the actors, and how the argumentation used by the actors challenges secular perceptions of notions such as gender equality and emancipation.

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“I give you the numbers, but it is up to you to reflect on them”. This is how the Facebook and YouTube blogger Tarek Ghanoum ends all his videos. Thirty-year-old Ghanoum holds a master’s degree in economics and business, and for the past five years he has produced informative videos, where he, dressed in suit and tie, presents a wide range of political topics from a statistical point of view, using a professional set up and interactive graphics. In 2016, Ghanoum caught the attention of national Danish news media by producing videos on anti-Semitism, integration, Islamophobia, social control, and gender equality. Despite the fact that the content of his YouTube channel challenges stereotypical discourses on political topics related to Muslims,

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Ghanoum never directly addresses his own Muslim background.

Ali<sup>1</sup> is a thirty-year-old popular YouTube blogger with more than 150,000 subscribers. Ali appears on the screen with high energy and a charming smile, welcoming the audience into his world. His videos are filmed in his own apartment, always with Islamic music playing in the background, while he is dressed in baggy pants and t-shirt, wearing a cap and always newly shaved. Ali uses emotional language clearly directed at a young audience while doing fast shifts in his tone of voice and facial expressions. Ali produces a range of videos focusing on his own emotional reactions to, for example, call of prayer and burnings of the Quran. Moreover, he produces videos where he discusses different Islamic topics, introducing quotes from Hadith and the Quran. The aesthetics of his videos are comparable to many other young influencers. He speaks quickly, is personal, and edits the video in short cuts, making the videos suitable for the market structures of social media (Boyle et al. 2019, Echchaibi 2008).

Thirty-year-old Mohammad Khani is an Imam in the Mohammed Ali Mosque in Copenhagen, and he holds a master's degree in Islamic philosophy and law from Iran. From the Mosque's YouTube-channel, Khani produces short videos in which he explains Islam and addresses what he calls "Islam Misunderstood". In the videos Khani always appears in religious clothing, wearing a turban and a long beard, and standing in front of a mosaic wall talking directly to the camera.

These three Muslim online actors constitute examples of the empirical material that will be analyzed in this article. They are all very different in their online appearance and mediation. However, they all represent popular Muslim voices using online spaces and platforms to mediate different content.

Online media has provided a space and a platform from where new religious Muslim voices are able to mediate in public – independent of a religious institution. Moreover, traditional religious authorities representing these institutions are rethinking their religious mediation by being present in online media (Cheong 2016; Campbell 2012). While the studied actors mediate all kinds of content online, I will focus specifically on how they mediate gender norms. When investigating articulation of gender norms on online platforms, the social structures and competitive nature of social media become part of the

1 Anonymous informant referred to as Ali

analytical framework. This invites questions on if and how contemporary trends and discourses are influencing the religious actors' mediation regarding gender norms (Cheong 2016, Evolvi 2019, Hirschkind 2012, Echchaibi 2011). Apart from creating a platform where new voices may exist, established religious institutions are forced to respond to online media and consider where to place themselves in the primarily secular arena of these platforms. Therefore, online media provide platforms where different groups operate on the same technical and structural terms. This enables an analysis of online content mediated by actors holding different authoritative positions but still existing on the same premises (Evolvi 2019, Cheong 2016).

Taking a comparative approach, this article examines how religious Danish Muslim actors orally mediate discourses on gender norms and family structures in online media, and how different modes of argumentation correspond to their authoritative position. The actors studied may be divided into two categories: (1) actors affiliated with an established religious Muslim institution and (2) actors who perform by themselves, independent of such institutions. The Muslim actors independent of a religious institution may be seen as examples of alternative religious authorities representing a new generation (Hoover 2016). Opposed to the new Muslim voices are the traditional religious authorities representing established religious institutions, who primarily mediate religious content in the mosques (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006). Furthermore, this article asks the following set of questions: How do the Muslim actors differ, and in what ways do they share similar approaches and views? How do the actors respond to notions such as gender equality and emancipation when articulating gender norms online in different contexts?

The findings presented in this article are based on a study I conducted during my MA thesis, which was carried out in collaboration with the research project *Rearticulating Islam: A New Generation of Religious Muslim Leaders* at the University of Copenhagen in 2020/2021 (funded by VELUX Foundation). Based on prior analysis mapping out the different constructions of authority performed by the actors studied, this article focuses on how these authority formations are reflected in the modes of argumentation used by the actors when articulating gender norms. In addition, it discusses how these different modes of argumentation challenge secular perceptions of

gender equality and emancipation of the individual, and further, how the mediated content is to be understood when looking at each Muslim actor as an individual. The material studied consists of 24 vide-os and audio files collected from online platforms and six qualitative interviews with actors representing both categories.

## Digital Religion and Virtual Spaces

The emergence of new online media has set in motion a development regarding religious practice and mediation. This development makes room for new religious voices and identities (Lövheim 2012, Campbell 2012, Moll 2010, 2020). Articulation of religious content, knowledge, and interpretations are no longer a practice limited to certain places or individuals. An increasing number of online platforms permit all kinds of actors to take part in the articulation and dissemination of religious content, thus changing contemporary religious fields (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006, 12; Moll 2010, 2020, Cheong 2016, Turner 2013). In the following section I present some of the existing literature relevant to my empirical material.

Professor of media studies Nabil Echchaibi concludes in an analysis of Arabic satellite television, that Islamic tv-programs are to compete for market share, despite their ties to official authority. This “forces channels like Iqra’ and Al-Risalah to provide a space for alternative religious voices to emerge and widen the range of social and cultural topics on which Islam is brought to bear” (Echchaibi 2008, 200). Furthermore, the market forces have an indirect influence on the discourses being mediated – including discourses on gender – because online actors are forced to respond to popular secular content when competing for the attention of the users (Echchaibi 2008, 2011). This market structure described by Echchaibi has only become more influential with social media creating a space with an even easier access for new alternative authorities (Hoover 2016). Previous studies concerning religious leaders in social media show that by sharing religious content on social media, the religious leaders create a sense of personal connection with their followers while mediating traditional religious content. In doing so, they make themselves compatible with a platform that works

as an open market, where their posts are competing with secular content and tendencies flourishing in the surrounding society – including new religious Muslim voices (Cheong 2016, Bunt 2018, Kloos 2019, Echchaibi 2008). Stig Hjarvard calls this a process of medialization, where the religious actors representing a religious institution are situated in a position where society is influenced by online media to such an extent that they need to participate in this development to have an impact in contemporary society (Hjarvard 2016, 9).

In the examination of Muslim actors online, I have looked to Heidi Campbell's de-scription of digital religion to obtain a connection between the offline and online domain of the actors. Campbell describes digital religion as something that exists in a dynamic interaction with of-fline religion due to the omnipresent nature of digital media (Campbell 2012, see also Lövheim 2012). In light of these fluent boundaries, I do not consider religious Muslim actors operating online or offline as two separate movements when studying religion and online media. In line with Campbell, Steward Hoover and Echchaibi describe digital *third spaces* as offline and online spaces influencing each other and the religious mediation as a product of an interplay between offline and online practices (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2021). Additionally, Giulia Evolvi studies *third spaces* as a religious space that exists because of the structures of the internet but differs from other virtual spaces because it ramifies into the users' offline lives and practices. This creates a connection between religious and secular domains and online and offline spheres (Evolvi 2019, 48). This is exemplified in a study of *Khutbas* on YouTube by Charles Hirschkind, where he focuses on the religious communities that are formed due to the virtual architecture of online media platforms. Hirschkind emphasizes how individuals from different places with different religious orientations have made use of the architectural perks of the internet technology and collectively created a shared space for religious devotion co-existing with secular content and offline practices (Hirschkind 2012, 2006). Thus, the study of digital religion has increasingly become the study of lived religion in everyday life (Peterson 2020, Lövheim 2012). In addition, anthropologist Yasmin Moll, through her work on Islam and media in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has studied what makes media Islamic (Moll 2010, 2020). Through case-studies of, for example, Muslim talk-show hosts such as Amr Khaled and Moez

Masoud, she exemplifies how a clear differentiation exists between religious media, primarily mediating sermons and prayers, and Islamic media, mediating all sorts of content but from the basis of Islamic principles (Moll 2020, 624). Moll argues that Islamic media treats Islam as a fundamental concept where secular and religious boundaries are being negotiated when mediating Muslim identities (Moll 2020, 637; see also Abdel-Fadil 2016, 248). Studying the empirical material from this approach allows for a more inclusive definition of what Islamic media may contain and how online media contributes to the development of Islamic mediation.

## Studying Gender and Islam

In the following, I will outline reflections and deliberations on gender norms in the study of Islam.<sup>2</sup> According to several studies on gender and Islam in Europe, the position of Muslim women is overrepresented in public debates compared to women with other religious or cultural backgrounds – a development that accelerated after 9/11 (van Es 2016, 39; Abu-Lughod 2013, 30; Walторp and Ahmad 2019, Peterson 2016). The representation of Muslim women in Western public debates and media has primarily focused on the meaning of the Muslim veil, Islam as an oppressive religion towards women, and social control (ibid.). In an examination of a Danish media controversy about the organization *Exitcirklen*,<sup>3</sup> Karen Walторp and Mahvish Ahmad point to the fact that in the dominating public discourse on Muslim women, these women are either portrayed as oppressed or extremists, thereby confirming the stereotype. Alternatively, they are portrayed as an exception to the norm, for example by not veiling or by leaving their family. This also indirectly confirms the stereotype as well. Walторp and Ahmad argue that women with a Muslim background are forced to re-produce the existing stereotypes if they want to be heard in the public debate because this constitutes the premise of participating (Walторp and Ahmad 2019). This practice of representation has created a pressure on Muslim women, as well as Muslims in general, to be constantly aware of how they are representing Islam. There is also pressure to disprove Western misrepresentations of Muslim women as oppressed and Muslim men as oppressors (Peterson 2016). Furthermore, in a study of young

<sup>2</sup> See also Scott 2007; Liberatore 2018; Bilge 2010; Gruber 2020; Seedat 2016; Tarlo 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Exitcirklen* is an organization started by the female imam Sherin Khankhan and Khaterah Parwani. *Exitcirklen* helps people who have experienced physical and psychological violence (Walторp and Ahmad 2019).

female Muslim influencers, Kristin Peterson emphasizes how Muslim women wearing Muslim fashion are put in a “representation-challenge”. As their bodies are hyper-visible as Muslims, they address negative stereotypes about Islam just by being visible in the public. This creates a highly binary space, where Muslim women either become an icon of “Western” freedom or Islamic piety through their choice of fashion (Peterson 2016). Hence, dichotomies such as modern vs. traditional or secular vs. religious are dominating the public representation of Muslim women. This leaves no space for complex individuals with different moorings and negotiations of position and identity (Waltorp and Ahmad 2019, Peterson 2016 see also Abdel-Fadil and Liebmann 2018).

In the influential essay “Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?” Mona Abu-Lughod (2013) addresses the overrepresented stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman by questioning the Western obsession with trying to save Muslim women. The narrative of the “West” saving women from the oppression of Islam creates a picture of “Western liberalism” as superior to Islam (see also Spivak 1987). In her monography on Muslim women in the West, Anne Sofie Roald (2001) further points to the fact that different groups judge each other in view of an ideal self-perception. Thus, Muslims living in Europe judge most non-Muslims as one homogenous group, focusing on the most apparent differences, but in view of their Islamic ideal, and vice versa (Roald 2001, 6). Following Roald, the way groups of people judge each other is based on an unrealistic self-image. This makes it easier to overlook flaws in one’s own group or culture, thus creating strong stereotypes and binary conceptions of “the other”. This creates a pattern of mutual misconceptions, which dominates the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims (Roald 2011). According to Deniz Kandiyoti and her work on Islam, gender, and governance, the self-perception of the West as an immune liberal order has been challenged by the political wave of far-right populism rising in North America and Europe reestablishing gender and racial hierarchies (Kandiyoti et al. 2019). Thus, this becomes an example of how a certain ideal of a homogenous “Western” liberalism is used when judging Muslim minorities, while the political landscape in Western countries tells a different story.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood has been an influential figure in the study of gender and Islam. Through her work on

Islam, gender, and piety, she illuminates how dominating secular and liberal positions and discourses in Western societies are playing a role in the increasing criticism of and view on Islam. Mahmood argues that Islamic tradition is perceived as dangerous in “the West” because it deviates from what she calls secular-liberal norms (Mahmood 2011, 189). When studying Islam and gender, it is essential to challenge fixed associations connected to Islam by becoming aware of one’s own position and the discourses dominating most Western societies (Mahmood 2011, 192). Mahmood examines Western normative liberal assumptions concerning emancipation and agency, which Muslim communities, and especially Muslim women, have been the center of. In Western societies there has been a tendency to simplify discourses on non-Western women’s agency to concern only patriarchal submission. Notions such as emancipation, self-fulfillment, and agency may take on a different meaning if embedded in the context of a different history and culture Mahmood argues (Mahmood 2001, 208). According to Mahmood, individual freedom as a political ideal is relatively new in history, and several Western societies have strived to other aspirations than this. When ideas and notions like emancipation, equality, and individual freedom are designated to describe a social movement or group, it is crucial to consider if the discursive elements bound to these notions are sufficient for the object of examination (Mahmood 2001, 225).

Mahmood presents a structural political critique of “secular-liberal” discourses dominating Western societies which create narrow and stereotypical perspectives on Islam and Muslims. Samuli Schielke challenges this “master narrative” of Mahmood (and Talal Asad, 1986) and calls for a different approach in the anthropology of Islam (Schielke 2010). Schielke argues that a focus on tradition, structures, and hegemones have been predominating in the anthropology of Islam. The complexity and sensibility of the Muslim individual and the lived everyday lives are underrepresented. Schielke presents a critique of the notion “secular-liberal” by questioning secularism as something equal to liberalism. Secularism in Europe is also connected to socialism, communism, and other cultural and political movements. The notion “secular-liberal” reduces the two terms to a simple format when describing “the West”. According to Schielke, this is not consistent with the complexities of European cultures and societies. By giving the “master



narrative” of structural power too much attention, there is a risk of missing the essence and the feelings at stake for the subject of re-search and their lived experience (Schielke 2010, 50). Concordant with Schielke, in a study of the webpage Islam Online, Abdel-Fadil emphasizes that a strong theorization of Islam bears a risk of depicting Islam and secular thought as two incompatible ideas that cannot be reconciled in the life-world of a Muslim person. Abdel-Fadil argues that Muslims cannot be analyzed solely from a “mas-ter narrative” perspective, as a constant negotiation exists among secular, liberal, and religious boundaries (Abdel-Fadil 2016, 247). Maintaining an awareness on the different approaches outlined above when studying gender, Islam, and “the West”, I strive to achieve nuanced insights when ex-aming the empirical material in this article.

## About the Study

The findings and analytical reflections in this article are based on an investigation carried out in col-laboration with the research project *Rearticulating Islam: A New Generation of Religious Muslim Leaders* during the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. The empirical material consists of online con-tent collected from YouTube, Facebook, and homepages during the fall of 2020. The studied con-tent has been selected based on a set of popularity criteria and the relevance of the mediated themes. The selection criteria are: 1) The public online accounts of the actor or institution have more than 2000 regular followers or subscribers, 2) the posted content has an outreach of at least 500 views, 3) the content generates regular activity measured in *likes*, comments, and *shares*, and 4) the accounts contain a variety of different subjects. The selected material both includes content mediating gender roles directly as a subject, as well as content dealing with other subjects mediating dis-courses on gender norms indirectly. The studied Muslim individuals represent actors affiliated with a religious Muslim institution as well as actors independent of such institutions. The online material consists of eight recorded Friday sermons (*khutbas*), three Islamic lectures (sing. *dars*),<sup>4</sup> and four-teen videos or audio files produced specifically for an online purpose. I located the online actors with help from Muslim gatekeepers and colleagues in the

field. Over time this resulted in the algorithm of especially YouTube working in my favor giving me access to further material (Shaffer 2019, 36). In addition, I carried out six qualitative interviews with actors from both categories in order to gain insight into their motivations and reflections— primarily focusing on their position of influence. All the actors representing a Muslim institution had an Islamic education themselves or had access to educated individuals providing them with guidance and legitimization of the Islamic content. Each of the independent actors except for one had a university degree, but none of them had any formal Islamic education.

The focus of this study is to examine discourses on gender norms among a variety of Muslim actors producing online content representing different aspects of their everyday life and reflections. Hence, the actors selected for this study mediate all kinds of content and not only content related to gender. Due to the selection criteria (number of followers, views, number of online media posts, and the diversity of the content) the studied material is mainly performed by male actors. This does not mean that female Muslim voices mediating and challenging discourses on gender do not exist on online platforms.<sup>5</sup> These female actors form an important subject of research in the study of gender and Islam representing a new generation of female public online actors (see Lövheim 2012, Sæthre 2020, Waltorp 2015, Robinson 2015, Piela 2013, Kavakci and Kreaplin 2016, van Es 2016). However, studying this group would call for a different investigative approach since the representation of these female actors' focuses primarily on gender norms and are primarily aimed at a female audience. According to five out of six of my informants, the demographics of their accounts show 55-60% female and 40-45% male followers between the ages of 15 to 35. This implies female interest in the mediated content (Amer 2021, 51). This conjecture is supported by recent studies examining gender norms among religious Muslim women in Scandinavia. These studies show a subscription to similar gender norms as presented in this article (Jacobsen 2010; Jensen 2019; Minganti 2011).

4 These sermons and lectures were delivered and recorded in mosques and later publicly circulated online.

5 The Mariam Mosque, the podcast and Instagram account Skamløs by Souha Al-Mersal focusing on gender norms and minority communities in Denmark, the Instagram account hijabigoneglobal focusing on women's fashion and stereotypes.

## Case studies

In the following section, I will outline the dominating discourses used by the actors in their mediation of content. Further-

more, I will show how the actors make use of different modes of argumentation when mediating Muslim gender norms.<sup>6</sup> The independent actors vocally emphasize how they do not see themselves as competitors or equivalents to the domain of the Imams dealing with religious interpretation. Instead they see themselves as supplements providing the perspective of young Muslims in Denmark (Amer 2021, Appendix 3).<sup>7</sup> The dominating discourse across both categories subscribes to traditional gender norms and family structures, where the man is the provider and active agent and the woman is ascribed a passive role in society having the domestic responsibility. The modes of argumentation used by the actors studied may be divided into a series of subthemes: Theological/Islamic argumentation, secular academic argumentation, and arguments against Western, modern family structures. All the argumentative approaches contribute to a discourse legitimizing traditional gender roles and family structures.

### Theological Argumentation

One of the main arguments is founded in a theological discourse and concerns the way traditional gender roles are natural by virtue of the responsibility and function that God has assigned the individual sex. This argument mainly appears among the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution – as expressed in the following passages by Islamic teacher Ahmad Ghofran giving a lecture (*dars*) and Imam Abdul Wahid Pedersen giving a sermon (*khutba*) (in both YouTube videos the actors appear in religious clothing, and using the mosque as their location):

By nature, women are more loving than men – especially to children. In Hadith the prophet, sallallahu alaihi wasallam, says “In the town where they live, the women who carry children are good with children and upbringing and loving by nature”. It is often the mother who spends time with the children. (YouTube: Dars by Ahmad Ghofran, Munida, Wakf, 2014).

Allah says in the Quran: “Men are the protectors and the providers”. “Men have power over women” would be the translation for some, but you could also see it as an

6 Based on a prior analysis, I find the independent actors representing an alternative authority based on a secular educational background and their ability to meet the followers at eye level. The category of the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution represents a traditional religious authority based on religious titles or an Islamic educational background (Turner 2013, 117, Amer 2021).

7 See also Stjernholm 2020, 47.

obligation for men to provide and protect. (YouTube: Khutba by Imam Abdul Wahid Pedersen, Danish Islamic Centre, 2012).

At first glance these quotes exemplify how Ahmad Ghofran and Imam Abdul Wahid Pedersen support traditional gender norms. They ascribe certain qualities and duties as given by nature to women using a religious discourse and theological arguments. By ascribing “soft” qualities a positive value using sources from Hadith and the Quran, the actors legitimize a maintenance of the traditional gender roles and family structures. Furthermore, Ghofran and Wahid Pedersen serve as examples of what Moll (2020) calls “religious media”. They use YouTube to perform classic religious practices such as *dars* and *khutba* exactly as it is performed offline at the mosque. Hence, they differ from the actors who actively use technical tools suitable for the format of social media such as visuals, sound effects, and video editing. This adds a traditional frame to the religious discourses and arguments articulated. Following the religiously anchored arguments outlined above, one will transgress against the natural order of God if one challenges traditional gender roles.

However, looking further into the quote of Imam Abdul Wahid Pedersen, an alternative interpretation is possible. Wahid Pedersen has an awareness of the way he represents Islam and what stereotypes he has the authority to demystify by addressing the Quran directly. He offers a translation with a different message regarding the position of women (Peterson 2016). The emphasis on men as “protectors and providers”, underlining a soft masculinity instead of “power over women”, may also be seen as part of a general trend in society. In a study of Islamic online counselling, Abdel-Fadil shows how the counsellors use examples from Hadith and the Quran to promote this “gentle Islamic masculinity”. Abdel-Fadil discovers that it is similar to the construction of “the new man” in American psychology, thus illustrating an example of how secular trends merge with religious arguments (Abdel-Fadil 2016, 259). In similar ways, Wahid Pedersen uses religious texts and interpretation to encourage a softer masculine ideal without compromising the structures of traditional gender roles. Whether the words of Wahid Pedersen are intentionally chosen to meet a general trend is hard to tell, but it is clear that he is aware of how he represents Islam regarding the position of women. Imam

Mohammad Khani, who was presented in the introduction, makes use of the same argumentation method in a YouTube video on women's rights:

The prophet was only twenty-three-years when he imposed a number of women's rights, and this was in a time and society where you would bury baby girls alive. (...) It was because of the changes of the prophet that one of the first universities was founded by a woman based on an Islamic fundament and the ideas of the prophet (YouTube series: Islam Misforstået, Mohammad Khani, 08.02.2018).

Khani uses the prophet Mohammed both as an external statement and indirectly as an internal inspiration (see also Abdel-Fadil 2016, 258-9). Like Wahid Pedersen, Khani is aware of the stereotypical image of Islam that is being produced in the West. By using historical references to the prophet and how he created the fundamentals of Islam, Khani challenges the Western misconceptions of Islam as being opposed to women's rights (which is also clear from the title "Islam Misunderstood"). Simultaneously, Khani's use of the prophet may be seen as an inspirational encouragement to follow his example when discussing gender equality, which I will get back to (Abdel-Fadil 2016). While Wahid Pedersen performs his arguments in a traditional *khutba*, Khani uses the formats of online media actively in his YouTube series "Islam Misunderstood" speaking directly to the online audience by looking into the camera (see also Cheong 2016).

The theological argumentation regarding gender norms is predominant among actors affiliated with a Muslim institution. However, the independent actor referred to as Ali, who was presented in the introduction, also make use of theological argumentation.<sup>8</sup> With more than 150,000 followers, Ali stands out from the remaining independent actors by being the most popular actor and, especially, by being the only one using a direct religious discourse and theological argumentation. As Peterson notes in her work on young female Muslim *vloggers*, online independent actors experience a different attraction from their audience because they offer a sense of connection and personality that is not as available with traditional celebrities – or traditional religious authorities (Peterson 2016, 9). Like Peterson's case study, Ali offers a very personal style of religious

mediation with a young appearance, talking directly to his followers in a personal language. This makes him stand out from the actors affiliated with a religious Muslim institution representing traditional religious authorities. In a video concerning the oppression of women, Ali argues:

I mean... according to the Prophet, *sallallahu alaihi wasallam*, women were created from Adam's rib. She was created from his side. Women are extremely vulnerable compared to men, so be gentle to them. If you put too much pressure on them, they will break, but if you let them be, they will stay bent. Because of this, be gentle to them, be good to them, be understanding, listen to them. (YouTube: Ali, 2019).<sup>9</sup>

He uses the same mode of theological argumentation by referring to the prophet as legitimization for his statement. Like in the example with Wahid Pedersen, you may argue that Ali is aware of existing stereotypes when he uses theological references to advocate for a "soft" and protecting masculinity to prove the righteousness of Islam. Like Khani, he uses the example of the prophet as an inspirational direct message to his male Muslim audience. While promoting a gentle masculinity, which may be seen as a general trend, he simultaneously contributes to a traditional discourse on gender norms by describing women as "extremely vulnerable" and men as the protectors of this vulnerability. Though Ali does not hold the same traditional religious authority and religious appearance as the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution, he manages to mediate religious content using theological arguments while performing in a non-religious space in fashionable secular clothes. According to the comment section, he succeeds in creating a religious space for his followers who respond with prayers and blessings (Amer 2021, Appendix 5.3, see also Hirschkind 2012). Thus, he constitutes an example of how religious and non-religious domains are constantly evolving around each other and how online media platforms help to create this fluid space where secular and religious boundaries are negotiated in the mediation of Muslim identities (Evolvi 2019, Abdel-Fadil 2016).

While the actors presented in this section constitute examples of how theological argumentation is used to legitimize traditional gender norms, this is not always the case. Several examples of reinterpretations of the Quran and Hadith exist

8 Anonymous informant.

9 See appendix 4.6, 4.8, 5.4, Amer 2021

that have previously been used to point out the submissive position of women, which later have been interpreted by scholars and different Islamic mediators to prove the opposite – e.g., Sherin Khankhan, Fatima Mernissi (1987), Kecia Ali (2010), and Nimat Barazangi (2016) to name a few (Waltorp and Mahvish 2019, Roald 2001, 172, Piela 2015, Jones 2020).

## Secular Argumentation

The predominant mode of argumentation used by the independent actors is mainly based on their educational training and is dominated by a secular discourse. According to Echchaibi (2008) media technologies have played an influential role in this type of Islamic mediation, where Muslim online actors are influenced by dynamics of consumer culture, which make the actors' mediation of Islam less dogmatic and more suitable for the media marketplace highly dominated by secular content. Furthermore, Echchaibi states: "Unlike in the politically engaged Islam, the architects of this new trend are younger Muslims with more business skills than religious knowledge" (Echchaibi 2008, 206). Facebook and YouTube-blogger Tarek Ghanoum, who was presented in the introduction, is a good example of this trend. He uses statistical graphs and a language reflecting his educational training in business and economics to address different political topics. In a personal conversation with him, he emphasizes how he never uses religious language or greetings, instead he implicitly uses his identity as a Muslim to represent a Muslim perspective to all kinds of subjects, which he believes is missing in the general media representation (Interview, Appendix 3.1, p. 11, Amer 2021). Following Moll (2020), this may be seen as an example of Islamic media, where the religious content is absent but Islam as a concept is present. Furthermore, this approach makes room for negotiations between secular and religious boundaries when articulating Muslim identity (Adbel-Fadil 2016, 247). The appearance of Tarek Ghanoum displays a natural similarity to the Egyptian talk show host Amr Khaled, who has been the focus of several case studies (Echchaibi 2008, 2011, Jung and Sinclair 2015, Moll 2010). Described by Echchaibi, Amr Khaled is an Islamic mediator, young, a business accountant, not a religious scholar, does not use religious greetings, and has a "somewhat liberal and tolerant approach to preaching" (Echchaibi 2008, 209). Although I would

not call Tarek Ghanoum an Islamic preacher, I still find the similar appearance interesting when examining Muslim identity in an era of new technologies, consumerism, and spaces for new Muslim voices and authorities. In a conversation with Tarek Ghanoum, he notes: "The first ten seconds are the most important. (...) A typical Muslim would begin by saying 'Salam aleikum abdullah, dear brothers and sisters' – and you already lost them [your audience] during the ten seconds you spend on a greeting" (Interview, Appendix 3.1., Amer 2021). This emphasizes his acute awareness of the format of his mediation (see also Peterson 2016). Looking at Tarek Ghanoum's mediation of gender norms, he comes to the same conclusion as the Muslim actors presented in the previous section. However, Tarek Ghanoum uses references to statistics and academic research to prove the natural order of men and women instead of turning to Hadith and the Quran – exemplified in the following quote from a Facebook video:

The reason [for an uneven gender distribution in the job market] is actually quite simple. It is actually shown [referring to research using graphics] that when women may freely choose, without thinking of the aspect of economy, they choose a field that is more in accordance with their gender [care work]. (Facebook video: Tarek, 2019)

Without linking his argument to an Islamic context, he uses a secular discourse based on statistics showing how the gender distribution in the job market is caused by natural motives. The implicated conclusion of his video is that women are naturally suited for "soft" vocations. Thus, there is no need to challenge the existing gender norms influencing the job market. In this video he addresses a topic often discussed in public media concerning gender equality in the job market – not from a religious Muslim perspective, but from his perspective as an educated young man, who happens to be a Muslim. As previously mentioned, he wants to provide a Muslim, non-religious, perspective on public debates calling for a broader and more detailed media representation (Waltorp and Mahvish 2019). The argumentation presented in the video should therefore not be seen as a solely Muslim representation. It is also a political argument that many people agree to – Muslims as well as non-Muslims (Schielke 2010).

A different example of a similar approach is a podcast by a



Muslim man and woman, both holding a master's degree (henceforth referred to as the Family Podcast).<sup>10</sup> They mediate their content using secular academic language often referring to their academic training. Frequently, they invite guests from academic environments to participate in their conversations on family life in a modern, Danish, Islamic context. In the following example a guest with a specialized educational background in family structures and childcare is sharing her professional experiences:

I see these women, who somehow have hidden their femininity (...) hidden their in-stinct and put on these masculine energies in their lives – striving for career and rational thinking (...) they have children who somehow show a behavior expressing the need for human contact. (Podcast by independent actors, 2020).

Based on her academic background, she states how breaking with traditional family structures will have serious consequences for the well-being of the children. Like Tarek Ghanoum, the content mediated in the Family Podcast is based on academic knowledge and dominated by a secular discourse according to which there is a natural stature to traditional gender roles that should be preserved. As a Muslim couple mediating content based equally on their academic and Islamic background, their view on women's position in a family structure is easily interpreted as an Islamic ideal or an expression of piety. However, following the work of Schielke (2010) and Roald (2001), one should be aware that they also are two individuals, who, apart from being Muslims, are academics, parents, and political beings, living everyday lives (See also Abdel-Fadil 2012). If the couple had lived in a Muslim country, the awareness of their Muslim background would not be pronounced when stating a conservative political opinion. In a personal interview, they share how they are inspired by the popular conservative scholar Jordan B. Peterson and how his work has influenced their conversations in the podcast (Interview, Appendix 3.5, Amer 2021). One will find many non-Muslims sharing the same interest in, for example, Jordan B. Peterson, without their religious or cultural backgrounds being used as explanations for their conservative interest (Roald 2001, 17). Thus, their mediation of traditional gender norms should not be seen as an absolute Islamic ideal, but as an expression of who they are as Muslim individuals (Schielke 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous informants.

While the actors presented so far support traditional gender roles, either using a secular or theological discourse and argumentation, the online radio channel Radio Waih stands out. Radio Waih was founded in 2017 by a group of young male and female Muslims striving to contribute to more detailed perspectives on Muslims in Denmark (Interview, Appendix 3.2, Amer 2021).<sup>11</sup> Radio Waih constitutes the only source included in this study that does not subscribe to traditional gender norms. Like the Family Podcast and Tarek Ghanoum, Radio Waih's mediation of content is largely based on a secular educational background. However, they differ from the other independent actors by using a secular discourse challenging traditional gender norms and breaking with the conception of Muslim women as passive. In addition, Radio Waih stands out by including female hosts who mediate content not solely related to gender issues. In an interview with the co-founder Elias Rama, who now hosts the radio show *Det, muslimer taler om* (What Muslims Talk About) on the Danish radio channel 24syv, he criticizes Muslim online media for not including Muslim women in the public mediation. He states:

Frankly speaking, many of them [the women], they have experience, they have educations that may contribute to levels that many men are not capable of. Because in their generation, the ones in their 30s today, the ones who have studied at the universities and finished studies in Humanities and Social Science, they are women. So, they are the ones who may contribute the most in these cases, even being the most suitable ones. (Interview, Appendix 3.2, Amer 2021)

Radio Waih's mediation of gender norms correspond to a secular conception of gender equality, which is reflected in the discourse. The hosts of Radio Waih use secular language, their academic training, and an active involvement of their own Muslim identity to challenge traditional conceptions of gender (see also Kloos 2019). Although this is the only case that challenges traditional gender norms in the empirical selection, Radio Waih represents a position also existing among young Muslims in Denmark calling for a broader diversity in Muslim online media.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The radio channel stopped producing content in 2019, but a considered amount of content is still accessible.

## Arguments Against the West

A noticeable trend among several of the actors is their use of testimonies from everyday life to show the natural stature of traditional gender roles and how breaking with these will have serious consequences. Ideas of the emancipation of the individual, for example embodied in modern family structures, are being presented defying natural human nature. This is expressed in the following quotes by the Imams Aarsal Tahsin, Mohammad Khani, and Abdullah Abu Lifa:

There was a campaign in some newspapers showing how many Danish women don't feel that they are allowed to be a mother. They are not allowed to stay at home with their kids and take care of their family, (...) because of this career rush. (...) Yes, there are some by now who have a lot of nannies who take care of their children and then they leave for work themselves. You can put it this way: this family structure – as the modern family structure – it can be damaging, right? It can become damaging. (Recorded Khutba by Aarsal Tahsin, WAKF, 2020)

It is abuse, honor killing, and I don't know what... social control. They [Muslim feminists] use these emotionally charged notions to make it easier to manipulate people to think "if we are emancipated, then..." There is no emancipation in damaging a family! (YouTube: Dars by Mohammad Khani, Imam Ali Mosque, 2019).

While I was studying, I was a taxi driver, and I met a lot of people. (...) I was driving this young girl in her 30s, a schoolteacher. She entered the car, and she was crying. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me "I'm soon 35, and I'm unmarried, and I want children". (...) And of course, she was sad – she wanted a stable man. (YouTube: Khutba by Abdullah Abu Lifa, Danish Islamic Centre, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> However, one should be aware that studies containing examples of online Muslim actors who use secular discourses and scientific disciplines to support more radical and traditional interpretations exist (Abdel-Fadil 2012, Al-Rawi 2017, Moll 2010).

Criticism of modern family structures and alternative gender roles are also found in the category of the independent actors – in this case exemplified in the Family Podcast:

Women are taught to strive for a career. It is a problem if both men and women act like men, and no one takes

responsibility for the role of caring. (...) In Muslim homes, there are many families where it is the woman who “wears the pants” and is dominant. This is damaging for the families and creates imbalance. (Podcast by independent actors, 2020).

The word “damaging” is used several times in the examples above. In all cases, the word is associated with family structures challenging the traditional one. It is apparent how the actors are emotionally invested in the issue showing how something natural and fundamental will be damaged if traditional family structures are broken. Especially the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution use the everyday testimonies as a supplement to their theological argumentation, underlining the divine natural stature of traditional gender roles. By questioning ideas of emancipation and what a free will entails, often associated with “the West”, modern family structures are challenged as the “correct solution”. This creates a space for reconstructing notions such as gender equality and emancipation. These notions are typically perceived in a secular context in close connection with alternative and modern gender norms (Mahmood 2001, 208). The examples presented in the sections above show how the actors from both categories raise questions about the emancipation of the individual as exclusively positive, and furthermore, what the notion emancipation entails. By challenging modern gender norms and family structures, they form a narrative where traditional gender roles and family structures are mediated as a positive alternative and in line with their religious beliefs.

The examples above mirror existing literature on Islam and gender when questioning modern family structures as liberating and by seeing modern gender roles as “a threat” to the family. Studying female Muslim preachers, Roald presents several actors stating how the natural roles of the man being the provider and the woman being the caretaker secure a strong family structure and furthermore, how it is a part of the submission to Islam (Roald 2001, 252). Mahmood emphasizes in her studies of Muslim women in Cairo, how pious women constitute an ambivalent example for feministic scholars, when they freely follow practices and ideals that are embedded in a tradition that historically has assigned women a subordinate status (Mahmood 2001, 205). Additionally, in a study of Muslim female online accounts Alia Imtoula and Shakira Hussein find that the participants in the examined forums articulate a strict

“set of pressures related to maintaining moral conduct” in public and in the household (Imtoul and Hussein 2009, see also Piela 2015, Ahmed 2016).

Based on the examples above, it is convenient to consider the subscription to traditional gender norms as something Islamic in particular. However, there exists many aspects challenging this claim. Following Abu-Lughod (2013) one should be aware of the position of Muslims as minorities in the West. To be a Muslim in the West you are more visible as a minority and thus set to justify certain opinions and positions. Subscribing to gender roles that regard the man as the natural provider and the woman as caretaker of the home and children is also an attitude shared by non-Muslim families and associated with politically conservative parties (Schielke 2010). Thus, the statements above can also be seen as an example of how groups are judged as homogenous, based on an ideal self-image of one's own group (Roald 2001, 6). A relevant example of this is a trend among young non-Muslim women on Instagram, who aesthetically perform traditional women's work including knitting, cooking, cleaning, crocheting, and baking within a negotiation of what feminism contains and what aspirations should be considered feministic in the question of free will and emancipation (Cramon, Information, 12.11.2022).<sup>13</sup> These non-Muslim women do not face the same accusations of being oppressed compared to Muslim women articulating the same content (Peterson 2016, Abu-Lughod 2013, 45).

### Gender Equality – A Western idea?

In the following section, I will outline how the actors conceive and use the notion of gender equality – a term often associated with a Western secular context, where gender equality means equal opportunities in every aspect of society regardless of gender (Mahmood 2001, Abu-Lughod 2013). I will look further into how the actors' use of notions such as equal worth and gender equality are caught between a secular discourse and a theologically based interpretation. The following example is from an Islamic lecture by Imam Mohammad Khani, in which he compares Christian history of philosophy and Islam. He disassembles the need for a feministic re-interpretation of the Islamic texts by stating: “No, men and women are equal in Islam. It is one's consciousness of God that decides one's worth [and not

your gender]” (YouTube: Dars by Mohammad Khani, 2019). His argumentation presupposes a conception of gender equality that is based in theology. By presenting a theological interpretation of notions closely associated with a secular discourse, he manages to challenge discursive elements dominating terms such as gender equality (Mahmood 2001). This is further exemplified in the following:

There are many who believe, especially in the West, that many of the rights and the equality existing here [Denmark], is something that was handed to us by politicians or Western philosophers and so on. It is not. It is the women themselves who fought for them. Some of the greatest Christian philosophers were discussing whether women were human. (...) As you can see, this is Western philosophy, (...) but what does this have to do with Islam?” (YouTube: Dars by Mohammad Khani, 2019).

Khani uses “equality” in the context of Western women’s rights movement perceived as equal rights in society regardless of gender. He presents this movement as a positive development for Western women. Following Khani, the women’s movement was necessary in Christian countries due to the misogyny existing in Christian philosophy. According to Khani, the same women’s movement is not necessary within Islam since men and women are equal before God (unlike the Christian tradition). Hence, there is no need for a feministic re-interpretation of Islamic texts.<sup>14</sup> Following the work of Roald (2001) and in concordance with Edward Said (1979), Roald finds a great difference between how “the West” perceives Islam and how Muslims perceive Islam. Khani presents a different perception of the need for a women’s movement within Islam that reflects how, as a Muslim individual, he understands gender equality (van Es 2016, Waltorp and Ahmad 2019, Roald 2001). Another example of this discourse is from a YouTube series produced by the Imam Ali Mosque called *Islam Misunderstood*: “Islam establishes that men are not more human than women just because they are men and vice versa. But due to the physical and psychological differences between men and women, of course they have different responsibilities” (YouTube series: Islam Misforstået, Mohammad Khani, 2018).<sup>15</sup> Although this approach is predominant with the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution, it is also found among some independent actors – exemplified in the Family

<sup>14</sup> With reference to Danish Muslim feminists like Sherin Khankhan and the Muslim feminist tendency she represents (Petersen 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Similar theological approaches to gender equality are found among the other actors (Amer 2021, Appendix 3.4, 4.1, 5.2).

Podcast, where it is stated: “My understanding of the Quran is, that we are all put on earth by God as equals. And that is where the foundation should be.” (Podcast by independent actors, 2020). The actors articulate an understanding of gender equality as conditioned by one’s belief and worth before God. Such a conception of gender equality is examined in several previous studies showing how both religious Muslim men and women articulate and subscribe to this notion using the same mode of argumentation referring to Hadith literature and the Quran (Roald 2001, 150-161, Piela 2015, Minganti 2011).

This interpretation of the notion gender equality is opposed to a secular conception in which a liberal idea of free will is embedded (Mahmood 2001, 207). Following Peterson (2016) and Abu-Lughod (2013), one may argue that the actors presented above challenge the “Western” narrative of saving Muslim women from Islam. By approaching gender equality based on a theological concept, the actors that were studied manage to create an argument that confronts the dominating perception of gender equality, while presenting Islam as fundamentally feminist. In these examples, the idea of men and women as equals, which holds feminist, secular, and liberal connotations, is connected to the essence of Islam and used as an argument for maintaining traditional gender roles. Thus, the actors find themselves operating between two spheres – a religious and a secular one, where traditional family structures and gender roles are legitimized by emphasizing the theological equality of the sexes as part of Islam’s fundamental values using a secular terminology. Hence, competing conceptions of notions such as gender equality and equal worth coexist in the actors’ mediation. This has the potential to form a conflict of communication between the mediator and the recipient (Roald 2001, 5).

## Reflections

Based on the actors studied in this article, I find a predominant subscription to traditional gender roles and family structures across the two categories of independent actors and actors affiliated with a Muslim institution. Following Schielke each actor represents different Muslim individuals and by their mediation of Islamic media, they all play a small part in representing what it is to be a Muslim. However, their mediation of gender roles should not be regarded as something especially Islamic

<sup>13</sup> Instagram profiles like @Ekatharinaandersen, @Annesofieiversen, @forstadsmor.dk and @hjemmearbejderne.

(Schielke 2010, 44). What is additionally noticeable regarding all the actors studied, is their common awareness of their position in relation to the non-Muslim majority. As Echchaibi notes “what is certain in a post 9/11, globalized era is that ordinary Muslims, and not only religious scholars, are being called to explicitly define what it is to be a Muslim” (Echchaibi 2008, 200). This has caused a need for individual Muslims to define what Islam is to them, and furthermore, how to re-invent the tradition (ibid., 203). The content mediated by the actors studied should not be regarded as a general trend, since several studies exist concluding the opposite when examining online Muslim actors mediating content challenging traditional gender norms.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless one may argue that the actors take part in a trend forming a new tradition and development of Islamic mediation. This builds on the legacy of Muslim voices playing with secular and religious boundaries, like television preachers and talk show hosts Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Mustafa Hosn (Moll 2020, Echchaibi 2008). Whereas satellite-television has played a central part in the development of Islamic media, the architecture of social media has made content mediated by new Muslim voices more available and personal (Hirschkind 2016).

Following the dominating discourse articulated by the actors subscribing to traditional gender norms, it is easy from a “Western” secular perspective to perceive it as an affirmation of the existing negative stereotypes about Muslims being patriarchal, oppressive of women, and having difficulties reconciling with modern family structures (van Es 2016, Roald 2001, Walторp and Ahmad 2019). However, following Mahmood (2001) and Abu-Lughod’s (2013) critique of the “Western” conception of Islam and what Mahmood calls “secular-liberal” discourses dominating the West, it is possible to challenge these stereotypes and obtain a more detailed perspective on the actors studied (Mahmood 2001, 205). Hence, I wish to draw attention to the religiosity of the actors and how it interacts with their mediation. Mahmood (2011) sheds light on how acts of piety among religious Muslim women in Cairo contain aspects of emancipation and fulfillment of the self. The same approach may be applied in the examination of the actors studied here by looking beyond the maintenance of a patriarchal system as the primary motivation of the actors and instead considering how piety might play a role in the actors’ mediation. Mahmood (2001) emphasizes the tendency among Western countries to simplify

16 E.g., the podcast and Instagram profile Skamløs by af Souha Al-Mersal (1500 followers) and the Instagram profile Hijabigoneglobal (14000 followers). See Piela 2012, Robinson 2015, Tarlo 2010, Lövheim 2012, Sæthre 2020, Walторp 2015, van Es 2019.



discourses regarding Muslim and non-Western women, reducing them to oppressed subjects without agency and differences – or, as Waltorp and Ahmad (2019) note, Muslims who do not fulfill this idea are perceived as the exception. Following Abu-Lughod (2013), this has led to a Western savior complex embedded in a discursive Western narrative of Muslim women who need to be saved from Islam. In addition, these discursive tendencies contribute to the perception that Muslim men have a deliberate agenda of oppressing women, without taking into account their actual intentions. However, one may argue that the subscription to traditional gender norms contains an aspect of religious freedom embedded in the actors' genuine belief in a divine natural stature of traditional gender roles. This is especially evident when considering the actors affiliated with a Muslim institution. From this perspective, the mediated gender norms should not be understood as a contribution to a patriarchal system, but as an act of submission and devotion to the actors' religious beliefs. According to Mahmood, we cannot presume that Western moral and appreciation of emancipation are the only concepts that constitute the foundation of a dignified understanding of human beings (Mahmood 2001, 225).

However, the discourses used by the studied actors may potentially contribute to a practice that suppresses Muslim women, as their argumentation makes it difficult for religious individuals to challenge traditional gender norms without committing an offence against God's order of nature. Yet, as mentioned above, there exists a possibility that the actors' statements may be shaped by a sincere devotion to their religious beliefs. Thus, they do not operate according to liberal ideals assigned by the surrounding secular society. Thereby, one may argue that religion, or certain interpretations of it, is patriarchal and oppressive of women, but this may not be attributed to the agenda of the individual actor. The patriarchal interpretation of such discourses should instead be addressed from a much larger and more structural perspective considering the historical and cultural moorings of all discourses and analytical frameworks (Mahmood 2001, Abu-Lughod 2013). By perceiving the religious conception of the actors studied as authentic, they can be released of a misogynist agenda, even though it is possible to interpret the content as a contribution to a retention of patriarchal structures.

While a critique of “Western” secular discourses and liberal moorings are essential when studying Islam, Schielke (2010) points to the equal importance of approaching Islam through the life of individual Muslims being influenced by trends, politics, and people. Thus, the actors, and especially the independent actors, may also be perceived as part of a conservative movement, wanting to maintain traditional family values and gender roles – opinions also shared by non-Muslims (see also Kandiyoti 2019, Roald 2001). Hence, the analyzed content entails several aspects of complex and multidimensional motives which can vary between the actors. However, the actors across both categories share the common feature of mediating traditional gender roles and family structures in a positive way no matter their individual motivations.

## Conclusive Remarks

The online actors affiliated with a Muslim institution and the actors independent of such use discourses subscribing to traditional gender norms; with the exception of Radio Waih. The dominating discourse across both categories is based on the natural stature of traditional gender roles providing the best preconditions for family life. However, the actors use different modes of argumentation. The actors affiliated with a Muslim institution make use of arguments based on theological reasoning conceptualizing traditional gender roles as part of a divine natural order. This means that men and women are equal before God resulting in gender equality being one of Islam’s fundamentals. This mode of argumentation challenges a secular conception of gender equality as adopted in most Western contexts. The independent online actors build their arguments around a secular, academic discourse using their educational training as the foundation for their mediation (with one exception). From this position traditional gender norms are subscribed as positive features. Following these modes of argumentation, the actors from both categories question modern family structures, a secular perception of gender equality, and the emancipation of the individual as exclusively positive. By challenging modern gender norms as “the correct solution”, the actors create a space for reconstructing locked concepts of gender equality and emancipation. A common feature across both

categories is a use of fluctuating secular aesthetics and discourses at different levels supporting a fluidity between the religious and the secular ideas in Islamic mediation.

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