

Locating Women and the Expansion of Islamic Morality in the New Turkey: Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the formation of new Muslim female selves in New Turkey. Drawing on Sehlikoglu and Kütük-Kuriş's separate longitudinal field research conducted in Istanbul since the early 2000s, this chapter explores how Muslim women navigate the political and socio-economic transformations that Turkey underwent during the AKP rule. It critically engages with the existing literature on Muslim women that adopts limited tropes, overlooking the intricate ways in which Muslim women's desire for agentive, consumerist and entrepreneurial lifestyles complicate notions of modernity and extend the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy. The chapter focuses on Muslim women's aspirations in the realms of leisure, highlighting how they propose diverse and contested interpretations within the realm of Islamic morality. While recognizing that these performances do not necessarily align with the dominant feminist clusters, we centralize women's own interpretations which complicate the underlying thesis of gendered Islam. We contribute to the literature on Muslim women's subjectivity and resonate with anthropological and sociological scholarship on Muslim geographies worldwide, underscoring the fluidity, multiplicity, and multifaceted aspect of self-making in the lives of Muslim women.

Keywords

Women, Islam, gender, modernity, morality, piety, desire, subjectivity, social change, Turkey

Introduction

In her book *Working Out Desire* Sertaç Sehlikoglu, one of the coauthors of this chapter, reflects upon an art piece she came across on an in-flight magazine. The piece was titled "Impossible Dream" by Palestinian artist Laila Shawa. The painting depicts ten women wearing vibrant burqas, each of them holding an ice cream cone loaded with scoops that they are unable to consume due to their facial coverings. The only features still visible are their closed, probably dreaming, almond-shaped eyes, which are rimmed in dark kohl, and their fisted hands, holding ice cream cones. They were holding ice cream, but they were not able to eat it due to their face veils. When Sehlikoglu first came upon this piece of art, she had already presented portions of her research at various conferences. Despite thorough ethnographic explanations of her chosen topic—exercising Istanbulite women—after her academic talks and presentations, she consistently faced similar somewhat narrow questions. Narrowness lies in the expectation that any research project focusing on women who happen to be Muslim should centralize religion: the degree of women's devotion to Islam; whether gym goers are exclusively secular (because religious women are "supposed" to attend mosques, not gyms); how precisely they tie their *örtü*¹ (scarf) while exercising and whether the chosen style might be a sign of their level of devoutness. Shawa's painting led to one of those exceptional "eureka" moments: it beautifully captures the most obvious challenge in describing the new Muslim selves [Sehlikoglu \(2021\)](#) and [Kütük-Kuriş \(2025\)](#) write about: that is to think about Muslim women differently through the multiplicity and complexity of their self-making processes, including their desires. Having the words Muslim women and desire in the same sentence was incomprehensible, not for any reason other than the way Islam and desire were imagined. In the same imaginaries, on the other hand, Islam—especially gendered Islam—is a long-lasting, conservative, and nonliberal faith that forbids women from following their fleeting impulses and demands piety and modesty in their place.

Desire marks everyday aspirations, joys, and pleasures—not however easily fitting into the way Muslim women are imagined and constructed in the existing anthropological and sociological thinking. Embedded in the Cartesian logic, religion is in the sacred realm, whereas the desires are in the profane. The persistently limiting questions stemmed from this dualist thinking, which we admittedly find frustrating. Thinking about Muslim women's subjectivities and subject-making processes through desire was therefore ungrammatical, to say the least. Islam is said to erect obstacles in the lives of women; if they do not stand up against it, Islam will prevent women from experiencing desire, joy, and pleasure. This perspective carries two basic assumptions.

The first assumption is built on the premise that desire frees individuals from realms of control. However, as the new anthropology of desire has demonstrated, desire is formed through social and even historical processes ([Joseph 2005](#); [Rofel 2007](#); [Sehlikoglu 2021](#); [Schäfers 2022](#)). The second assumption is that religion offers a normative control mechanism and allocates no room for individual improvisations, another limiting perspective that a number of scholars on gendered Islam have successfully refuted ([Boellstorff 2005a, 2005b](#)). It is at this point we join the recent scholarship that directs our attention away from the piety-oriented self-making and subjectivation theories (e.g., [Fadil 2009](#); [Huq 2009](#); [Mahmood 2005](#)) and instead aim to understand the fluidity, multiplicity, and multifaceted aspect of self-making in the lives of Muslim women by focusing on the realms of desire—namely, leisure and fashion ([Deeb and Harb 2013](#); [Le Renard 2014](#); [Gökarıksel and Secor 2012](#); [Rana 2022](#); [Sehlikoglu 2014a, 2015b, 2021](#); [Khalili 2015](#); [Kütük-Kuriş 2025](#); [Korkman 2023](#)).

As it is in most of the social science research, the scholarship on this very multiplicity of self-making processes has evolved in the last two decades after the “new selves” started being more visible. The changing public visibility of Muslim women and the “rising” desire for beauty have been an object of fascination by scholars and lay people of diverse political inclinations across the Muslim world ([Kütük-Kuriş 2021; 2025](#); [Ünal 2019](#); [Crăciun 2017](#); [Gökarıksel and Secor 2016](#); [Altınay 2013](#); [Tarlo and Moors 2013](#); [Lewis 2013](#); [Werbner 2011](#); [Gökarıksel and Secor 2010a, 2010b](#); [McLarney 2009](#); [Moors 2009](#); [Mears 2008](#); [Huq and Rashid 2008](#); [Osella and Osella 2007](#); [Yaqin 2007](#); [Moors 2007](#); [Balasescu 2007](#); [Jones 2007](#); [Abaza 2006](#); [Kılıçbay and Binark 2002](#); [McRobbie 1997](#); [Al-Qasimi 2010](#); [Sehlikoglu 2015a](#)). Indeed, in the last two decades or so, just like other women in the Middle East, Turkish women have occupied discourses and practices around Islam and morality while women themselves were simultaneously embracing realms of desire in their leisure performances and other quotidian activities. Based on the work of the two coauthors, Sertaç Sehlikoglu's work on desiring self-making (2021) and [Merve Kütük-Kuriş's \(2025\)](#) book *Refashioning Muslims*, this chapter explores the formation of new selves across Muslim Turkish women within and beyond debates on Islam and morality. It does so by focusing on women outside of domestic and religious spheres, which might often be spaces of leisurely self-making, in order to move beyond the preoccupation with piety. Sehlikoglu's interlocutors who exercise in women-only spaces—only slightly more than half of whom are wearing headscarves—continuously, verbally, and sometimes performatively remind us of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of their desires. Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors in fashion entrepreneurship aimed to appeal to young headscarf-wearing women with different tastes and aspirations, and in so doing broaden and flex the definition of “Muslim chic” long controlled by religious male intelligentsia and devout male entrepreneurs. Both research foci are significant enough to create their own industries, terminologies, trends, and various enthusiasms and fads attached to them. In this chapter, we make use of the intangible connections between the two avenues of research to reflect on two matters: (1) how they both reflect an expansion of Islamic morality in the New Turkey and its significance among women, and (2) the limits and merits of anthropological and sociological thinking in the broader debates of Muslimhoods and Muslim subjectivities.

The Changing Landscape of Islam in Turkey

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has witnessed a significant transformation in its political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. One of the most salient aspects of this transformation has been the increasing visibility and influence of Islam in various spheres of public life, including politics, economy, media, education, and cultural production ([Akınerdem 2019](#); [Emanet 2023](#); Tuğal [2009](#), [2016](#); [Yeşil 2016](#); [White 2012](#)). Muslim Turkish women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, professions, and generations have become the favorite target for these Islamically inspired structural changes ([Adak 2021](#); [Dedeoğlu and Elveren 2012](#)). Although Muslim women's increasing public visibility has proven that the existing categorizations are unable to grasp the complex daily performances of Muslim women with or without a headscarf, thereby putting the divide between secularism and Islamism under critical scrutiny, there are still terminological and analytical limitations in analyzing Turkey's transformation in the last two decades, particularly its gendered Islam.

A notable aspect of this change has occurred in women's leisure-time physical activities, specifically sports. The number of women-only sports centers, step-aerobics, Pilates, Zumba classes, and swimming pools has risen in the metropolis of Istanbul. Between the years 2005 and 2012, the number of women-only gyms had increased twentyfold. Municipality-run sports centers accommodated nearly one million women in 2011 ([Sehlikoglu 2021](#)). Concurrent with this emergent trend, a number of private chains of women-only gyms and all of the thirty-three public municipal sports centers² in Istanbul are now offering women-only hours, spaces, and courses where no male participant or staff are allowed to enter or even see women exercising from outside. These facilities are accessible for women from different levels of income, including the lower class. The interest of women is so pervasive that even women's charities have been replacing the classical handicraft classes with Pilates sessions, carefully tailored for the women-only demands of their customers, by altering and obscuring windows and the entrances in their venues.

The majority of users of these women-only facilities wear headscarves. During 2008 and 2009, the proportion of headscarf-wearing women was as high as 70 percent, given the fact that the common characteristic of women who prefer to exercise in such segregated spaces is to have normative concerns related to their body movements in mixed spaces, which lead them either to exercise in a homosocial space or to limit those movements if they exercise in a public one. On one hand, the recent popularity of exercise among women from different walks of life and their similar concerns over the boundaries of modesty has demonstrated that headscarf-wearing women do not have a natural monopoly on Islam and morality. On the other, this has manifested how headscarf-wearing women balance faith and their physical aspirations, thereby countering reductionist approaches linking headscarf-wearing women exclusively with the use of *seccade* (the prayer mat), and nonheadscarf-wearing women with secularism and the use of the Pilates mat ([Göle 2013](#)).

Another important development has taken place in the realm of fashion production. Following the gradual lifting of the ban on the headscarf, headscarf-wearing women began to broaden their career horizons—shifting from the fields of social sciences (e.g., politics, sociology, law) to creative industries (e.g., design, crafts, film, music). Kütük-Kuriş's focus on Muslim female fashion entrepreneurs, or Muslim fashionistas, between 2013 and 2021 provides a compelling illustration of young women who achieved remarkable success in the textile business. Most astonishingly, they reversed the prevailing Islamic norms concerning the Muslim female body hitherto regulated by Muslim male businessmen. Most fashionistas adopt headscarves in a great variety of forms (e.g., classical Turkish style pinned under the chin, shawls, turban, bandana). Different from the conservative approaches adopted by the previous male investors ([Kılıçbay](#)

and Binark 2002; Sandıkçı and Ger 2007), most fashionistas also opted to act as professional models as a marketing strategy to reach out to young and urbanite Muslim customers. The majority of them belong to the Islamic bourgeoisie, although there are fashionistas who have entered the market thanks to their education, and desire for upward social mobility. Despite their differing backgrounds, they achieve great economic success in the industry.

Muslim fashionistas have underlined the increasing visibility of Muslim women in the public sphere, which calls for a diversely rich wardrobe accommodating their needs for a variety of occasions (e.g., office, special gatherings, weekend getaways, gym, and outdoor sports). Importantly, they express an increasing desire among young Muslim women for presenting their selves according to different tastes—namely feminine, preppy, bohemian, vintage, and sporty. The diversity of their views on “Muslim chic” similarly affects the ways in which they understand and make meanings about the norms of Islamic morality. Some fashionistas follow a similar line to male owners of headscarf-design companies regarding the “right” balance between Islamic piety and fashion. They, therefore, mimic piety-oriented self-making theories requesting women to control their worldly cravings. An editor of an Islamic fashion and lifestyle magazine, Hayat³ (32), exemplifies this perspective. As a graduate in Islamic theology, she articulately opposes the portrayal of Muslim women in “improper” attire, such as bonnets or bandanas (revealing women’s neck and hair) in the new generation modest fashion magazines, particularly the inaugural modest fashion magazine *Âlâ* (Sayan-Cengiz 2018). She stated: “We have a mission. Our magazine refrains from featuring public figures on the cover who misrepresent Islam. Our exclusive is on showcasing women who can serve as exemplary role models for society.” However, most fashionistas stand aloof from defining the ideal look for Muslim women. Instead, they opt for the notion of modesty and define it in an inclusionary way to house Muslim women with or without headscarf. This is because Muslim fashionistas knew that nonheadscarf-wearing women give similar attention to the male gaze, and continuously negotiate the norms of public sexuality, despite such negotiations being regarded as “poor” or “inappropriate” performances by the religious elite. Yet, many Muslim fashionistas provide a significant incentive, removing the question of modesty from the exclusive use of headscarf-wearing women. These developments even led to the opening of a shopping mall by a Muslim female entrepreneur to exclusively serve women (Kütük-Kuriş 2020). At this point, Sehlikoglu and Kütük-Kuriş’s research both highlight the growing significance of homosocial spaces for women, as well as the complex negotiations and interpretations surrounding societal norms related to public sexuality.

Understanding the “New Selves”

“It is still possible to see people surprised when they hear about a headscarf-wearing woman doing aerobics or even training aerobics in a gym,” says Ayşe Akbaş, the aerobics trainer of Altunizade Cultural Center. Women participants experience a fresh feeling of balance, health, and freedom for one hour every day. They also feel more productive and active. Although most of the course participants have not yet reached their ideal weights, they seem very eager and inspired to continue their aerobics courses. They experience a renewed sense of joy, and positive energy in their lives; and they experience less stress. They altogether seem more hopeful (Yılmaz 1997).

During the period in which Yılmaz authored this article, in the late 1990s, social science scholars were discussing the rise in new forms of Muslim female selves as somewhat awkward and even self-conflicting subjects (Arat 1989; Saktanber 2002; White 2002). A number of our interlocutors had found themselves in conversations where they were expected to explain their seemingly contradictory choices of self-fashioning. Seniha (44) remembers her college-level English instructor yelling at her, “Your headscarf is from Iran while your jeans are from America. You are in an identity crisis,” while cornering her on the corridors of her university.

The very imaginaries of this normative prevailing culture stated in the first page of this chapter have been haunting our interlocutors' everyday interactions at various degrees, in different terminologies, since the 1990s. Their responses to our questions as to "why" they do what they do, be it exercise or create or follow fashions, be it swim or wear make-up, have been informed by those haunting everyday conversations. Therefore, for us, they have been informative in understanding the very agentic processes of manifesting those new selves.

Elif (45), for instance, is a young, physically active woman. Since she likes swimming, she is a regular member of Okyanus (an upper-middle-class sports center with a swimming pool in Istanbul) and prefers to spend a couple of weeks every summer in different hotels that offer women-only pools and beaches to their customers. During one conversation about her swimming routine and the luxury facilities she enjoys, she said: "We have every right to have fun." Melahat (49) associates ugliness with fatness, in contrast with the older perception equating thinness with poverty and well-rounded bodies with fertility and feminine charm. She says that "It doesn't mean that I will not look after my body since I'm covering (it). We can do stuff like swimming, exercise, or aerobics just like anyone else. We can look pretty too." Elif and Melahat's statements refer to popular assumptions that *başörtüsü* is in fact a reflection of a primarily religious and/or traditional lifestyle which conflicts with any of the aforementioned desires. However, Elif and Melahat's keenness to exercise shows that new Muslim selves happily adopt neoliberal self-care discourses that positions individuals as equal moral members of the public, having "the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (Brown 2007, 5–6). In other words, exercising Muslim women position themselves as followers of global trends of female self-making. This is why they strongly defend their right to enjoy their free time and to craft fit and fashionable bodies in the same way as other urban women.

Similarly, Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors heavily criticize those who find them inconsistent as their entrepreneurial endeavor is regarded as blurring the Islamic morality rules concerning the female body. Feride (27) is a fashion designer and consultant to the headscarf-wearing businesswomen and MPs. She replied to her critics:

They see Islam and fashion as mutually exclusive categories, the former having fixed sets of rules, and the latter not having any rules at all, just changing trends. I do not find critics honest. For example, those attacking us, mostly devout people, change their cars when there is a new model available on the market. They redecorate their homes because they got inspiration from new interior design trends. They enjoy frequenting new and stylish cafés and restaurants. See, fashion extends beyond just clothing, permeating all aspects of our lives. Why are we the only ones to blame?

Feride's self-positioning, similar to Sehlikoglu's interlocutors, demonstrates a significant shift in the discourses of Islamic morality in Turkey. In the 1990s, scholars on public Islam identified clear boundary making mechanisms between the secular and Islamic lifestyles. Yet, when the researchers themselves wear headscarf, there is an immediate rapport established and the interlocutors do not calibrate themselves as distinctively different from the secular bodies. Rather, they focus on the parallels across the politically contrasting bodies. Rather than highlighting the boundaries, they demand recognition of their desiring leisurely selves that would not be too different from the secular bodies' desiring selves. The noticeable contrast in earlier studies can also be attributed to their exclusive scholarly emphasis on dedicated activists rather than recognizing ordinary Muslim subjects as equally worthy of investigation. Another essential aspect to consider is that the AKP rule brought about a significant transformation among Muslim practitioners in Turkey, specifically those in the middle and upper classes—some of whom strongly adhere to the Islamist movement. Since 2002, during the AKP's uninterrupted governance, Muslim practitioners have overcome their disadvantageous position in the public sphere. What is more, the AKP's clientelist ties with pious entrepreneurs in

various sectors have widened class differences among the Turkish society's devout sections (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014). This has resulted in the emergence of a new Islamic bourgeoisie sharing similar lifestyle choices with secular upper classes (e.g., in consumption patterns), and increasingly alienated from the Muslim masses. For instance, they follow famous fashion houses in the West and plan work and leisure trips to Europe for the weekends.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to highlight the difference in experiences between Sehlikoglu and Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors. The latter's informants were regarded as having greater potential to influence the decisions of young Muslim women due to their social media fame, which attributes them greater normative role in representing Islam. Allow us to elaborate. Critics of neoliberal theory argue that neoliberalism's discourse of individualism promotes the idea of individually responsible and self-sufficient and self-caring agents. This however refers to a "make-believe" world given the political, economic, and social constraints that exist. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of experts in various fields, such as healthy living, psychological well-being, child-rearing, and home improvement, who guide these very individuals (Rose 1992). Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors, for example, are not only fashion entrepreneurs but also lifestyle experts, who work hard not only to realize their own aspirations but also become inspiration for others. These include outfit tips, online make-up or skin care tutorials, healthy recipes, travel suggestions, and even relationship advice. This proves a major shift in the way urban Muslim women are perceived. The dichotomy between modernity and tradition has been largely replaced by the accusations of degenerating Muslim culture and tradition due to, as the charges continue, "excess" in Muslim women's embrace of modernity. In Sehlikoglu's (2016) terminology, Muslim fashionistas perform an act of daring *mahrem*⁴ (the intimate/sacred) as, in the 1990s or early millennial years, it was extremely unlikely for Muslim women to pursue modeling as a career, or expose their intimate lives to public consumption. They owe their choices to the individualist approach taken concerning Islam and morality. Although they do not generally accept that they "represent Islam," they cannot escape public criticism (Sehlikoglu 2014b, 2015c). They however challenge cultural assumptions and attributed roles; either verbally or performatively. Feride's story about a skull necklace is enlightening:

I wore a skull necklace in one of the fashion shoots. *Anadolu Ajansı* [a state-run news agency] ran a headline: "This does not suit the Islamic headscarf." Others commented, "How could a headscarf-wearing woman wear a satanic symbol?" But I wore that necklace not as an emblem of any ideology, but instead as a simple fashion statement. I really liked the color of it and wore it. My reply was: "If you insist on the symbolism of a skull, a skull reminds me of my mortality. We should all live as if we will die one day."

Feride's creative approach illustrates the fact that new Muslim selves do not simply imitate Western styles. They negotiate the "given" meanings of Western symbols or rituals, and employ appropriation strategies—religious appropriation in Feride's case. Such inventive tactics underscore the depth of knowledge required about Western subcultures. Scholars of popular culture have shown that rituals, styles, or objects of subcultures are quickly copied into popular culture by the market, thereby losing their capacity for contestation to mainstream culture (Hebdige 1979). Feride is well aware that the skull is no longer a symbol of protest, and can have multiple meanings. By ascribing a religious connotation to it, she innovatively distances herself from negative criticisms.

Similar innovative approach can be observed in Zerrin's strategy for using social media. Zerrin (28) is one of the first entrepreneurs who transformed fashion consultancy into a business model through social media. Her journey began with blog writing and extended to platforms like Facebook and Instagram where she rapidly gained public fame among young Muslim women. She provided content on achieving a stylish urban look with a headscarf and reinterpreting clothing that was considered inappropriate by Islamic modesty standards. The

following exchange between us illustrates Zerrin's individualistic response to criticisms concerning her adherence to the contours of the ideal Muslim woman:

Zerrin:

I reject the role of representing all Muslims. It is an incredibly heavy burden for an individual Muslim. I try to do my best, acknowledging that mistakes are normal and should not warrant public backlash ... I find some criticisms especially perplexing given that my social media accounts are woman-only spaces. I do not accept male followers on Facebook and Instagram.

Kütük-Kuriş:

It must be difficult though to distinguish whether your followers are women or men. Some men can impersonate women, right?

Zerrin:

Yes, it is possible. But I cannot control that. However, I control the content I share on Facebook and Instagram. I do not post the same content because there is a different audience socioeconomically and generationally on Facebook. I share more controversial content only on Instagram as audience there tends to be more tolerant.

Kütük-Kuriş:

What do you mean by controversial content?

Zerrin:

Instagram requires a smartphone, attracting a more educated and younger audience from well-off classes. It is my experience that they are more open to different opinions. Facebook, on the other hand, is frequented by older generations and those from lower class. My aim is not to label people. Do not get me wrong please. But I have tested this multiple times. Some photographs would be heavily criticized on Facebook, such as content revealing a bit of my hair or wrist, but the same photo does not elicit an admonishing effect at all. Thus, I carefully choose where to share what content. I do not want to give myself a headache after all.

Kütük-Kuriş:

What about your blog? I assume that is open to all.

Zerrin:

Yes, I cannot control that either. Also, I do not want to. This may seem contradictory. But my blog is the only medium for reaching a broad audience—an essential aspect of expanding my business.

As one of the early entrants to Islamic fashion industry, Zerrin reflects on the early state of social media in the first half of the 2010s. While smartphone usage has surged since then, facilitated by the digitalization of commerce and public administration via e-government services (*e-devlet*) in Turkey, the effectiveness of Zerrin's strategy of curating the two social media platforms differently is debatable today. Notably, Facebook lost its initial popularity among Muslim fashionistas and Instagram became their primary online advertising space. Despite the rapidly evolving landscape of social media management strategies, Zerrin's early use of social media and its potential to expand the boundaries of Islamic morality remains significant. The tailoring of her social media content does not indicate complete indifference to social criticisms. Instead, it highlights the need for thoughtful decisions on what and when to share on each platform, demonstrating Zerrin's dynamic interpretation of what is deemed Islamically proper while considering her individual circumstances.

From Duality to Multiplicity: "We have always been Modern"

As women's bodies were perceived as the visible marker of the Turkish national change during the early republican period, women's veiled, loose, out of shape, peasantry/rural, and therefore Islamic, old, and traditional look is located at the one end of the spectrum while their unveiled, fit, healthy, well-postured, and therefore modern, Western, young and secular look, is put at the other; where the latter one is propagated over the former. What we call the early republican

split not only shaped women's aspirations related to education, appearance, and fitness but also placed them under contestation in the subsequent years. Clearly, the bifurcation of the views related to the content of what it takes to be the ideal Turkish woman in this period have evolved and become complicated over time. Yet, body and gender roles have remained at the center of this contestation.

[Lara Deeb \(2006\)](#) has previously discussed the problematic of perceiving believing subjects as traditional. To explore the limitations of modernity as a conceptual framework, Deeb has suggested the term modern-ness in the anthropology of Islam in order to point out the state of being attracted to achieving the status of "modern." She defined "modern-ness" as an enchanting quality in and of itself which also allowed her to analyze the idea of the "pious modern," particularly as it relates to Muslim women, as encompassing the desire to subvert or deny the validity of patriarchal claims to hegemonic narratives (e.g., narratives of Islam in which male-dominated ritual practices are seen as the norm), public space, and "authentic" Islamic tradition. [Deeb's \(2006\)](#) book on Lebanese Shi'a Muslim women in the neighborhood of al-Dahiyya in Beirut explores the spiritual and social lives, social-activist attitudes, and "pious modern" identities and ideals of these women by decoding such notions as public piety, modern volunteerism, and faith-based activism. Deeb's idea of the "enchantment" of modern-ness has two aspects: one, the essentialization of Western modernity by the speaking subject, or interlocutor, and two, the tendency to contextualize one's own practices of modernity, which ultimately engenders multiple (even contradictory) articulations and understandings of the modern and modern-ness.

Such an analysis joins ongoing discussions about Muslim modernity in the social sciences, particularly those that take up the question of how practices commonly associated with modernity are being refashioned (or represented) in terms that are meaningful within Islamically oriented frameworks of understanding. Many studies continue to assume a view of modernity based on the erroneous notion that it is rooted in the adoption of progressive technological and cultural practices alike (hence, assuming practices like sex segregation to be unmodern). These studies often position Muslim women as being fascinated by the dream of being perceived as modern, prosperous, and progressive, and describe how this orchestrated theater turns into "an economy of appearances" ([Tsing 2000](#), 118) centered on conjuring—which is loaded with the hope, and desire. However, the perceived (and somewhat imposed) duality contrasts with the multiplicity observed in our fieldworks. As Muslim women pursue sports, fashion, and leisure activities, they do not strive for "becoming modern" nor do they feel an obligation to choose between modernity and Islamic practices. Thus, we believe the problem arises from the framing: modernity may not be the most convenient approach to understanding how Muslims navigate an Islamically oriented life in contemporary neoliberal times.

Many of Sehlikoglu's interlocutors see their lifestyle as an example of modernity and reject the idea that their religiously appropriated choices needed to be questioned in terms of modern-ness or its contemporary equivalents. Deniz (40) says, "a Muslim is not disconnected from life, is she? The Prophet did everything including racing with his wife as well as trade. There is no such thing as to pray and fast all day and night." Another interlocutor, Nazlı (33) was more responsive to her question about modernity and Islam. Nazlı interpreted Sehlikoglu's words as if she was questioning the possibility of being a modern *başörtülü* woman. She said:

So am I progressive or not ("gerici")⁵ based on the scarf on my head? I have been *başörtülü* for several years and I am more modern than those who do not cover (their heads). I come here at least three times a week, take care of my body, follow social activities (in the city), I have a job... I don't think these kinds of motives are related to being *başörtülü* or not; it has to come from within.

Here, Nazlı not only tells us how passionate she is in striving for a modern lifestyle, but more importantly, she defines her particular understanding of modernity and its requirements: exercising, following social activities, and working in a paid job. The women Sehlikoglu talked to in 2008 have a hunger to navigate their multiple subject positionings as modern and religious at the same time, and they do this in part through participating in activities traditionally considered to be within the realm of the “masculine.” Thus, it would be challenging to understand how Sehlikoglu’s interlocutors negotiate their multiple and dynamic subjectivities if we insist on categorizing their Islamic demands as “traditional.” The terminological inadequacy in reflecting the multiplicity and fluidity of Muslim subject-formation processes became more apparent in Sehlikoglu’s study in the following years (2012) as well as in [Kütük-Kuriş’s \(2025\)](#) recent longitudinal study on Muslim fashionistas.

For example, Kütük-Kuriş’s research reveals a shift in attitudes toward the Islamic leisure venues of the 1990s (e.g., halal hotels providing women-only pool and spa facilities, alcohol-free restaurants with designated prayer rooms). They have lost their early appeal because new Muslim subjects take equal pleasure in spending time in non-Islamic environments (e.g., hotels without gender-segregated amenities, and restaurants that serve alcohol). The transformation is linked to the rapid growth of the consumerist market and the normalization of the Muslim lifestyle, particularly wearing the headscarf, under AKP rule. Headscarf-wearing influencer Zerrin recounted this change: “I am currently studying fashion at the Istanbul Moda Academy [a private fashion school]. After class, we hang out in Nişantaşı [an upscale district in Istanbul]. When I am at cafés or shops, I do not feel like anyone is staring at me. Maybe I do not care anymore. When I was younger, those things used to bother me a lot.” İnci (23) joined Zerrin with a similar tone, and provided a list of criteria for vacations:

For holidays, what I prioritize is whether the hotel offers activities for children, a variety of world cuisine, and access to a nice beach with clear water. I am not particularly concerned with whether the hotel follows Islamic guidelines as what matters most is receiving high-quality service. Of course, this is thanks to the political changes. When I was a small girl, my mother and other headscarf-wearing women felt unwelcome and out of place. But now, even if I dress in a full *ferace* (a long-sleeved, ankle-length, loose coat), I no longer receive negative attention. Muslim fashionistas have the ability to connect with ordinary Muslim women, some addressing a million online followers, potentially influencing the way everyday Muslims perceive and express themselves. They were often sought after for guidance, particularly on how to navigate public spaces, such as public beaches or non-Islamic holiday destinations. An entrepreneurship coach and headscarf-wearing lifestyle blogger Sevinç (33) said the following in an encouraging talk to her Instagram followers:

While there may still be an occasional disapproving gaze or negative comments directed towards headscarf-wearing beachgoers, particularly on the Eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey, it is not a widespread trend. In these moments, I talk to my boys about the importance of showing respect and not marginalizing others. I do this loudly so that those who are targeting us feel ashamed of their behavior. It is important not to let these isolated incidents stop you from enjoying the beauty of our country. This is why I share my travel route, highlighting and rating public beaches. We have every right to enjoy beaches and swim in clean waters. This is our country.

Sevinç’s rights-based discourse, demanding equality for her headscarf-wearing body in public, is reminiscent of [Budgeon’s \(2003\)](#) critical engagement with the theorization of the relationship between the self and the body, where the body is interpreted as open to human intervention. Budgeon argues that feminist theorizing has often rested upon a mind and body division that delineates an understanding of embodied identity; and offers a new feminist approach to focus on “what bodies can do” instead of what bodies mean. This theoretical intervention sheds light on Sevinç’s response to any criticism she may receive due to what her

appearance meant to others. Through this critical lens, Sevinç and other Muslim women in our studies reject any attempt to diminish their agentic capacity. Instead, they claim their equal right to participate in society on their own terms.

Obviously, women's performative critiques are not only toward the conventional secularist perspective but also aimed at the popular Islamic view that proper Muslim women should not engage in sports or fashion. Sehlikoglu's sports enthusiast interlocutor Asuman (37) says she sees no reason why she can't fulfill her Islamic obligations and engage in physical exercise as some religious men do. "Nobody is surprised when men go out to play sports or football. Why should any of those [people] be weird when I do them? I am sorry if it surprises anyone, but I can cook and do ironing at home, then can come here and do aerobics." Asuman compares her situation with men to challenge gender asymmetry in popular Islam. Muslim fashionistas' famous social media activities, such as marketing a new outfit or chatting with followers while applying make-up, can similarly be regarded as performative criticisms of gendered Islam. Kütük-Kuriş's many interlocutors often face criticism for their vibrant clothing designs. The critiques are rooted in the belief that lively colors contradict the purpose of Islamic veiling which seeks to divert attention away from the female body. Colorful attire is viewed as a contradictory performance. However, the use of colorful clothing has been part of the Islamic fashion market since its formation in the 1990s. Feride defends her incorporation of colors into her designs, stating:

I recently designed a *haute couture* dress for a kermes (charity bazaar), drawing inspiration from colors and patterns found in Iznik (Ottoman handmade) pottery. The harmony of colors is inherent to our Muslim-Turkish culture. Hence, I believe Turkish women should not and, in fact, do not prefer plain and dull colors. My customers are highly satisfied with my offerings, and I often take their preferences into account when designing for new seasons. I genuinely fail to comprehend how these criticisms overlook our rich history and the deep appreciation Turkish women have for their heritage.

Similar to her inventive analysis of how Western symbols and rituals integrated into Turkish popular culture, Feride's defense of colorful fashion designs is innovative. It counters criticisms that accuse her of undermining Turkish culture and youth. By invoking the significance of color in Ottoman-Turkish cultural history, she strategically resurrects the authenticity argument, diminishing the critical impact of her detractors. In this way, Feride demonstrates her expertise in Western cultural elements and those of Ottoman-Turkish origin. Additionally, it is not an overinterpretation to argue that Feride indirectly challenges the distinction between what is considered Western or modern and what is not, thereby questioning the very concept of modernity. Nevertheless, these acts should not be quickly named feminist aspirations. Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors develop a distant attitude toward feminism, encapsulated in Feride's statement:

I believe that working women emit a positive energy that contributes to the well-being of their family. This is not feminism, as I do not have a feminist attitude. However, I see nothing wrong with being a successful businesswoman.

Despite the increasing number of young Muslim fashion entrepreneurs, there is still a significant internal debate about what constitutes appropriate practices for Muslim women in the fashion industry. While they share very similar projects of desiring and self-making, some interlocutors in Kütük-Kuriş's research explicitly subscribe to the piety-oriented subjectivity projects. Fashion designer Feza (38), for example, defends the perfectionist self-making view: "Muslims are encouraged to resist their worldly desires, which can be particularly challenging in the face of numerous stimuli in everyday life. However, indulging in things like fashion cannot be used as a justification for any wrongdoing." Differing perspectives on gendered Islam, such as "what makes an ideal Muslim woman," or whether Muslim women have a

representative status of Islam—a status that is seldom attributed to Muslim men—illustrate the diversity within the new Muslim female subjectivities.

One of the central questions to be addressed is related to the earlier debates and cultural/religious contradictions regarding women's physicality, bodies, appearance, and public visibility. In this case, the body becomes a contested site to “earn” privileged gendered rights; the new empowered gender becomes rehearsed like a script, and a new identity is brought to life through performative discourse. With their desires to access modern facilities, engage in sports, look fit and fashionable, and have fun framed as “rights,” they actually engage in “speech acts” that serve as embodied strategies. They repeatedly and consistently assert that they are modern and have the right to be and become beautiful. Furthermore, they utilize their bodies by beautifying them and keeping them in shape and presenting them in public. Through discursive practices or performative acts of speaking, *başörtülü* women attempt to create a new reality in response to the patriarchal conventions and ideologies surrounding them. This nicely fits into the argument of [Castoriadis \(1997\)](#) that suggests these “gender acts” create a new sense of independent and self-willed subjectivity ([Sehlikoglu 2015d](#)) through performativity and enact a new body through material changes in the bodily self.

Gendered Selves in the New Turkey: Ethical yet Desiring

Our interlocutors' quest for life, and their desires, often start with a simple *why not* question, all tailored to take place and be performed within the limits of ethical norms. With reference to the cultural context, the bodily movements of women are coded as sexual; therefore these codes limit women's public behaviors and movements. Sehlikoglu's interlocutors, as *başörtülü* women, control their sexuality in the public space, in accordance with the gendered norm prevalent in Turkey. A woman is expected to stay within the “modesty realm” in the mixed-gender public sphere and behave like a well-mannered lady (*hanım*—the word itself denotes politeness and appropriateness). This social pressure is usually stronger for a *başörtülü* woman since, by putting the headscarf on, she silently declares that she will limit her sexuality in public. Therefore, they control their posture and bodily movements when they are in public spaces. A segregated women-only space provides freedom to them. As Sevgi (39) stated very clearly, while explaining her reason to choose a women-only gym: “*Burada bakanımız edenimiz yok* (There is no one to look at us and disturb us here).” Another interlocutor said, she “wouldn't leap or jump” in public. They feel more liberated, freed from the limiting male gaze that controls female bodies by continuous surveillance.

Another important dimension concerning the customers of women-only gyms is that they have an ambivalent relationship with contemporary fashions. On one hand, they desire to appear fit, healthy, and thin; but on the other hand, they use the homosocial space of these gyms (and their changing rooms) to verify their skepticism about being able to achieve such looks. On this point, there is an interesting contrast between Sehlikoglu and Kütük-Kuriş's informants given that Muslim fashionistas have successfully built a business model that promotes fit and thin appearances. Despite criticisms of the sexualization of Muslim women's looks, Muslim fashionistas find pleasure not only in the way they dress but also in the success of their enterprise as a whole. Nevertheless, this does not imply that they disregard ethical concerns stemming from Islamic values. Here, nonheadscarf-wearing fashion designer Feraye's (34) concerns are telling:

I prefer casual style in natural colors and plain designs such as jeans paired with a shirt or sweatshirt. I like to add accessories like a bag, earrings, and bracelets to make the look more interesting. I also make sure to take care of my hair to achieve an “effortless chic.” However, many high street brands, both local and international, manufacture tops that are too short or revealing. I prefer to cover my hips and avoid low-cut pieces. This was frustrating for me, so I started my own brand that produces oversized sweatshirts, long high-neck t-shirts.

Feraye's journey into the fashion industry corresponds well with the modesty concerns of Sehlikoglu's interlocutors, whether they wear a headscarf or not, when in public. As stated, some adopt to perfectionist approach, and thus view manufacturing and wearing a non-Islamic dress as ethically wrong. Others acknowledge the challenge of defining clear boundaries. Sühan (27), a fashion designer who exclusively produces *ferace*, believes that it is the most appropriate garment for Muslim women. Still, she recognizes the complexities posed by the market and the diverse needs and preferences of consumers: "I faced criticisms even when using a professional model, as some felt the outfit was tight and not in line with Islamic dress code... But I concluded that advertising my products through a fashion shoot is acceptable. The consumers do not have to copy everything they see in the shoot. They are free to make their own decisions regarding clothing."

Our work on ethical yet desiring Muslim selves in the new Turkey is in conversation with the earlier works on leisure and gender in other Muslim contexts as well. [Walseth and Fasting \(2003\)](#), for instance, discuss the interpretations of Islam's health concerns that Egyptian women use to validate their sports activities. [Walseth and Fasting \(2003, 54\)](#) share the case of a woman who says that she plays football with her brothers because she feels that Islam's order to take care of the body reflects a command from God to participate in sports. Just as in our cases, Egyptian sportswomen also use their multiple subject positionings to navigate through enjoyment and piety. For instance, while they are comfortable with basketball, they find aerobics inappropriate in a mixed-gender setting ([Walseth and Fasting 2003, 48](#)). The sort of bodily control they are following is informed by both piety and traditional gender norms. They are also informed by more contemporary and Eurocentric references to sexuality norms. Indeed, women's bodily movements, including running (which involves movement of hips and breasts), stretching (which looks sexually attractive and exposes the front of the body), leg movements (which draw attention to the pubis), posing to the camera (which draw attention to the lips) are considered highly sexual. Such scenes are often used in media to highlight the sexual appeal of a woman, often borrowed from American series for the pleasure of the male gaze ([Featherstone 1991](#)). Thus, Walseth and Fasting's Egyptian interlocutors consciously avoid such body movements in mixed environments as they avoid the male gaze, very similarly to Sehlikoglu's Turkish interlocutors ([2021](#)). By contrast, Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutors bend these norms to some extent to establish credible positions for their daring and attractive businesses.

Conclusion

As exotic and peculiar subjects for social scientists, headscarf-wearing women's religious and political commitments, identity, and sexuality have been discussed from various perspectives, mostly with references to the concepts of oppression and liberation ([Harper 1985](#); [Tillion 1983](#)). Following the path of their predecessors, several scholars studied the veil as a visible aspect of women's oppression ([Goodwin 1994](#); [Abadan-Unat 1979](#); [Moghissi 1999](#)), as a vehicle used by Islamist men to sustain masculine dominance ([Mernissi 1987](#)) as a symbol and emblem of the Islamist social movement ([Ahmed 1984](#); el-Guindi [1982, 1999](#); [Göle 1996](#)) and recently, as a counter figure to the secular state ([Arat 2005](#); [Shively 2005](#)). As the discussions unfold, insiders' perspectives gained importance within the limits of previously set frameworks, mostly focusing on headscarf-wearing women as political subjects. Some recent studies on Muslim fashion and leisure are centered on the challenging identities of Muslim women who are conventionally positioned outside of Western conceptions of secularism, as their opposites, yet who innovatively adopt and bend meanings attached to these conceptions in unexpected ways. There would always be a risk of robbing headscarf-wearing women of their humanity by dismissing their daily routine lives and diverse subject positionings. Despite the interest in Muslim women's involvement in recreation in the last two decades ([Bagdogan](#)

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2023; Benn et al. 2010; Kütük-Kuriş 2020; Saavedra 2008; Sehlikoglu 2021; Walseth 2006), there still is a repeating pattern in dismissing their lives outside of religion, resulting in a lacuna of research in their everyday lives. According to Stodolska and Livengood (2006, 294), this lacuna is not limited to the daily lives of Muslims but observant believers of any faith in terms of the impact of belief over their “leisure participation”.

Following Sehlikoglu's (2018) descriptive review of women's agency in the literature on Muslim women, the recent interest in female desires, aspirations, creative capacities, realms of leisure including fashion and self-fashioning, falls into the fourth wave of feminist scholarship. The fourth wave of feminist scholarship focuses on capturing creative and ordinary agentive techniques women follow and develop to gain control of their lives that challenge (multiple) patriarchal ideologies. This perspective is informative in this chapter as it also signifies how women (continue to) occupy discourses and practices around Islam and morality in Turkey in the last two decades.

In the introduction to the second edition of her book “Loving with a Vengeance,” Tania Modleski (2007) explains her political positioning as a feminist scholar as she intends to “analyze the text that women found appealing.” According to Modleski, such an analysis can never be fulfilled unless popular women's entertainment is taken seriously, which should be “listened to and learned from” by the scholar herself. She says, “I hope the reader will see that my project was indeed designed to learn from women” (2007, xvi). We second Modleski's aspiration. Our focus on women's leisure and fashion aims to highlight the “feminine perspective” (Boddy 1989, 4), even if not explicitly feminist, as Kütük-Kuriş's interlocutor Feride eloquently expresses. This perspective seeks to understand a group of Muslim women on their own terms, despite all the conversations about them and around their bodies, by bringing forward the multiplicities in their self-making processes. According to Janice Boddy, the “feminine perspective” is both constrained by and subversive of dominant narratives of Islam.⁶ In other words, women articulate their experiences through dominant (which refers to masculine) categories/discourses of modesty. This chapter has thus examined the “peculiarized” positions of observant headscarf-wearing women by highlighting their often-overlooked performances beyond the religious (i.e., mosques) or domestic spaces. By doing so, it has presented dynamic interpretations of their everyday leisure; interpretations that question the perfectionist ideals of gendered Islam which denies or ignores the fluidity of self-making processes.

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