

Embodying intersecting selves:

Exploring the lived experiences of queer Muslim women in Norway

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Abstract

This thesis explores the lived experiences of five queer Muslim women and one queer formerly Muslim woman in Norway. With attention to critical and decisive moments in participants lived experiences pertaining to sexuality, family and religion, this study examines how intersecting identities and formation of the self both shape and are shaped by context to illuminate the multiplicity of selves as complex and fluid. This qualitative study employs a feminist-informed and life narrative methodology as the central empirical approach so as to engender rich and detailed narratives that bring to bear on the research topic. Some of the main themes that emerged in the life narrative interviews was the impact of sexuality on lived reality, when sexuality became important and how, as well as religion as empowerment. The findings revealed the importance of addressing heteronormativity, homonormativity, the function of ‘the closet’ at the individual level, and the experiences of occupying multiple marginalized positions through lived experiences of sexuality and religion.

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List of contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Female same-sex sexuality in Islam	1
1.2	Research questions	2
1.3	Aim and scope	3
1.4	Structure.....	3
2	Previous research.....	5
2.1	International research	5
2.1.1	Lived experiences of lesbian Muslims	8
2.1.2	The power of the arts.....	12
2.2	Norwegian research contributions	14
2.3	Situating the study	19
3	Theoretical framework	20
3.1	Intersectionality	20
3.1.1	Queer Muslims – intersectional subjects.....	22
3.2	Formation of the self.....	24
3.3	Heteronormativity, Homonormativity, and Homonationalism.....	26
3.3.1	‘The closet’: western pride and prejudice	28
3.4	Summary.....	29
4	Method and process.....	31
3.1	Rationale for choice of method	31
4.1	The role of the researcher	33
4.2	Navigating the field: organizations and interlocutors.....	35
4.3	Recruiting participants to the study	40
4.4	Selection criteria	41
4.5	Interview guide	41
4.6	Transcription process.....	42
4.7	Approaching the analysis.....	42
4.8	Participants	43
4.8.1	Terminology	43
4.9	Ethical considerations	44
5	Self-narratives: sexuality.....	45
5.1	When sexuality became important	45
5.2	Family negotiations and performance	52
5.3	Naming desire.....	57

5.4	Views on western queer visibility and ‘coming out’	61
5.5	Discussion and summary	64
6	The place of Islam	66
6.1	Surviving and thriving: on being queer and Muslim	66
6.2	Sexuality as legitimized by God	75
6.3	Connection and change in lived religion	77
6.4	Discussion and summary	81
7	Embodying the everyday life	83
7.1	Situated expressions of sexual selves	83
7.2	Questioning intersectional queers	86
7.3	Empowerment of the self	89
7.4	Discussion and summary	91
8	Conclusions	93
8.1	Intersectional selves within dominant discourses	93
8.2	Interpretive authority of the self	96
	References	99
	Appendices	106
	Appendix 1	106
	Appendix 2	107
	Appendix 3	108
	Appendix 4	109

1 Introduction

Research on religion and same-sex sexuality has received increased attention in the literature over the past decades. A growing interest in the lived experiences of gay male Muslims has emerged due to the dominant discourse of viewing Islam and homosexuality as mutually exclusive categories of identification. Despite the growing research interest in Islam and gay men, we still know very little about the experiences of queer Muslim women, and how the intersections of queer identity, Muslim identity, race, age, etc., play out in queer Muslim women's lives. If we are to gain an understanding of queer Muslim women's experiences, we need to examine the nexus of sexuality and religion. The emphasis on this intersection can add complexity to contemporary debates on Islam and queerness.

Understanding the intersections of female queer Muslim experiences is essential in providing insight into the various ways in which queer Muslim women identify, perform, and ultimately, live, in the Norwegian context today. This thesis explores the lived experiences of five queer Muslim women and one queer formerly Muslim woman in Norway. With attention to critical moments and turning points in participants lived experiences pertaining to sexuality, family and religion, this study examines how intersecting identities and formation of the self both shape and are shaped by context to illuminate the multiplicity of selves as complex and fluid. This qualitative study employs a feminist-informed life narrative methodology as the central empirical approach so as to engender rich and detailed narratives that bring to bear on my research topic.

1.1 Female same-sex sexuality in Islam

The academic discussion on homosexuality in Islam seems primarily to be tied to the sexual act. Male Arabic-Muslim sexuality, for example, is centered on the roles of passivity and activity in connection to penetration (Massad 2007). While sex is considered an important part in Islam, it is dominantly viewed as permitted only through marriage between a man and a woman. Adultery, *zina*, is considered the gravest sin and classical Muslim scholars commonly compared homosexuality to *zina* in the classical legal tradition (Ali 2006).

The body of literature on same-sex sexuality in Islam is mainly concerned with male homosexuality, which is commonly condemned through particular readings of the story of Lot

in the Qur'an (Ali 2006; Siraj 2006; Kugle 2009). While Islam is a religion with a positive view on human sexuality, including acknowledgement of female sexuality, female sexuality is also treated as dangerous and has the potential to cause chaos in society (Ali 2006, 8).

Contemporary American Muslim scholar Kecia Ali argues that the focus on male homosexuality is a reflection of the focus on male sexuality as active sexuality. Muslim scholars have concentrated on the importance of the fulfillment of male sexual needs, whereas women commonly are not perceived to be sexually independent subjects (Ali 2006). Ali argues that in light of this tradition, of concentrating on male active sexuality, the silence surrounding female same-sex sexuality is “due perhaps because many legal effects of sex depend on penetration by a penis” (Ali 2006, 80). Afsaneh Najmabadi similarly asserts that female same-sex relationships are frequently considered to be innocent and viewed as something that will eventually disappear through marriage (Najmabadi 2014, 238).

Ali (2006) and Siraj (2011) notes that there is only one part in the Qur'an that is taken as a prohibition against female same-sex behavior and used to censure female same-sex behavior:

As for those of your women who are guilty of lewdness, call to witness four of you against them. And if they testify (to the truth of the allegation) then confine them to the houses until death take them or (until) Allah appoint for them a way (through new legislation). And as for the two of you who are guilty thereof, punish them both. And if they repent and improve, then let them be. (Quran, 4:15-16)

Ali highlights that “there is no consensus as to whether the Qur'an even mentions female same-sex sexuality” (Ali 2006, 81) in this verse. More recently, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (2016) demonstrates the entanglements and paradoxes within the various ways in which Qur'an 4:15-16 have been interpreted by many Islamic thinkers, and asks the question “Is female same-sex intercourse banned in the Qur'an? This seems to be a simple question but there is no simple answer” (Kugle 2016, 9).

1.2 Research questions

This study seeks to explore queer Muslim women's lived experiences and their understanding of Islam so as to contribute to the research gap that currently exists on the topic. I am

interested in the ways in which various discourses might influence queer Muslim women's lived experiences. The research questions that have framed my investigation and analysis are as follows:

What are the dominant discourses that queer Muslim women living in Norway navigate in everyday life? And, how are these discourses spoken about by queer Muslim women?

In what ways do queer Muslim women's understandings of Islam inform their expressions of sexual identity? And, how does queer Muslim women's sexuality affect their religiosity?

1.3 Aim and scope

Altogether, I am striving to understand how women who have grown up in Muslim families from different Muslim backgrounds, identify as queer/lesbian and understand themselves in relation to Islam. This thesis will not concern itself with arguing the nature of sexual identities and legislation per se, but rather analyze how participants understand their same-sex sexuality, how they identify with Islam and navigate the Norwegian LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex and queer) community. My intention is not to disparage Islam, or to demonstrate that heterosexual Muslims are homophobic, neither is my intention to demonstrate that the Norwegian queer community is Islamophobic. This thesis is however a critique of rigid understandings of Islam and Muslims and a critique of homonationalistic discourses. By exploring the stories of queer Muslim women in Norway, I hope to give insight into the tensions between queer identification and Muslim culture and to broaden the analysis beyond a queer visibility/invisibility binary. One of the aims of this study is to contribute to the literature on LGBTIQ Muslims as I explore various identitarian entanglements (gender, religiosity, race and sexuality) that create a multiplicity of experiences hitherto under-researched.

1.4 Structure

Chapter 2 provides an overview of previous anthropological research with LGBTIQ Muslims internationally and in Norway. This chapter introduces common themes found in the literature

that engages the lives of LGBTIQ Muslims. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework for the thesis. This chapter presents theories assembled from the locus of experience: the theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberlè Crenshaw, and as employed by Momin Rahman as ‘disruptively queer’, including and Afsaneh Najmabadi’s insights on subject formation. In addition, the chapter presents Jasbir Puar’s notion of homonationalism, while also introducing the discourses of heteronormativity, homonormativity and the notion of ‘the closet’. Chapter 4 introduces method, presenting a rationale for choice of method, reflections on my role as a researcher and how I navigated the field with organizations and key interlocutors in order to solicit participants to the study. The chapter also contains the interview guide, presentation of participants, the process of analysis and ethical considerations.

From the research contained herein various themes emerged. The themes are somewhat overlapping and are not to be perceived as bounded units. In order to manage the collected material, I have selected three overarching themes which are presented in three analytical chapters. Chapter 5, the first analytical chapter, is entitled “Self-narratives: sexuality”. In this chapter I present participants’ stories in relation to how they came to realize same-sex sexuality and their experiences of coming to terms with their sexuality. Realizing same-sex sexuality is closely connected to family, because most participants lived with their families at the time of becoming aware of sexuality. Therefore, family negotiations and performance is particularly highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter 6, the second analytical chapter of the thesis, is entitled “The place of Islam”. This chapter explores the various ways in which participants make meaning of being both queer and Muslim. Foregrounding the meaning of Islam in participants’ lives and how they relate to Islam. This chapter also highlights participants’ views and understandings of same-sex sexuality in Islam. Chapter 7, which constitute the third and final analytical chapter of the thesis, is entitled “Embodying the everyday life”. This chapter foregrounds some of the participants’ experiences of maneuvering situated expressions of sexuality. In addition, I highlight the spaces participants outlined as dis/empowering for their sense of self as queer Muslim women.

In the final and concluding chapter I will sum up the primary findings of the thesis as they pertain to the research questions.

2 Previous research

Research that explores LGBTIQ identities and religion has gained significant interest in the past decade, particularly focusing the Judeo-Christian tradition (see for example Wilcox 2003; Barton 2010; 2012; Wolkomir 2006; Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000; Thumma 1991). In the face of extensive debates concerning Islamic attitudes towards homosexuality there is limited research that focuses on the lived experiences of queer Muslims. This chapter therefore examines contemporary studies of sexual minority experiences within Islam from empirical perspectives, internationally and in Norway. The chapter is organized into four sections; first, I give an overview of international research contributions to get an understanding of various aspects of Muslim LGBTIQ identity.¹ Second, the chapter gives insight into research conducted primarily with lesbian Muslims, as female same-sex sexuality is an under-researched field (Habib 2007; 2010; Siraj 2011; 2012; 2015). Third, I explore how the arts, such as documentaries and photojournalism, form a particular valuable archive when exploring the lives of LGBTIQ Muslims. Lastly, the chapter gives an overview of the Norwegian research contributions, consisting of reports and master's theses.

2.1 International research

Internationally there are few, but rich studies on homosexual Muslims in the U.S. (Minwalla et al. 2005; Rouhani 2007) in Britain (Yip 2004; Siraj 2006; Jaspal and Siraj; 2011; Jaspal and Cinirella 2012) and Australia (Abraham 2009; 2010). These studies have primarily focused on the male experience. Historical studies, documenting homosexual behavior have also shown to be centered on male homosexuality (Murray & Roscoe 1997; Massad 2002; El-Rouayheb 2005; Kugle 2010). Minwalla et al., (2005) published one of the first empirical studies in this field, interviewing activists from the organization Al-Fatiha, an internet based organization that consist of local chapters in various cities in the U.S. and abroad (Minwalla et al., 2005, 114). The study was a forerunner in identifying key themes for LGBTIQ Muslims, centering on the complexities of religion, marriage expectations, the 'coming out' process, and difficulties with east-west cultural differences (Minwalla et al., 2005).

¹ I use the abbreviation LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer), but I do not explore trans or intersex in this thesis.

Previous empirical studies show different areas of focus, such as Yip's (2004; 2007; 2008) and Kugle's (2014) focus on individual strategies for identity formation. Jaspal's (2012; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012) contributions employ identity process theory from psychology explaining the construction, threat and coping of identity from the lived experiences of British Muslim homosexual men of Pakistani descent. Other studies have emphasized more comprehensive sociological, political and cultural contexts, e.g. Abraham's study (2009) examined the incorporation of sexuality into the cultural and political discourse of the "war on terror", and his second study (2010) is a sociological case study on the limits of Australian liberal multiculturalism. The importance of these studies for LGBTIQ Muslims living in the west is that they reveal five central themes (Rahman and Valliani 2016) that I now will engage.

The first consistent theme is a perception of the family and ethnic community reacting negatively to Muslims who reveal a public homosexual identity (Yip 2007). It has been found that some gay Muslim men refrain from disclosing sexuality due to the possibility of violent reprisals from the religious community (Minwalla et al., 2005). Furthermore, Siraj (2009) also found that violence as punishment for homosexuals is defended by some parts of the Muslim community in Britain. This theme is concurrently related to the second consistent theme, namely the perception of the public homosexual identity as a western cultural phenomenon, and is repeatedly shown in research on Muslim lesbians and gay men in the UK (Yip 2004; 2005; Siraj 2006; 2009; Jaspal and Siraj 2011), gay Muslims in Australia (Abraham 2009) and Muslim lesbians in North America (Al-Sayaad 2010). The two above mentioned themes are connected in that the process of 'coming out' to oneself and/or others e.g. family and community can be a complicated affair due to an assumption that homosexuality is a western construction (Rahman and Valliani 2016).

The third consistent theme concerns the lack of community support for LGBTIQ Muslims, both from within their own ethnic or religious communities and from western LGBTIQ organizations. Nevertheless, the existence of support groups and networks in some large scale cities in different countries is mentioned in this research, such as *Salaam* based in Toronto, *The Safra Project*, *Naz* and *Imaan* located in the U.K., *Habibi Ana* and *The Yoesuf Foundation* in the Netherlands, and *The Inner Circle* in South Africa. Joining these organizations is part of the struggle to confront social stigma and reconcile sexual identity with faith commitments, and to find others who share the struggles in order to overcome them (Kugle 2014).

Connected to lack of community belonging is a fourth consistent theme, that is, experiences of racism and discrimination of LGBTIQ Muslims by western LGBTIQ communities, which are predominantly white (Abraham 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005). Abraham describes this particular situation as ‘hegemonic queer Islamophobia’ (Abraham 2010, 402). A crucial caveat of having divergent identity positionings, i.e. self-identification as Muslim and gay, may leave gay Muslims in a vulnerable position to possible preconceptions from secular gay men who may question and challenge the identification of Muslim *and* gay (Minwalla et al., 2005; Yip 2007; Abraham 2009; 2010). Jaspal and Cinnirella (2012) also found in their study of British Muslim gay men that some of their participants eschewed relations with white gay men due to the portrayal of white gay men as extremely open about their sexuality. Other participants in their study attested to the openness of white gay men to be an identity enhancer for themselves (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012, 230).

The fifth theme emerging in the literature on LGBTIQ Muslims is that re-interpretation of Islamic texts constitutes a valuable supporting framework in the struggle to bring together religious and sexual identities. This is an important theme that illustrates how lives benefit from re-interpretation (see Yip 2003; 2005; Abraham 2010; Yip et al., 2011; Kugle 2014), creating space in a religion where LGBTIQ Muslims feel belonging. The perception of Islam as being anti-LGBTIQ is unhelpful. Yip and Kugle, in particular, have shown that more nuanced understandings of Islamic texts are needed. Their research continues to demonstrate what a crucial role religion and spirituality plays for many LGBTIQ people.

The five themes mentioned above give important perspectives and are paramount in the distinctive challenges that LGBTIQ Muslims face. The research outlined above also elaborate and foreground lived experience as a category of analysis. By examining existing literature, it becomes apparent that there are different struggles that apply to Muslim gays and Muslim lesbians, respectively, which brings me to the under-researched field of lesbian Muslim experiences.

2.1.1 Lived experiences of lesbian Muslims

During the last years, insightful empirical data has emerged; contributing to unfolding stories of lesbian² Muslims' lived experiences. The themes found in the empirical literature outlined above have also surfaced in these studies. Researcher Asifa Siraj has done extensive studies on homosexual Muslim men in Britain, and more recently undertaken three exploratory studies on lesbian Muslims in the UK. In the latter studies, Siraj considers how religious identity intersects with sexual identity, and how the intersecting identities simultaneously produce feelings of empowerment and disempowerment. In the article "Isolated, invisible and in the closet: The life story of a Scottish Muslim lesbian" (2011), Siraj focused on the experience of one lesbian Muslim woman in Scotland. In particular, she explored her feelings of isolation of being in 'the closet' due to her family's negative attitude towards homosexuals. Siraj's study is important in that it demonstrates that the experience of being a lesbian Muslim is not only about women who are engaged in sexual relationships with other women, but also about women who do not have sexual, emotional or romantic relations with other women for reasons of family and/or religion (Siraj 2011). Siraj demonstrates that the homophobic rhetoric of religion, family and society, in some cases, is acting as a powerful hindrance to 'coming out', hence, creating a distinct boundary between being in 'the closet' and being 'out' (Siraj 2011, 117). Through their multiple identities, lesbian Muslims can meet multiple forms of oppressions, being subjected to what Bradshaw (1994) calls 'triple jeopardy'. Triple jeopardy involves the experience of homophobia, sexism and Islamophobia, and as Bradshaw puts it; "there is no safe place, no place to belong, whether in the majority or minority community" (Bradshaw 1994, 109). The point is that it is not only the 'open' lesbians that have experiences to share, or that we need to know how they experience the world, but also women who choose not to be 'out' and open about their sexuality. Research on the subject of 'closeted' lesbian Muslim women's experiences provides valuable knowledge about women's lived reality.

Siraj's second article "I don't want to taint the name of Islam': The influence of religion on the lives of Muslim lesbians" (2012) uses data collected from online interviews with five lesbian Muslims. In this article, Siraj explores whether participants can create their lesbian identity within a discourse that rejects their sexual orientation. There appears to be the

² I here use the term lesbian due to the fact that Asifa Siraj (2011; 2012; 2015), one of the few contemporary scholars who empirically explores the intersection of women, Islam and queer sexuality, consistently uses the term lesbian in her studies.

construction of a binary between religion and same-sex sexuality/identity, which is clearly presented as an overarching issue that Siraj's studies challenge. Siraj found that the women she interviewed used Islam to create a framework with which they could reach an understanding of their sexual orientation. For some, Islam gave them strength to be open, and for others, their faith made it possible to manage staying in 'the closet'.

Siraj's most recent study "British Muslim lesbians: Reclaiming Islam and reconfiguring religious identity" (2015), is also based on interviews with five Muslim lesbians. This study stresses the themes of personal conflicts with the self, faith, family and religious community, and explores the ways in which participants reconfigure their religious identity in order to incorporate their sexual identity. The study found that the obstacles imposed upon the participants by moral and social standards of (hetero) sexuality, forced them to separate their religious and sexual identities. Siraj's participants adopted a more 'progressive' understanding of social justice and respect for diversity and equality. By reinterpreting the prohibition of homosexuality in Islam and focusing on the silence around the punishment for 'being' lesbian, her participants challenged the notion that they as lesbians did not have the right to identify as Muslim (Siraj 2015, 198). By reclaiming and reconnecting with their faith Siraj's participants felt free to unite their previously fragmented sense of self.

Siraj's empirical work can seem to primarily depict 'sad stories'. The women interviewed can be portrayed as 'miserable', which again feeds the stereotypes of women being weak and emotional. What Siraj is highlighting through her research, however, is how religiously dedicated and committed her participants are, and also how some are empowered by religion. In addition to Siraj's research contributions, American-Iranian Khalida Saed illustrates the complexity of sexual identity, writing about her own experiences as a lesbian Muslim. In her mother's immediate reaction to her 'coming out', the theme of the family and/or ethnic community reacting negatively to revealing a public homosexual identity, and the second theme of the homosexual identity as a western cultural phenomenon, is illustrated:

The most compelling argument she came up with was that I was far too Americanized and that my sexuality was an offspring of the American values I had internalized. This last argument may or may not have a ring of truth to it. I'm not sure I would have had the balls to discuss my sexuality at all, or even consider it, if my American side hadn't told me I had the right (Saed 2005, 86).

Saed's narrative describes the intersections of identifying with a sexual minority, being Iranian and Muslim. In her realization that she had the right to 'come out', she used a 'western version' as a resource for 'coming out', and was accused of being too westernized. As Siraj (2011) argues, lesbianism in migrant communities is often perceived to be a symptom of 'westoxification' (being intoxicated by secular western culture; Yip 2004, 340), thus 'coming out' can be seen as evidence of women's cultural assimilation into a white majority (Siraj 2011).

Ayisah Al-Sayyad is another important contributor to the study of lesbian Muslim's lived experiences. Al-Sayyad's master's thesis *Queer Muslim Women: On Diaspora, Islam and Identity* (2008) tells the stories of eight women who identify as queer and Muslim in North America, and are also illustrative of the two themes found in Saed's narrative of 'coming out'. Furthermore, the study found that participants feel the pressure to choose between their sexuality and their culture or religion in order to preserve the family honor and live a normative life (Al-Sayyad 2008, 116). Most participants and their family chose to maintain their familial relationships by not discussing sexuality as an alternative to the western focus on visibility and 'coming out' (Al-Sayyad 2008, 117). Additionally, participants were not involved in any type of organization due to often having to explain that they are both lesbian and Muslim – something that connects to the fourth theme found in the studies of gay Muslim men, namely, the lack of community support. This demonstrates the paradox that both gay and lesbian Muslims face, being both on the inside and outside of the western LGBTIQ movement. Al-Sayyad's second study (2010) on queer Muslim women in North America found that the participants in this study commonly renounced Islam to be able to express their sexual identity. I find this an important example that illustrates how not everyone can reconcile faith and sexuality.

Another central contributor to the field of exploring LGBTIQ lived experiences is Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle. In this section I want to highlight his book, *Living out Islam* (2014), which explores the lived experiences of gay, lesbian and transgender Muslim activists, presented in 15 in-depth interviews with activists living in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and South Africa. Kugle's book includes four interviews with self-identified lesbian Muslims. The four lesbian's narratives display resistance against the policing of sexuality in cases where religious discourse is used to denounce and repress women who do

not follow the sexual norms advocated by their religious community and family. Through actively constructing and engaging in spaces that promote and enrich diversity outside the heteronormative family, without policing and surveillance, participants are resisting conforming to heterosexist notions that dominate the public sphere. As a result of being engaged in LGBTIQ support groups, participants found spaces that let them positively express both queerness and 'Muslimness'. Their stories emphasize how their religious identity shaped their lesbian identity, and vice versa. Through engaging in interpretation of what Islam means, the four lesbians interviewed were able to reconcile their sexuality with their faith, with different intensity and at different degrees. One of the most important tools participants used was re-interpreting and re-framing what Islam means. This is important to further the deconstruction of the traditional interpretation and condemnation of homosexuality (Kugle 2014).

In addition to the aforementioned, Andrew K. Yip has published extensively within the area of same-sex sexuality and religion. Here I want to emphasize one of his studies, "The quest for intimate/sexual citizenship: Lived experiences of lesbian and bisexual Muslim women" (2008). Yip found that British lesbian and bisexual Muslim women's legal and cultural citizenship is inextricably linked to intimate/sexual citizenship. In their quest for legal and cultural citizenship, Yip's participants articulated feeling united with fellow Muslims, while finding a greater sense of belonging in secular society when it came to their sexuality. This in turn undermined their sense of belonging within the Muslim community. This research demonstrates experiences of multiple belongings, and his participants articulated that belonging depends on identity (Yip 2008).

Reconciliation of sexual identity with Muslim faith commitments is one of the core themes in the aforementioned studies. Exploring this intersection uncovers how lesbian Muslims are able to ease the conflict and tension often facing either disconnection with their religion or incorporate a more inclusive religious ethos (Siraj 2012, 45). The studies also reveal that in coming to terms with their sexuality, lesbian Muslims have to navigate and negotiate with their family, religion and identity.

Besides the particular themes foregrounded, the studies highlight that there is also a particular gendering of queerness within the discourse. The Muslim family is based upon a patriarchal social structure with two distinct sexes and recognizable gender roles. Women's identities are

based on their responsibilities within marriage, family and motherhood, and male identities are rooted in their duties and responsibilities to their families, work and society (Siraj 2011). The experiences and challenges gay men and lesbian women undergo are thus distinct and should be recognized as such.

2.1.2 The power of the arts

As I hope to have clarified at this point, international academic research shows multilayered LGBTIQ issues. Visual representation is an additional archive that I have found useful. The arts are an important contributor in the field of exploring LGBTIQ Muslim lived experiences. Documentaries, photos and blogs tell stories that have a different force of impact and expand reception beyond academia. To illustrate, the documentary *A Jihad for Love* (2007) was the first documentary to explore the intersections between Islam and homosexuality, interviewing homosexual men and lesbian women who do not seek to reject Islam, but rather negotiate a new relationship to their faith. Two lesbian couples, from Egypt and Turkey, respectively, are portrayed. The faces of the women in Egypt are censored and it becomes clear that one of the women struggles deeply with accepting herself for loving a woman due to her belief in the condemnation of homosexuality in Islam. This sequence in the documentary depicts how religiosity impacts the woman's love-life. She fears God, stating that she is suffering inside due to her lesbian sexuality, crying on the musallah (prayer mat). She describes her sexuality as a 'test from God', and that she does not know if it is possible to be both Muslim and love women. Due to this struggle, she talks about a wish to get punished, as a way of relief. A stark contrast to the first couple is the Sufi lesbian couple in Turkey. Their faces are not censored. We can observe them holding each other outside a mosque, expressing their love for each other. In the documentary they articulate that if God has created this love in their hearts, for this reason, their relationship is legitimate.

The only documentary I have found documenting solely lesbian Muslims is entitled *Al Nisa: Black Muslim women in Atlanta's gay Mecca* (2013). *Al Nisa* means 'the women' in Arabic, and is the title of the fourth sura of the Qur'an, which actually tells no stories about women. Film maker Red Summer brought five self-identified lesbian Muslim women together in her home, all seeking to establish a community where there is none. Red Summer stated "I can be black, I can be American, and I can be Muslim. But I cannot be lesbian, that has frozen me". She explains that many women have never been in a space with other queer Muslim women

and never even considered it because of how they feel individually. Through a series of interviews and a shared discussion, the women give voice to both joys and pains in their search for reconciling faith and sexuality. They address how sexuality was never a topic of discussion growing up, which made them think that homosexuality and spirituality could not coexist, oftentimes thinking “I am the only one”. One of the women describes that the struggle with coming to terms with her sexuality was never about God, it was about the community. When she realized the difference between the two everything became clear, stressing that “No-one can define our spirituality” – emphasizing that it is important to be a part of a community, but that their dedication to Islam is a realm where community have no say. The personal investment in religion and hiding their sexuality was a struggle for most of the women in the documentary, stressing that ‘coming out’ is a long journey and a fight for their truth. Through the documentary the women describe that Islam plays an important role in their lives, and they recognize that they need God. For them it is possible to be both queer/lesbian and Muslim, and because of their fight, they feel in position of privilege to tell their stories, so others can do the same.

Here, I also want to give attention to the photo project *Just Me and Allah: A Queer Muslim Photo Project*, a photography series and blog by Samra Habib, a queer Muslim photographer and journalist. Habib has traveled through North America and Europe taking portraits of LGBTIQ Muslims willing to share their stories and desire for connection. Habib’s blog display photographs of queer Muslims, in addition to interviews with some of the individuals about their relationship to Islam. The project caught the attention of many media outlets, and photos from the series have been exhibited in New York City, Munich, Berlin and Oslo. The project is about a new way of thinking, as Habib explains “about people composing their identity with their sexuality” (Akage 2016).

As shown in this section, the arts contribute to the field of exploring queer Muslim lives. The arts are a particular archive; an emotive archive, wherein LGBTIQ Muslims in these projects is given a platform to speak their truths and to be seen. The effect of video and photography can illuminate different aspects of Muslim lesbian lives than that of academic texts, eliciting particular emotions, where the audience might feel a deeper relation to the storyteller, and more importantly, identify with how nuanced, complex, and *human* queer Muslim lives are. The documentaries and the photo project capture the lives of queer Muslims, using art as a force for change and making it easily accessible for everyone.

2.2 Norwegian research contributions

Within the Norwegian context LGBTIQ *Muslims* have hardly been subject to research. I begin with the parliamentary report number 25 2000/2001. This report concerned living conditions and quality of life among lesbians and homosexuals in Norway, with an overarching goal of ‘demystifying’ lesbian or homosexual sexuality so that lesbians and homosexuals could love someone of the same gender without fearing sanctions. The report concluded with a call for more research on the topic of Muslim lesbians and homosexuals in Norway, due to no evidence of how it is being a minority within a minority (25: 2001, 49).

Lesbians and homosexuals with immigrant backgrounds: a pilot survey (2003) by Bera Ulstein Moseng was the first official study of LGB people with immigrant backgrounds published by NOVA.³ The report was based on 15 qualitative interviews with both women and men. In this study, religion was not taken into account. In the over 200 hours of interviews, Moseng states that only for about 10 minutes in total was the topic of religion discussed. As I can read from the report, the interview guide was divided into nine themes, and religion or religious affiliation was not part of the guide. One of the report’s conclusions was that culture and religion could not be seen as an important factor in participants’ lives, due to participants not mentioning religion as neither an empowering source nor a problem in their lives. Yet, Moseng states that “Gay women and men who are Muslim are portrayed as a particularly vulnerable group” (Moseng 2003, 8;25), but the pilot survey gives no indications in that there is any rationale to single out Muslim lesbian and homosexuals due to their religious affiliation. It is evident that this study was of the opinion that religion was not significant. Yet, how can one then conclude that lesbian and homosexual Muslims is a *particularly vulnerable* group, if religion is an unimportant source in the participants lives? The conclusion and the statement is contradictory. However, it should be taken into consideration that the report was published in 2003, and a lot has happened since then both in the religious and the queer communities, not to mention the great changes in the last decade concerning LGBTIQ identity, where initiatives from activism and scholarship has changed the field.

³ NOVA – Norwegian institute for research with upbringing, welfare and aging.

More recently, in October 2013 a report from Fafo⁴ was published, entitled *Open rooms, closed rooms: LGBT in ethnic minority groups* (Elgvin et al. 2013), with a revised edition in 2014. As the title indicates, the report gives insight into LGBT minority peoples' experiences in Norway, using in-depth interviews with 26 participants. The themes are ranging from foregrounding life as a double minority, self-understanding and identity (living 'out' their sexuality openly, living a 'double life' or in 'the closet'), violence, physical health and queer migration. The Fafo-report is the most extensive study conducted in the Norwegian context that gives insight into how the situation for sexual minorities in the Norwegian society has changed drastically in the last 20-30 years (Elgvin et al 2014, 31). The data documented in this report is quite different from Moseng's report in that it brings attention to the importance that religion has for some of the participants, finding that participants from both Muslim and Latin-American backgrounds perceive religion to be central in their journey of figuring out their identity (Elgvin et al., 2014, 100). The report note that from the material it seems that more men than women with minority backgrounds are open about their sexuality, and that the research team had difficulties getting in contact with women, something which explains the finding on how it was easier for men in the community to 'fight for their freedom' (i.e. being gay) (Elgvin et al. 2014, 74).

Further, the report shows that participants have different ways of approaching religion, either distancing themselves from it, or re-interpreting their religion so as to combine personal religiosity with one's sexual orientation or gender identity. This finding is interesting in light of the themes found in the international research of re-interpreting religious texts so as to excavate a space of belonging. Another theme connected to the international research is that the Fafo report indicates that LGBT people with minority backgrounds experience negative attitudes from family and community (Elgvin et al. 2014, 10; 44;). Participants also mention that homonormativity is largely is connected to whiteness. Some participants criticized the whiteness-norm that exists in the queer communities, having experiences of being met with skepticism due to their minority background or of feeling excluded from social settings due to the pervasive place of alcohol consumption (Elgvin et al., 2013, 82). This point is reflective of the theme found in international research that pertains to lack of community belonging. The Fafo 2014 report did not go further in the discussion of homonormativity in the Norwegian

⁴ Fafo – a Norwegian research foundation.

context, yet one can speculate as to whether homonormative attitudes can be a part of the reason for why queer Muslims decide to remain in 'the closet' or 'closet' their religion.

In addition to the reports, there currently exist four master's theses on the subject of LGB people with minority backgrounds. Heidi Rafto's MA-thesis (2008) in social anthropology interviewed 19 lesbian, gay and bisexual people with the selection criteria of 'immigrant background'. Rafto's thesis investigated experiences of belonging and exclusion through focusing on three areas: 'coming out' of 'the closet', organizations/activism, and media/representation. Rafto's findings show how her participants are located at the intersection of different discourses. For example, several of her participants' stated that homosexual practice could be tacitly accepted as long as the practice was hidden from their countries of origin (Rafto 2008, 22). Participants experienced the media as painting a stereotypical picture of gay people, thus complex individuals are reduced to stereotypes (Rafto 2008, 107). Some of Rafto's participants found categories (e.g. lesbian) limiting to their freedom as individuals, with specific expectations of how one should act (Rafto 2008, 113), while others found these categories liberating. Rafto writes that reflection tied to religion emerges as an important part of the 'coming out' process for several participants, but that questions pertaining to the intersections between religious belonging and sexuality fall outside the scope of her thesis. I understand completely the need to narrow down the scope of investigation, however, it would have been interesting if Rafto did at least mention some of the reflections tied to religion in the 'coming out' process of her participants.

Georgina Demou Øvergaard's MA-thesis (2013) also used 'immigrant background' as a criterion for selecting participants, interviewing four lesbian women and three homosexual men. The focus of this study was not on religion, but rather the relationship between homosexuality and challenges arising from cultural heritage (Øvergaard 2013, 8). Øvergaard employed theory on stigma to investigate how her participants experienced being stigmatized. Her study found that the participants are located in a landscape of contradictions, both meeting acceptance and protection by law, but also experiencing negative attitudes, resulting in selective and strategic self-presentations (Øvergaard 2013, 93). Interestingly, her finding is reflective of the first theme found in the international research, namely, a perception of the family and ethnic community reacting negatively to revealing a public homosexual identity, thus navigating this terrain so as to avoid stigma. The study also found that participants that to a lesser degree experience positive acknowledgement about their sexuality have lower self-

esteem and consequently find it hard to accept themselves as either lesbian or homosexual. The different degrees of self-acceptance regulated whom participants chose to be open with about, or disclose, their sexuality (Øvergaard 2013, 94).

Randi Rørlien's MA-thesis (2003, revised in 2006) focused on homosexual male immigrants with the research criteria of 'Muslim background' (having to limit her thesis to homosexual men due to not finding queer women). Her thesis investigates experiences of opportunities and restrictions of living in Norway through six in-depth interviews. This study found that participants more or less had broken ties with their Muslim communities and changed their relationship to religion at different degrees. Despite this, several of the participants continued to call themselves Muslim as a cultural or ethnic marker (Rørlien 2006, 68). Rørlien also found that participants expressed that the Norwegian society provided them with the opportunity to live a life as homosexuals (Rørlien 2006, 87), using other arenas than their ethnic community to acquire a social network, such as the gay community (Rørlien 2006, 91). This finding is both similar and contrary to the theme found in the international research; lack of community support. Rørlien's participants find support in the gay community, but distance themselves from the Muslim community.

Richard Ruben Narvesen's MA-thesis (2010), similar to Rørlien used 'Muslim background' as research criteria, interviewing eight gay, lesbian and bisexual participants. This study describes how participants experienced difficulties in their religious or ethnic communities due to their sexual orientation. One of the study's findings is that homosexuals with minority backgrounds can experience religion as a source of empowerment, and not only as a problem. Themes that recurred in Narvesen's interviews were honor, community and the heterosexual marriage. Narvesen found some differences between women and men in the sample concerning marriage expectations, by interpreting the female participants' life stories in light of a forced marriage discourse. It appeared that the men somewhat more than the women could choose not to marry, yet the perceived expectation of (heterosexual) marriage was problematic because all the men interviewed did not want to disappoint the family (Narvesen 2010, 43). One of the female participants was forced to marry and described several escape attempts. Narvesen found some differences between his male and female participants regarding the expectation from family of heterosexual marriage, wherein the male participants can to a greater extent than the female participants choose not to marry. Even as none of his male participants recounted any escape attempts, Narvesen states that "the doxic

expectations of a (heterosexual) marriage can be just as burdensome for the men, because all the male participants do not want to disappoint their families” (Narvesen 2010, 43). What Narvesen fails to take into account is the different gendered expectations (i.e. sexual) within marriage. Furthermore, Narvesen finds most of his participants to be ‘strategically open’ about their sexuality, meaning that participants are open about sexual orientation on occasions, and not open on other occasions (Narvesen 2010, 46). Some participants mentioned having experienced honor-related violence because they broke with understandings of what is allowed and forbidden (Narvesen 2010, 68). This finding is reflective of the first theme in the international research, namely, that family and community react negatively to a public homosexual identity. Nevertheless, two participants stood out as “actively open”. Narvesen explains this openness by foregrounding these two participants as non-believers, having higher education, having parents who were not especially religious, and foregrounding that their sexuality was accepted by their family and friends. (Narvesen 2010, 46-47). Additionally, Narvesen found that progressive and liberal readings of Islam worked as a source of empowerment, giving LGB Muslims new ways of understanding themselves and their sexuality (Narvesen 2010, 67).

The reports and theses outlined here demonstrate attempts at exploring the intersections of queer life, religion and identity. The studies display that research on LGB people with minority backgrounds has either focused on migration and ethnicity, or religious affiliation in the Norwegian context (Elgvin et al., 2013, 79). However, having browsed through the reports and MA-theses, it becomes clear that homosexual Muslim men are more often interviewed than lesbian Muslim women. To illustrate; of a total 26 interviews, the 2013/2014 Fafo-report interviewed 5 trans, 13 gay men, 3 bisexual women, 4 lesbian women and one undefined woman. Rafto (2008) interviewed 11 men and 8 women (unclear how many are bisexual; thus the numbers are unclear). Rørlien (2003) could not find any lesbian participants, resulting in only male participants. Narvesen interviewed 3 lesbians and 5 homosexual men, while Øvergaard (2013) on the other hand, interviewed 4 lesbian women and 3 gay men. Both the Fafo-report (2014), Rørlien (2003) and Narvesen (2010) highlighted the difficulty of securing interviews with lesbian Muslims, which explain the scant data on this particular group. Overall, the research surveyed in the Norwegian context illustrates the lived experiences and voices of men primarily. As a consequence, we do not know whether queer Muslim women in Norway grapple with specific challenges particular to them being women. In regards to the

themes found in the international research, there are clear parallels in the research conducted primarily with lesbian Muslims internationally and in the Norwegian contributions.

2.3 Situating the study

The lack of research with queer Muslim women internationally is also found in the Norwegian research contributions. This bear witness to the challenge of exploring queer Muslim women's lived reality and evokes the female same-sex sexuality as a sensitive topic, while also a disputed sexual orientation. My research adds to existing literature on sexuality and religious identity in several ways. First, it recognizes and emphasizes religion as an important element in the lives of queer Muslim women, something that assists in attaining new perspectives in this area. Second, the research challenges the continuing academic disregard of Muslim women's non-heterosexual identities by utilizing narratives to focus on the sociocultural framework within which women's sexual and religious identities are lived out in Norway. And third, my research provides a platform for queer Muslim women to tell their stories, to document their experience, with emphasis on how experience is varied and that it is possible to be Muslim *and* queer in the Norwegian context.

3 Theoretical framework

The categories of LGBTIQ and Muslim are often held to be mutually exclusive (Rahman 2010; 2014). In challenging this dichotomy, I employ theoretical frameworks that assist in attaining deeper insight into the intersections of identities, in particular that of gender, sexuality, and religion. As such, I engage the theory of ‘intersectionality’, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, while also foregrounding Momin Rahman’s engagement with intersectionality as ‘disruptively queer’, and Afsaneh Najmabadi’s notion of subject formation. These theories prove useful in illuminating the multiplicity of queerness also as it pertains to religion. Moreover, I engage with how ‘heteronormativity’ and ‘homonormativity’, and the notion ‘homonationalism’ developed by Jasbir Puar (2007), exclude queers of color and queer Muslims from national queering projects. Intertwined with these concepts is the western notion of ‘the closet’, where I present Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed’s problematizing of ‘the closet’ as a suppressive space for queer Muslims. I aim to show how these theories and concepts meaningfully interact and their value as critical underpinnings informing my analysis of queer Muslim women’s life narratives.

3.1 Intersectionality

The theory of ‘intersectionality’ is an analytical tool for studying and understanding the ways in which gender intersects with other identities, and how certain intersections enables particular experiences of oppression and privilege. The specific term ‘intersectionality’ was first coined and introduced by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article “Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color” (1989). Crenshaw here used the term to describe the connection and interconnection of gender, race and class among Black⁵ women.

Crenshaw made a legal argument pertaining to several employment discrimination lawsuits where anti-discrimination policies did not cover Black women. She saw that the problem lies with anti-discrimination politics that only recognize *one* form of discrimination. Because Black women could not legally establish their distinct problem of discrimination on the basis of *both* gender and race – Black women face a combination of both racism and sexism. The

⁵ I capitalize Black because, as Crenshaw argues, “Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other ‘minorities’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun” (Crenshaw 1988, 1331-1332).

court refused to allow the plaintiffs to combine a gender-based and race-based discrimination as a single category of discrimination. While white women experienced sexism and black men experienced racism, Black women whose identities intersected with both sex and race became legally 'invisible'. This led Crenshaw to conceptualize the notion of intersectionality. She detected that looking at Black women's situation through the lens of either racism or gender discrimination as isolated situations, was insufficient (Crenshaw 1989, 160). For Crenshaw, the experiences of Black women were explained through the metaphor of an *intersection*. The roads of an intersection can symbolize the way the workforce is structured by race and gender, and the traffic in the road represents hiring practices and the law. If Black women are harmed in the intersection, the harm could be caused from a number of directions; i.e. both from sex discrimination and race discrimination (Crenshaw 1989, 149).

Crenshaw's contribution sprung out of Black Feminist aims at decentering white privilege, western, heterosexual, middle-class women, that had occupied the center of feminist analyses and the standard of feminist politics. After Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, it was broadly embraced as a term that managed to capture the concurrent experiences of multiple oppressions faced by Black women. Moreover, while Crenshaw importantly addressed flaws in the legal system pertaining to the twin concerns of gender oppression and racism, she also challenged feminist practices' disregard to "accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (Crenshaw 1989, 140). She argued that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analyses that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The foundational feature of intersectionality is located in its acknowledgement that multiple oppressions are not experienced separately; instead Crenshaw perceives intersectionality more readily as a complexly entangled experience.

In addition to Crenshaw, feminist critical race theorists bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), among others, also illustrated the impossibility of dividing the categories of race and gender. They challenged the use of 'woman' as a uniform category, resulting in essentializing the experience of all women. These theorists saw the need to trouble and problematize the concepts of 'woman' and 'black' to demonstrate the differences also within these categories and the crucial effect of the interaction between the two categories that form particular oppressions in the lived realities of Black women.

The flexibility of the analytical category intersectionality has made it possible to include “several social identity markers (such as, sexual orientation, age, religious belonging, ethnicity, geographical location, economic status, educational background, and so on), which are intersectionally employed, in various combinations, so as to understand and theorize various forms of structural oppression and discrimination” (Hoel forthcoming, 10). Therefore, social identity markers, for example race, ethnicity, age, ableness etc. can be engaged with intersectionally, because such identity markers are embodied and interweave with peoples’ understandings of lived experiences.

3.1.1 Queer Muslims – intersectional subjects

Momin Rahman (2010; 2014; Rahman and Valliani 2016) theorizes gay Muslim identities using queer theory as an intersectional approach and calls for a more serious implementation of intersectionality as a ‘disruptively queer’ term: “Queer intersectionality is simply the necessary tautology: intersectionality is inevitably disruptively queer, and queer must be analytically intersectional” (Rahman 2010, 956).

For Rahman, exploring lived experiences of an ‘impossible’ category – namely gay⁶ Muslims, gives the means to an understanding of how the dominant categories ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ “achieve their (incomplete) coherence *only* through the exclusion of ‘others’” (Rahman 2010, 953). Rahman has argued that gay Muslims represent an intersectional location that illuminates particular difficulties because their existence challenges both western and eastern cultures’ views of seeing Islam and homosexuality as mutually exclusive categories (Rahman 2010; 2014). Thus, Rahman employs intersectionality to highlight the intersectional identities of gay Muslims, and demonstrates that cultures and identities are plural and overlapping rather than monolithic and mutually exclusive:

Building on the limiting research from an intersectional perspective would give us a more accurate sociological understanding of how cultures are experienced and lived because intersectional analytics asks us to consider differences within identity categories; the social location of gay Muslims marks a difference from two major

⁶ Rahman uses the term gay as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual Muslims.

identity categories that are often mapped onto oppositional cultures (Rahman 2010, 951).

Hence, queer Muslim subjects disrupt the ontological consistency of dominant identity categories. It is thus more significant to understand LGBTIQ Muslims as “disruptively queer intersectional subjects” instead of understanding their identities as minorities within either Muslim communities or LGBTIQ communities (Rahman and Valliani 2016, 84). I find Rahman’s approach useful in that it considers the implications of this disruptive intersectionality for the dominant western queer politics of identity, and questions the outcomes of what sexual liberation looks like (Rahman 2014).

Intersectionality features as a critical feminist approach that provides a valuable theory to explore the intersectional identities and experiences of queer Muslim women. The theory of intersectionality is relevant for the analysis of the empirical material in this thesis as it functions as a tool to understand participants’ experiences in a society that is marked by migration and globalization. Utilizing an intersectional lens in research on queer Muslim women also brings forth that sexuality is just one category of participants’ intersectional identities, just as religion is just one category (Hoel, forthcoming). The religious and the sexual aspects of participants’ identities are thus only two categories that illuminate participants’ experiences, yet, in this study, due to the prevailing perception of mutual exclusivity, they constitute the two primary categories of investigation.

In examining the relationship between religion/religiosity and sexuality, I see it necessary to further explore the intersectionality of these distinct identities because they can give voice to a range of experiences that then can be analyzed in order to understand the various ways in which participants enact and perform their identities. In addition, it is important to recognize that queer Muslim women do not constitute a homogeneous group and that their experiences cannot be essentialized or used to create stereotypes. In other words, participants’ experiences need to be taken seriously when considering the diversity of experience. The diversity of experience can in this study be shown through the analytical lens of intersectionality.

3.2 Formation of the self

Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2014), is a historical and ethnographic study. Najmabadi thoroughly explores the implications of the use of sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and the growth of this practice in contemporary Iran. Since the mid-1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran have legalized SRS and Najmabadi brings to the fore the post-revolutionary era where the complex ways in which the domains of law, Islamic jurisprudence, biomedicine, psychiatry and psychology unite to foster specific ideas of acceptable (transsexual) and unacceptable (homosexual) sexualities. Contradictory to what the state might have intended, Najmabadi discusses the various ways in which state regulations have created new spaces for non-heterosexual and non-normative people living in Iran. Because regulating and determining who is 'authentically trans' and 'authentically homosexual' is heavily contingent on the stories people choose to tell – on the selves that people profess – making use of new spaces that are made available by cracks in the dominant structures emerges as a fruitful endeavor (Najmabadi 2014, 291). The primary analytical category Najmabadi employs throughout the study is 'narratives of the self', and she highlights the dominant 'scripts' of how men and women are supposed to be. The transsexuals in her study are choosing to do otherwise and challenge the functioning of the gender-normative 'scripts'.

In her study, Najmabadi wants to understand how transsexual selves are professed and performed in the context of Iran. On that account, she problematizes the intersections in understandings of same-sex, transsexual or transgender interests, behaviors or identities. Presented through the personal narratives of transsexual persons, Najmabadi critiques the notion of an inherent essence and the idea of identities as essences (Najmabadi 2014, 297). She found that her participants showed different ways of being, different ways of *professing selves*. By highlighting conduct or performance as ways of professing selves, reflecting the notion that selves are situated, contingent and relational, she argues that being in the world is centered on conduct that give meaning in terms of a specific location at the intersection of various relations that establishes the scene of conduct of the self (Najmabadi 2014, 297). Thus, she elucidates how subjectivity is always fluid, because material bodies are continuously producing themselves in different scenes of conduct and in various relations.

In the final chapter of the book, Najmabadi gives a nuanced theoretical approach to think about lived lives/experiences by focusing on subject formation, and exploring how her participants make sense of their being in the world. Asking the questions of how selves are professed, and whether ‘naming’ matters (i.e. trans, lesbian, gay, straight, etc.), she disturbs/challenges the notion of an autonomous and stable self (Najmabadi 2014, 275).

Through her analysis, Najmabadi is making some key analytical points. First, ‘professing selves’ are contingent on the self’s relationality. The self is relational and expressed through performance with others. Locality is imperative, in that different parts of our self are dependent on situation, person, and context (Najmabadi 2014, 277). Relationality is professed differently; always changing, always fragmented and incoherent. There is no ‘deep inner truth’, only fragmented selves that position themselves in relation to others and that are situated in a space defined by various connections (Najmabadi 2014, 277). Second, Najmabadi argues that we need other concepts of selves. Her participants are not rejecting or challenging the discourses of e.g. law, Islamic jurisprudence, psychiatry etc., but instead use these discourses and ‘play’ within them. The micro-spaces that her participants play within are being used differently from what intended by the people in power (Najmabadi 2014, 289). Najmabadi’s main intervention is to explore selves through conduct, in relation to ‘other’ concepts of selves - meaning that selves can manifest themselves without labeling oneself as queer, and instead use the micro-spaces that are available. In other words, we are not dealing with essences or identities; rather we are dealing with conduct or performance – what Najmabadi calls ‘self-in-conduct’:

[self-in-conduct is] a sense of being in the world that is centered on conduct – the situated, contingent, daily performances that depend not on any sense of some essence about one’s body and psyche. Rather it is defined in terms of its specific location and temporal node at the intersection of numerous relations[...] (Najmabadi 2014, 297).

The question ‘am I queer/lesbian?’ is for Najmabadi “a question of not some inner truth but of figuring out and navigating one’s relationship-in-conduct vis-à-vis others” (Najmabadi 2014, 298). Najmabadi understands participants’ self-identifications through a network of actors, that is, through ‘doing’. For example, “a life narrative is told as one in the context of a connected and located series of moments within the sites that give meaning to one’s life” (Najmabadi 2014, 297).

In relation to my project, I want to see how my participants produce their subjectivities through their life stories, and in what ways participants profess themselves through action/conduct. I believe Najmabadi's notion of subject formation as "self-in-conduct" is a well-suited concept to explore how at different points in life participants perform one's self in different ways to build an identity that they themselves maintain that they have. In regards to for example family relationships and 'openness' of one's sexual orientation, subject formation is essential to explore. Subject formation is not only about how people perceive or experience themselves, but also about how others perceive and experience them. Multiple subjectivities and contextual conditions such as family and majority society, with even larger overarching power structures might make participants profess themselves in different ways. Professing selves can thus vary from which contexts participants move through and between. Closely connected to performance are the heteronormative and homonormative paradigms, which I now will engage.

3.3 Heteronormativity, Homonormativity, and Homonationalism

The regulating modes of heteronormativity dictate proper femininities and masculinities, through the ways in which bodies correlate with 'proper' gender and sexual performances (Butler 1993). Queer and feminist theorists have argued over disclosing heteronormativity as an excluding and authoritative framework, because the boundaries of belonging are always sexualized (Rich 1980; Butler 1990). The concept heteronormativity refers to the interdependence of gender and sexuality (Ingraham 1994), where sexual attraction to the opposite gender is naturalized, while non-heterosexual forms of desire is seen as deviating from the heterosexual norm. As Stevi Jackson argues "Normative heterosexuality regulates those kept within the boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them" (Jackson 2006, 105).

Lisa Duggan (2002) presented the idea of 'homonormativity', arguing that homonormativity "[...] does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a [...] privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2002, 179). The idea is further understood as producing cultural norms for the 'proper' way to be gay and lesbian. Therefore,

homonormativity maintains stereotypes for lesbians and gays based on gender, race and sexuality. Instead of disrupting the normalizing project of heteronormativity, LGBTIQ organizing deal with a recognizable shift in seeking inclusion within it (Collins 2009).

Gender equality and sexual diversity have turned into markers for measuring modernization, and are defined in relation to the western experience (Rahman 2014). The transnationalization of LGBTIQ rights propel these specific homonormativities into the narrative of modernity, which in turn renders particular structures of sexual performance into one consistent narrative that the west can be said to be writing. As Rahman (2014) argues, the gay rights discourses in the west are seen as already achieved, and the west is thus challenging the (Muslim) east for being anti-queer.

The construction of homonationalist LGBTIQ identities is described in Jasbir Puar's influential book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). In the context of the USA, Puar argues along the same lines as Duggan (2002) that the heteronormativity that the U.S government is relying upon is accompanied by *homonormative* ideologies that reproduce restricted class, racial, gendered and national ideals (Puar 2007, xxv). Puar coined the term 'homonationalism' (homonormative nationalism) to describe the post-9/11 U.S. She perceives the U.S. as a space of sexual exceptionalism, where Islamophobia has contributed to this exceptionalism and given resources to collaboration between certain homosexuals and the state (Puar 2007, 68). Today, the understanding is that the "Other" – the Muslims, the immigrants, the ones that are not modern – is the one who expresses and perpetuates homophobia, due to entirely different cultural and religious systems or norms (Haritaworn 2015). Consequently, "homosexuality has switched sides in the familiar dichotomy: from a sign of uncivilization, homosexuality or at least the 'tolerance' or 'acceptance' of (certain modes of) it, has become a marker of civilization" (Bracke 2012, 249). Homonationalism can be said to be a tactic, "my enemy's enemy is my friend", and today western modernity is seen in close association with the LGBTIQ movement. Homonormativity creates a double pressure for queers of color.⁷ This includes, blaming Islam for causing homophobia, resulting in the marginalization of Muslims, queer or otherwise, who do not fit into the neoliberal structure (Puar 2007, 2). Puar suggests that "queerness is a process of racialization" (Puar 2007) and that homonormativity is dividing queer people into

⁷ This point on double pressure is linked to e.g. the Norwegian Fafo-report (2014) that found that homonormativity largely is connected with norms of whiteness.

those who must be protected, and those who are eliminated from protection. This begs the question; what does a queer body need to look like in order to be protected?

Puar's notion of 'homonationalism' tackles how the state ordains homonormative adherence, rather than being a hindrance to the queer community. This biased incorporation of queer subjects as protected by the state "rests upon specific performances of [...] sexual exceptionalism, vis-à-vis perverse, improperly hetero and homo Muslim sexualities" (Puar 2007, xxxiv), which in turn convey "acceptable" scripts of homosexuality. The emergence of a national homosexuality has placed queers of color, and queer Muslims outside of hetero- and homonational discourses.

While the discussion of homonormativity and homonationalism has indicated a notion of an 'acceptable' queer, there is a lack of research and investigation into the lived experience of those left outside these discourses. I intend to use Puar's notion of homonationalism, while also drawing on discourses of heteronormativity and homonormativity in my empirical analysis. Within the realm of lived experience, the abovementioned concepts can be meaningful so as to trace individual experiences that can get lost in these concepts, which in turn can give new insights into how queer Muslim women navigate the discourses.

3.3.1 'The closet': western pride and prejudice

Fused into the framework of homonationalism and western diverse sexual identities is the 'coming out' narrative. The 'coming out' narrative can be said to have become a 'rite of passage' into a queer community, and rests on or is embedded in some form of 'essential self' that needs to be liberated from 'the suppressive closet' in mainstream (western) LGBTIQ rights activism. The 'epistemology of the closet' has emerged as a common unifying discourse in western gay culture (Sedgwick 1990, 68), which is problematic as it does not take into account LGBTIQ politics as interconnected and developed through a range of factors, such as religion, ethnicity and class, that grant varying degrees of access to this 'queer world' (Rahman 2014, 99).

In the article "Sexual diversity, Islamic jurisprudence and sociality" (2011), South African acclaimed scholar Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed, a researcher in Religious studies at the University of Johannesburg problematize the notion of 'the closet' for LGBTIQ Muslims. The

article offers a critique of Scott Kugle's (2010) project of trying to make Islamic authoritative texts sexually sensitive. Through re-reading and interpreting the Qur'an and fiqh literature, Kugle attempts to reveal texts' sexually sensitive potential, and to give a new meaning to the text (Kugle 2010). Kugle's use of western categories and notions of LGBTIQ identity is challenged by Esack and Mahomed and they argue that Kugle's approach results in restricting the sociality of the body and sexual expression in Islam (Esack and Mahomed 2011, 53). Writing from a post-colonial perspective, Esack and Mahomed are challenging the normative western understandings of queer sexuality. While Esack and Mahomed acknowledge the need to transform the Islamic environment to be more open-minded of same-sex relationships, they argue that the need for transformation is not automatically solved by legislating positive law for same-sex relationships and desires. Esack and Mahomed see Kugle's project as a way of 'civilizing' alternative ways of knowing and experiencing (Esack and Mahomed 2011, 52). Their contribution in problematizing Kugle's approach, in connection to 'the closet', is their description of 'the closet' as a form of queer redemption; an important place to resist normativity (Esack and Mahomed 2011, 54). Esack and Mahomed argue that Kugle is undermining the importance of 'the closet' as a safe space.

In my analysis I wish to employ Esack and Mahomed's insights pertaining to reclaiming 'the closet', and also question the value of 'the closet'. I follow Esack and Mahomed's assertion that 'the closet' can act as a space of protection, a safe space. A concern, then, that exist around 'coming out' is that those individuals who choose not to publicly announce that they are queer, risk being eschewed for not being 'true to who they really are'. This can create a false dichotomy and a queer 'hierarchy', dividing those who have 'come out' and those who have not.

3.4 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined theoretical frameworks, insights and terms that I employ in the analytical section of this thesis. The theories outlined are theories assembled from the locus of experience: the theory of intersectionality, as employed by Rahman, and Najmabadi's insights on subject formation, recognizes and acknowledges relations of power and various ways of discrimination that affect people in different ways. I find Rahman's notion of intersectionality as a 'disruptively queer term' and Najmabadi's approach of 'professing selves' to be relevant to how identity markers are expressed through the actions and interactions of an embodied

self. These theoretical perspectives and concepts foreground an understanding of identity as fluid, multifaceted, produced, action-oriented, complex and intersecting. The theoretical perspectives can make it possible for me to study how my participants understand and form their identity in different ways, in different phases in life, and in different contexts.

Moreover, I intend to use Puar's notion of homonationalism, while also utilizing the discourses of heteronormativity and homonormativity to trace participants lived experiences within these discourses. The dominant script of 'coming out' ignores the various reasons for why people may choose not to 'come out', and, accordingly, use the closet as a safe space. Through not giving privilege to the 'coming out' discourse, by foregrounding participants' experiences in this regard, I emphasize that visibility is not always the goal, and that invisibility can be a choice. Furthermore, because it is essential to bear in mind that queer Muslim women are not a homogeneous group as there are particular cultural, religious, and social aspects that inform individual woman's experiences, I believe the theories outlined will be fruitful in the upcoming analyses.

4 Method and process

Driven by the interest of exploring queer Muslim women's relationship to sexuality and religion, I am undertaking qualitative research, using in-depth interviews and a life story approach. This chapter is three-fold; first, I outline a rationale for choice of method, including reflections on significant issues that might arise in the interview situation. Following this, I reflect upon my role as a researcher, highlighting three key concepts developed by Donna Haraway (1998). The second section of the chapter is a description of how I as a researcher have navigated the field, contacted organizations and interlocutors that have been particularly helpful to the development of the project. Hereunder, I also want to give the reader insight into how I recruited participants to the study, selection criteria, and a description of the interview guide. The third section of the chapter explains processes of transcription, data analysis, a presentation of the participants partaking in the study, and finally, ethical considerations.

3.1 Rationale for choice of method

The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of queer Muslim women's lived experiences in Norway. Being made aware of the difficulties of securing interviews with this particular group, as highlighted in the literature, I found that qualitative method was the only realistic approach. The life story interview, combined with a semi-structured interview guide was employed so as to explore rich and deep narratives from the participants. The semi-structured interview guide is just that: a guide that fits well with life narratives as the participant is encouraged to speak freely around a chosen topic, with a flexible and fluid structure. Meanings and understandings are created in the interaction between researcher and participant. The interview is a co-production, involving the construction and re-construction of knowledge, and embodied research with different bodies gives different meanings. I draw largely on Robert Atkinson's (1998; 2002) approach to the life story interview, which he describes as essentially being a narrative of what a person has become, and can describe a person's journey from birth to present. It foregrounds participants' significant moments, experiences and feelings in a lifetime (Atkinson 1998). The life story interview is an active form of interviewing in that it unveils and gives insight into a small number of individuals' experiences in life, with special emphasis on important aspects, in this case religion and sexuality. The life story interview provides me as a researcher with the means to see and

identify links that connect one part of the participant's life to another. Nevertheless, a number of significant issues need to be reflected on, because each life story is multifaceted in its own way. For example, does the life story as told by participants, tell me who she sees herself as? (Atkinson 2002, 133) The participant is re-representing who she is, and can tell me whatever she wants. The participants' representation of themselves in the interview situation is the participants' choice of how she wants to represent herself. I am not looking for what the participants' 'essence' is, or evaluate the 'authenticity' of their stories. I also find Atkinson's reflections on the participants voice useful; if the participant has found her voice, know what it is and is used to using her voice, then it is difficult to see certain changeable relations that can affect the voice the person is using to tell her story (Atkinson 2002, 133). In relation to the theme of this project, I am attentive to the ways in which participants create and live their lives, their intersectional selves, the narratives participants tell about themselves and who they are. But also, as Atkinson describes, "What may be of greatest interest is how people see themselves and want others to see them" (Atkinson 1998, 24). Moreover, the relationship between the participant and the researcher can affect the level of openness in the interview, a point I discuss in the next section of this chapter.

Another important point for me, was to speak with, and not about queer Muslim women. A study on women needs the voices of women, a study on queer lives needs the voices of queer people, and a study on Muslims needs the voices of Muslims. Through narratives we can explore the ways in which participants grapple with the entanglements of religion and sexuality. The fact that little is known about queer Muslim women's lives in Norway means that the life narratives collected can make a valuable contribution to adding to the plurality of voices of lived experiences, and challenge Norwegian discourses pertaining to heteronormativity and homonormativity. The life story approach will make participants' journeys visible to me as a researcher, and thus give me insight into how a Muslim woman's queer body moves through the web of religious doctrine and heteronormativity.

I hope to give the participants' narratives the place that they deserve, and more importantly, do justice to their life stories. Research on the subject of queer Muslim women's experiences provides knowledge about participants lived reality. However, as I am problematizing the notion of 'coming out', I am also careful not to perpetuate this notion in my research. As such, it is important to discuss my role in making participants' experiences and lives visible. As previous research highlight, queer Muslim women are a 'hidden' population (Siraj 2011;

2015). A majority of the reactions I have received from people asking about the project reflects a similar view: ‘do they even exist?’ In other words, the dominant assumption, at least as evidenced in the scant literature and as reflected in comments from acquaintances, is that queer Muslim women ‘do not exist’. The normative western view, perceiving Islam and sexual diversity as mutually exclusive (Rahman 2014), projects a combination of ignorance and unawareness regarding queer Muslim women. My aim is to foreground these women’s experiences – however, my aim is not to do this by perpetuating and giving privilege to the coming-out discourse. Rather, I follow Esack and Mahomed’s (2011) claim that ‘the closet’ can be a protected and safe space for queer Muslims, an assumption that problematizes visibility as something that is not always wanted and/or posits invisibility as a matter of choice. Additionally, and as mentioned in the chapter on previous research, queer Muslim women might meet some specific challenges that are largely made invisible through the focus on gay male experience. It is thus important to address and probe the specificity of female experience.

4.1 The role of the researcher

My first entry into the topic of queer Muslim women was introduced to me in a course at my faculty called “Islam, Gender and Sexuality”, through a course reading by Asifa Siraj (2011) on a closeted lesbian Muslim in Scotland. After choosing the topic of my thesis I had to think about; who am I to do this? And what are the implications? Inspired by Nina Hoel’s (2013; forthcoming) reflections on embodying the field and taking the body seriously, I draw on her insights to reflect upon my embodied positioning as a researcher.

My own embodied positioning is that I am a non-Muslim, non-queer, white Norwegian woman with no prior connection to the queer community. In this sense, I can be said to be in an “outsider” position. This differs from lesbian and gay researchers who do qualitative research in the queer communities and who can be characterized as having an “insider” position and perspective due to intimate knowledge and/or being part of a queer network. The insider/outsider binary has been challenged. Hoel (forthcoming) emphasizes that in going into the field one has to be aware of the politics of positioning and that “there is never just one way of positioning oneself”. She argues that “[...] the insider/outsider is limited and limiting as it does not take into account the fluidity of real and en fleshed subjects and the multiple positionings that a researcher can embody in the field” (Hoel forthcoming, 10). Through using

the analytical category of intersectionality, Hoel argues that the intersectional frame can capture the ‘in-betweenness’ better than the insider/outsider paradigm. Approaching the field and participants intersectionally acknowledges my diverse markers of identity. Whereas some identity markers such as religious affiliation and sexuality are different from participants, other markers of identity can be alike or intersecting, such as gender, age, geographical location and education level (Hoel forthcoming, 10). The ‘in-betweenness’ creates proximity and distance, which can be essential to interpret empirical data.

Furthermore, the power dynamics in the research relationship needs special attention in relation to my positioning as a researcher. Hoel is drawing on the work of Donna Haraway (1998) to highlight particular relations of power as well as knowledge production as always being embodied and partial. Hoel’s engagement with Haraway is beneficial to this project so as to analyze the research relationship and the power relations therein. I will here highlight three key concepts developed by Donna Haraway as discussed by Hoel (2013): accountability, positioning and partiality. To be accountable, in a study that claims a feminist framework, the researcher is compelled not to re-inscribe dominant stereotypes or recreate inequality. This does not mean that the researcher cannot write about experiences of inequality and marginalization that the participants might talk about (Hoel 2013, 30). I am accountable to my participants, and my feminist lenses make me accountable to question leading representations and not to reproduce them. Positioning refers to the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Here, Hoel argues the need to mention or reflect on how diverse power dynamics have shaped and had an effect on the research situation and interview (Hoel 2013, 28). Regarding my project, positioning includes reflecting on what I as a researcher am giving back to the participants who are sharing their stories with me. I realize that being non-Muslim and non-queer inform the way I read, interpret, analyze and so on, the empirical material. It is therefore important that I am transparent and clear. My positioning as a white and non-Muslim woman might have impacted knowledge production by ways of what participants shared or chose not to share during the interviews. Maybe I would have received less information if I were Muslim? Therein lies an assumption that if I was Muslim, participants might have been less willing to talk to me due to the dominant view that Muslims condemn homosexuality. The fact that I am female, I believe played a central role in soliciting participants. Many participants articulated that they would never have shared their stories if I was male. Perhaps it was positive that I identify as heterosexual as participants might have had bad experiences with the queer white non-Muslim persons. My own positioning in this

research was important as a constant reminder that participants lived experiences does not only exist as words on a page, but are connected to real women with real experiences.

Haraway's third term, partiality, is connected to avoiding generalized representations of the research sample. Partiality has to do with an acknowledgement of the multiple and diverse views expressed among participants. Various factors, such as social background, upbringing, religious convictions and so on, illustrate how queer Muslim women cannot be seen as a homogenous category. As emphasized by Henrietta Moore:

The experience of being a woman or being black or being Muslim can never be a singular one, and will always be dependent on a multiplicity of locations and positions that are constructed socially, that is intersubjectively (Moore 1994, 3).

Additionally, reflexivity has been a crucial concept in the research process. Reflexivity requires self-awareness and attention to self-positioning and dynamics of power. In the research process, I became very aware of my own race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion (or lack thereof). As a researcher and interviewer I am indeed situated as a subject of power, which always left me remembering that participants trusted me with their most intimate stories. My identity markers as white, heterosexual and Norwegian might create an intersectional unit that participants could interpret as powerful and/or privileged. Together with Haraway's three key concepts – accountability, positioning and partiality – reflexivity constitutes an important methodological key that I consider in the process of research, data collection and analyses. By continuously reflecting on my role as a researcher and my research relationship with participants I believe I became more equipped to undertake the study.

4.2 Navigating the field: organizations and interlocutors

My research journey into queer networks, navigating through snowballing and reaching out to various people, has been my greatest challenge in this project – as was also expected. In the process of negotiating and gaining access via gatekeepers and interlocutors, I got in touch with a woman, who I actually thought was a potential participant, but as it turned out was neither Muslim nor lesbian. However, she recommended several places I could turn to for help with finding participants, and she got me in contact with Amal Aden, a publically well-

known lesbian Muslim woman. I found it necessary to get in contact with Amal Aden because of her position and contribution as a writer and public intellectual in the Norwegian media, where she challenges both the Muslim community and the majority society for viewing Islam and homosexuality as mutually exclusive. I wanted to talk to her about her views of queer Muslim women's realities in Norway. I also had the hope of Aden acting as an interlocutor, putting me in contact with potential participants for the study (a hope I had when meeting with every person I spoke to about the project). The reason for me not interviewing Aden as a participant is precisely her position. Aden has published the autobiography *If hope slips everything is lost* (2012), and given multiple interviews, so it would be impossible to anonymize her. One of the crucial points of anonymity in this project is that participants should not be identifiable. A benefit of anonymity can also be that readers can relate to the narratives told without being hung up on who the narrators are. The importance of Aden being an important interlocutor is her distinctive position, voice and experience in Norway as a lesbian Muslim woman.

During my conversation with Amal Aden, she told me that her reason for being 'open' about her sexuality is personal, in that her 'coming out' publicly resulted from her having a conversation with a young Muslim boy who was contemplating suicide due to his homosexual orientation. Aden emphasizes that she understands that not everyone can be 'open', but the more people who can bear it, the easier it can become. Aden states that she knows numerous lesbian Muslims who are in 'the closet', and that the 'closeted' women find comfort in talking to her, oftentimes Aden being the only one knowing about their sexual orientation. Through giving seminars and speeches in different arenas e.g. conferences and high schools, Aden tries to appeal to Muslims who are lesbian. From our conversation, I learned that there are differences between gay men and lesbian women in the Muslim community. Aden states that she talks to a lot of queer women who are unhappily married to men, yet, the pressure of gender roles makes it hard for them to leave their marriages. Aden elaborates further that many Muslim communities (in Norway) seem to accept men being in 'the closet', while also being aware that they are having sexual relations with other men. Aden states that men can more easily 'hide away' and 'do what they want' (if they are homosexual), unlike women who struggles with being 'stuck' at home with the responsibility of children. What I also learned, and was most struck by, is the sexism that seems to exist within the queer community (at the time of this interview I had no participants, and I was oblivious to the fact that sexism was an issue in the queer community). Aden informed me that lesbian Muslims face

discrimination from gay Muslim men. The saying “you cannot be a lesbian, because to be a woman is almost an offence in itself”, meaning that women are of a lower rank than men, and heterosexuality is their only choice, is one such example. This is an important rationale for exploring queer Muslim women’s experiences.

Aden stated several times during our conversation, when she recalled women who have told her that they are lesbian, that “maybe she wants to talk to you”, but always including that the women she is talking about is in ‘the closet’. Through Amal Aden’s description of the field in the Norwegian context, I became even more aware of the difficulty of locating participants for this study. Her continuously foregrounding of ‘closeted’ queer Muslim women, led me to perceive queer Muslim women in Norway as ‘closeted’. Following the meeting with Aden, I consulted with two LGBTIQ organizations, FRI and Queer World, so as to get to know the field I was getting into and obtain context-specific knowledge. Organizations working for LGBTIQ rights are layered in the Norwegian landscape today. FRI, the Norwegian Organization for Sexual and Gender Diversity, is the biggest organization in size, and has been a clear voice for LGBTIQ rights since 1950. Oslo Pride Festival has been organized by FRI every year since 1982, seeking to make the broadness of LGBTIQ culture more visible, increase understanding and inclusion in the Norwegian society (FRI 2016). Chairman of FRI, Hans Heen Sikkeland, provided me with new ways of thinking about the interview guide, especially pertaining to terminology in that it is important to emphasize situations that do not use labels which in turn possibly could make it easier for participants to talk about feelings and faith. Sikkeland also suggested restricting the research sample to cis-gender participants. Cis-gender is a term that is under constant debate. I have interpreted Sikkeland’s use of the term to mean women whose gender identity correlates with their sex, but who falls outside of the heteronormative discourse due to their sexual preference for other women. I decided to follow the advice by Sikkeland, with the exception of one participant who identified as bisexual. I will explain my rationale for this choice later in this chapter.

There are no organizations in Norway that exclusively work with LGBTIQ Muslims. However, the organization Queer World works with and for LGBTIQ people with minority backgrounds. Queer World started as a project organized by FRI, and in 2010 Queer World became an independent organization. The organization supports LGBTIQ people with minority backgrounds and facilitates social gatherings where LGBTIQ people with minority backgrounds constitute the majority (Queer World 2015). Today, Queer World’s headquarters

is located in Oslo, but also includes active groups in both Bergen and Trondheim. The organization is often engaged in the public, through for example regular columns in the magazine FETT,⁸ and writing articles for newspapers. I contacted the (now previous) leader of the organization, Nora Mehsen, who herself is a self-identified lesbian and Muslim, to learn more about the organization and how they work. Mehsen explained that there often is a need to categorize people as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and so on, and emphasized that there are cultures that do not have this conceptual apparatus that is common in Norway and in the west. Cultures that do not use these categories, can be challenging for immigrants who are seeking asylum in Norway, and are being persecuted in their home countries on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Immigrants might not use the “right” terms at the asylum-interviews, and can thus be misunderstood. However, Mehsen states that she knows that UDI (The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration) is focused on being sensitive to the conceptual apparatus being different for immigrants, and that UDI has a general awareness about this. The role of the organization, Queer World, Mehsen explains, is that the organization does not assist immigrants judicially, but they provide additional information in the asylum application process, and if the applicant wishes, staff from the organization may join in court appeal cases. Moreover, due to negative experiences with authorities in countries of origin, immigrants who are seeking help from Queer World get support and briefings in the asylum application process from the organization.

I asked Mehsen about Muslim members and the prevailing/normative belief that homosexuality and Islam are mutually exclusive categories. Mehsen explained that there exist diverse beliefs. There are some members in their organization that believe that they cannot live out their sexual orientation because it is contrary to the word of Allah, and at the same time argues that no-one can tell them that they have an oppressive religious interpretation. Some have sought out the organization wishing to be part of a network, while still believing that it is not right according to the Qur’an to ‘practice’ their sexual orientation. Others do not have a problem with reconciling their religious identity with their sexual identity.

Through my conversation with Mehsen, I attained greater insight into the workings of the organization. I also came to understand how important Queer World is for LGBTIQ immigrants seeking asylum in Norway and for LGBTIQ people with minority backgrounds

⁸ FETT – Feminist magazine in Norway.

who are on the lookout for a safe space, someone to talk to, or a community. The diverse views of sexuality and faith illustrate some of the tensions for queer Muslims, where some do not 'live out' their sexuality because of dominant understandings of Islam as condemning homosexuality, yet still seek out the organization to be part of a queer community.

Following the meeting with Mehsen, I started attending weekly social gatherings at the headquarters of the organization. At the social gathering, called Queer Café, members cook food for everyone that wishes to stop by. It is an informal gathering where people can share food and conversation and get to know each other. At Queer Café, many participants want to cook meals from their home countries. This constitutes a regular practice of the social gathering. As a white, blue eyed, Norwegian woman I stood out. For the first time knowingly being a sexual minority, I was both nervous and excited. My objective was to volunteer of some kind; I wanted to participate in something useful in "their" space, so that I wasn't just a person who took up the space of someone who actually needed it for its original purpose. I was entering a safe space for LGBTIQ people with minority backgrounds, their "free" space, and I came in as a researcher. First, I felt like my presence destroyed the sanctity of their safe space. The venue was always filled with people sitting and standing everywhere. I could not help but notice that the majority of participants were men – there were almost no women. Nora Mehsen explained that a major part of Queer World's network consists of refugees and asylum seekers. The organization knows that the majority of refugees and asylum seekers are men, and this reflects their membership in many ways. The organization is aware of barriers that can make it more difficult for women, including transgender people to participate, and are focusing on sexism and transphobia within the organization. As for the low attendance of women, Mehsen stated "it is important for us that our space is experienced as safe for everyone. We have a separate women's group to create a private and secure space in addition to the general meeting places".

Personally, I experienced Queer Café as an including space, after getting over my feelings of invading the space and not fitting in due to my visible identity markers. You sit down, and when someone sits next to you it is common that you talk about where you are from, what you work with, difficulties and hardships in life, boyfriends, sex, etc. I was soon enough asked if I was lesbian, however, the ones who asked was pretty convinced that I was not queer. It was natural for me to tell them the reason for why I was there, and then what I had hoped for

happened; a young man sitting next to me told me that he might have a friend who could be a possible participant, and voilà, the snowballing worked.

4.3 Recruiting participants to the study

Through the fall of 2016 and the winter and spring of 2017 I attempted to reach out through every channel I could think of that might be fruitful for locating possible participants. To start with, participant recruitment was undertaken through publishing a notice in FETT (see appendix 1) and the social media profile of FRI. By doing this I was able to inform a limited, yet significant public about my research. I also reached out to a few mosques in Oslo; they were not open to share information about their community and asked me to contact individuals. Various Muslim organizations were contacted, with no response. Islamic Council of Norway did not reply to the e-mail I sent them. The organization Sister-Good, an international online magazine for the voices of women of Muslim heritage, could not assist me. Following the first interview, through my contact at Queer Café, I had to immerse myself in an additional two months of intense networking. Snowballing became my primary sampling strategy. Various individuals showed great interest in the project, and reached out on my behalf to individuals from multicultural communities. Similar to the mosques and some organizations there have been individuals that have not wanted to circulate information about the project because of their views on homosexuality. It has been hard to reach outside the queer networks, due to the apparent taboo queer sexuality represent for some individuals. However, I also found it challenging to gain entry into the queer community in view of the fact that few women attended the social gatherings that I visited.

Several possible participants were asked to participate, agreed, but later declined due to not being completely comfortable with sharing their life experiences. Some highlighted their fear of being recognized, even when I informed them about the use of made-up names. The fear of being recognized can be said to be a finding in itself and says a great deal about how sensitive the topic is. What might have been a drawback for some women was that they got the information through friends, and did not receive the information directly from me. At times, I experienced people receiving wrong information when the information had gone through several people. In the end, I managed to recruit a total of six participants. The participation of these women was voluntary and I never pushed anyone who was hesitant to participate. All of the participants emphasized that being part of the study was important for the deepening of

knowledge about queer Muslim experiences and paramount in the development of a ‘queer-affirming’ Islam, and a ‘gay-affirming’ mind-set.

4.4 Selection criteria

I have not been in the position to ‘pick and choose’ participants on the basis of, for example, age, ethnicity or background - so as to obtain variation in the research sample. This is due, as explained, to the difficulty of securing interviews with queer Muslim women. Nevertheless, some criteria were decided on, in order to narrow down the scope of investigation:

Participants had to identify as 1. Cis-gender women, 2. as queer or lesbian, 3. as Muslim or formerly Muslim, and 4. had to be living in Norway. As I mentioned above, I included one bisexual woman in the project, and I would like to explain why. I got in contact with the participant through a friend, and we started the interview. The participant had already told me several times that she was queer, but as the interview went on she told me that she felt excluded from both the majority heterosexual society and the queer community, because she was bisexual. I did not want to be yet another excluding experience for her, so for me it became natural to include her story.

The selection of participants to this study is not based on any other criteria than the aforementioned, with the exception of the one participant who identifies as bisexual.

Regardless, I have been so fortunate to have met six women from six different countries, who are at different ages and at varying places in their lives.

4.5 Interview guide

The interview guide (see appendix 2) was developed as a thematic guide, so as to cover different areas of the participants’ life. The themes ranged from childhood, education, work and some more specific questions, for example, how participants navigate their sexual and religious identity in different spaces. I consistently started asking about their childhood if the participant had not already begun her story, and the interviews always moved over to the other areas of participants’ life, but not always in the same order. Due to the fact that every narrative and experience is unique, different themes emerged. In the interview situation it became easier for me after the first interview to come up with follow-up questions, and to ensure that I understood what participants meant by repeating what they had said to either get

clarity on a topic or to get the participant to elaborate. Each participant was assured confidentiality and given a pseudonym prior to the process of coding and analysis. I gave each participant the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves. Two participants chose a pseudonym, and four of participants wanted me to choose for them. For some participants the interview possibly had an empowering effect, in that they expressed their desire to tell their story so that hopefully others could relate and be empowered.

4.6 Transcription process

The foundation of the empirical research as a whole has been the interviews with my participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview had taken place and I also wrote down immediate thoughts and certain observations that I made during the interview. The transcription process was done verbatim, reflecting everything that was said during the interviews. Following the process of transcription, I sent the excerpts that I wished to include to participants who wanted to see what I included from their interviews. In this way, participants could review my choices and give me feedback if they wished something to be removed from the text. This process has been very important because of my own sense of accountability to participants, which include that participants did not end up feeling misunderstood or mis-presented in any way. I have made minor edits to the chosen excerpts so as to make the language and grammar easily understandable, also in its written form.

4.7 Approaching the analysis

The first stage of the analysis involved reading through the transcripts, looking for themes that emerged from the texts. After transcribing the interviews, I made two columns, one containing the transcription and one column where I wrote my comments to either explain or highlight what the participant was saying, marking important points or sequences in participants' narratives, or thoughts and observations that I made so as to assist the process of analysis. After having read through the transcriptions several times, I developed a coding system. I employed a system of thematic coding. Thematic coding involves identifying dominant themes in the interviews in order to extract main features, nuances, tensions and (in-)consistencies. Some codes had connections with other codes, making up cross-codes, or making it natural to present some codes together. The interview transcripts were pasted all

over my walls and color-coded according to the different themes that I located. After color-coding the transcripts, it was easier to locate the similar codes and the codes that differed from the others in the later interviews. Following this coding process, I made a map that gave me a thorough overview to pull out themes from the narratives.

4.8 Participants

The narratives that are employed in this study came from immigrants or Norwegians born to immigrant parents. A total of six women participated in this study. This small sample signifies the difficulty of recruiting queer Muslim women to this study as explained above, and the small sample should not discredit the research (Siraj 2012, 455). My first participant was recruited through Queer World. Four participants were recruited through the snowballing method, and one was a referral from one of the participants. Two participants are of African descent, two participants of Middle Eastern descent, one is of Asian descent and one is of Eastern European descent. Participants' ages range from early twenties to forty years old. The interviews varied from 1.5 hours to 4 hours and were conducted where the participant felt comfortable. Two interviews were conducted at my home upon participants' request, while the remaining four interviews were conducted in public places such as restaurants and cafes. Most of the interviews were done in Oslo, but I also travelled outside of Oslo to meet with participants.

4.8.1 Terminology

It is necessary to address terminology or the categories of 'lesbian' and 'queer' that are used in this study. These categories are particularly problematic when discussing same-sex sexuality beyond the western world. Several scholars, for example Joseph Massad (2002), have argued that while some Muslim Middle-Easterners practice same-sex acts, few would identify as homosexual or lesbian (Massad 2002). While there are Arabic terms for variations of 'hetero' and 'homo', Arabic concepts are not equivalent to western concepts. Also noting the diverse geographical origins of my participants, I am choosing to use the terms the participants prefer to use.

4.9 Ethical considerations

This thesis is developed in accordance with The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH) guidelines. Prior to conducting interviews, I applied for approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in order to ensure proper processing of personal data (see appendix 3). In accordance with NSD's ethical guidelines I developed an informed consent form (see appendix 4) that explained the project and its purpose, including voluntary participation, the participants' right to withdraw if they wished, and processes of anonymization. Participants signed with initials and date on one page that I kept, and received the information page to keep for themselves. I also informed participants that I could e-mail them the transcripts from the interview so that they could read and decide if it was correct and if they approved what I used in the thesis. Four participants wanted to read the transcripts, whereas two participants declined this possibility, stating that they trusted the project and me. The audio recordings from the interviews were stored in a secure and appropriate manner, where only I and my supervisor had access. The recordings will be deleted one month after the project has been finalized, while anonymous transcriptions are kept by me.

While undertaking this research project, personal commitment has been highly important. It was important for me to gain participants' trust, and to establish a mutual relationship between me and the participants. It was also significant for me to foreground from the very beginning that participants were 'in charge' of what they wanted to share and how much they wanted to share. The anonymization of the data was also important to emphasize, as in some cases I was the first person to hear participants' recounting of particular experiences. Easily identifiable characteristics' have been rewritten or omitted.

The layered queer field in Norway made visible exceedingly nuanced lived experiences and attest to how sexuality and religious belonging is experienced differently by queer Muslim women. My participants come from (as noted above), various countries and different social backgrounds and have given me extensive insights into the ways in which queer Muslim women's being-in-the-world is embodied in contemporary Norway. I now turn to my analytical chapters, where particular themes are investigated to get a deeper understanding of the ways in which Muslim female same-sex sexuality is lived.

5 Self-narratives: sexuality

This chapter explores the ways in which participants spoke about same-sex sexuality. The narratives illustrate a nuanced picture of queer Muslim women's lived experiences. Most participants narrated their first experiences of becoming aware of same-sex sexuality already in their childhood. Therefore, in the first part of the chapter I engage with participants' narratives of their first experiences of becoming aware of same-sex sexuality. Many of the narratives outlined here articulate participants' feelings of living 'double lives', either in relation to family or in relation to country of origin. Because family is deeply connected to participants' narratives of becoming aware of same-sex sexuality, this chapter foregrounds varying family relationships and negotiations that might have shaped participants' expression of sexuality. The second part of this chapter describes the ways in which participants name same-sex desire and their views and experiences concerning the 'coming out' narrative.

5.1 When sexuality became important

When my participants reflected on when sexuality became important, there were various experiences that surfaced as meaningful for the ways in which participants talked about becoming aware of same-sex sexuality. Most participants stated that they knew and became aware of non-heterosexual sexuality when they were children. Several participants addressed how sexuality was never a topic of discussion growing up, which made them think that homosexuality and spirituality could not coexist. Their narratives echo feelings of being the only queer Muslim girl in the world, and illustrate that each participant have undergone an individual process of recognizing, managing, accepting, and living their same-sex sexuality.

One of my participants, Sumaya, lived with her family in Norway for a few years when she was young, until her father had what Sumaya describes as a 'religious awakening'. This resulted in her father moving Sumaya and some of her siblings to a 'Muslim country', to be brought up in Islam. During my interview with Sumaya, she continuously emphasized that she has never told her parents about her sexual orientation. However, she told me that once, when she was about 15 years old, her father asked her about her sexuality. Sumaya told me that her father's question was connected to a larger conversation that they had about obedience, where her father had asked her to stand up and walk back and forth in front of him. Sumaya elaborates:

I thought he was being weird [by asking her to walk in front of him], and then he asked me if I was lesbian. He said the word [lesbian]! I did not understand the word [lesbian] at this time, but I had already been with a few girls and we had done some stuff... He told me that when we lived in Norway he had read about these girls [lesbians], and wanted to know if I was one of them. I said no, and we changed the topic quickly.

Sumaya had not heard the term 'lesbian' prior to her father's mention of it. When her father described what it meant to be 'lesbian', having 'read about these girls', Sumaya understood that the label suited her sexuality. Sumaya told me that she remembers feeling something more than friendship for a girl when she was in the 7th grade, but that she kept her feelings secret. In Norway, lesbian women, queer lifestyle, queer couples etc., is often featured in the public discourse, which is not the case in Sumaya's country of origin. Due to her family having lived in Norway, her father seemed to link particular behavioral traits (e.g. having a particular walk) to lesbian sexuality and inferred from this that Sumaya could be lesbian. Her father's reasoning to engage in conversation with her was to ask her to walk in front of him. This point is interesting in relation to what perception one has for lesbian women (is there such a thing as a lesbian walk?). The quote also demonstrates that she felt the need to lie, because heterosexuality constitutes the norm in her culture. Sumaya further explained how she navigated through the heteronormative space she was located in:

I have lived a double life all my life. I left for school in my abaya [Islamic dress], and took it [abaya] off before I entered the school. Many girls did that. If I came to school with bruises on my face, everyone understood; because they were also beaten from time to time. It was no shame in that [being beaten by a family member]. But if you like girls you are alone. Therefore, there are things you hide, and camouflage.

In the first part of this excerpt, Sumaya talks about living a 'double life'. I understand her to mean that living a 'double life' involves not sharing her sexual orientation with anyone. The excerpt further tells us that she followed cultural and gendered norms of propriety, wherein dressing in abaya is normal for girls, and physical punishment from parents or siblings is also common. With this in mind, the excerpt tells us that the cultural norms that she grew up with are connected to gender and a particular locality. Not being able to confide in anyone has to

do with social scripts that regulate female and male behavior. The context in which she was brought up is clearly heteronormative, which presupposes certain forms of gender relations. Sumaya's 'double life' is reflective of there only being one gender paradigm – the heteronormative. She was clearly aware of her sexuality not fitting the heterosexual mould.

As she got older, after her father introduced her to the term 'lesbian', she identified as queer/lesbian through the TV-series 'The L-Word'.⁹ At this point, she stated that she experienced her sexuality as being part of herself, to some degree. Sumaya described her university years as 'heaven', having started an all-girls university. She was, however, conscious that her sexuality was not commonly accepted and made sure to not tell anyone about her sexuality. In the context of the all-girls university, however, Sumaya further found a small group of girls that she could confide her same-sex feelings to, for the first time disclosing her sexuality. During her university years she had some short-term relationships and flings with girls, but one particular experience represents a critical moment in her life and her identity:

I moved to [European country] to proceed with my studies, and of course, I fell in love with a girl. The relationship did not last. When the break up happened I realized that I had the right to feel sad. In [country of origin], I did not have this thought, and I think this is because I became mentally aware that my sexuality gave me the right to feel sorrow when a relationship ends, just as much as anyone else [heterosexuals] does.

Sumaya explains how her experience of heartbreak became a decisive moment in her life, leading her to understand that she had as much a right to feel sad as anyone else over lost love, regardless of sexual orientation. Sumaya had never felt heartbreak before and became conscious that her feelings for women were legitimate feelings. The experience made her think differently about her sexuality. In many ways, it seems that Sumaya's experience of heartbreak made her more aware and accepting of her sexuality; her sexuality became embodied in a different way. The vulnerability she embodied in this moment of heartbreak led her to take ownership over the things that meant something to her – shaping her embodied self in a particular way, which invokes Najmabadi's notion of self-in-conduct (Najmabadi 2014). Sumaya was able to cognitively legitimize that she could feel sorrow. Before this moment,

⁹ American-Canadian TV-series featuring stories about the lives and love of a group of lesbian and bisexual women in Los Angeles.

she had not accepted herself as a queer person, and in that experience her emotional register was prompted by heartbreak that made it possible for her to accept her sexuality. This experience can mean that her embodiment of sexuality became a different character than it had been before. Her idea of who she is, what she can do, what she wants and desires changed through an embodied emotional experience. Hence, she filled her sexuality with new meaning because of her lived embodied experience in this situation.

Other participants of this study also tell stories of living ‘double lives’. Similarly to Sumaya, they became aware during childhood that they were not heterosexual. Due to their young age, several participants described their childhood as difficult. One of the main reasons for this was that they could not understand what their sexuality really involved, only that they were different. For example, Zara asserts that:

I always felt different. I started to analyze myself in 4th or 5th grade, I was a child, and had not yet reached puberty. I was insecure about who I was, and used a lot of time to try to figure out who I was. When I was ten years old, I started to fall in love with all my female friends, so I distanced myself from them, because I felt it [romantic feelings for girls] was wrong. I have always felt that I am two people; one person that only I know, and one person that I pretend to be.

Zara, having become aware at an early age that her sexuality was somehow ‘different’, led her to feel insecure about who she was. When she developed romantic feelings for her female friends, she chose to withdraw herself from them. The excerpt also illuminates that Zara felt that her romantic feelings towards girls was wrong, an indication of the passing on of cultural and gendered norms. Zara’s feeling of being ‘two people’ is reflective of Sumaya’s experiences in that Zara also did not share her sexual orientation with her family, and suppressed her feelings for some time. Zara’s feeling of being ‘two people’ creates a certain cognitive dissonance. She experiences internal discomfort between her sexual identity and her relation to family and friends.

During our interview, Zara stated that when she started high-school, rumors had started to spread that she was queer, and, to her surprise, she received positive recognition about being queer. At this point in her life, she was able to live out her queer self by talking to her friends about her sexuality, hence, her classmates saw her as queer, accepted her as queer, and the

space of the school became the primary context in which she was able to express her queer self.

Another participant, Jennifer, describes moving to Norway as achieving a new sense of freedom. Similar to Sumaya and Zara, Jennifer was also a child when she realized that she was not heterosexual. Jennifer told her mother that she liked girls when she was 8 years old, and recalls her sexuality being a secret between her and her mother, because her mother informed her that same-sex sexuality in their country is not permitted. When Jennifer became older, her mother ‘assisted’ her in having secret relationships with women. In their gender segregated society, Jennifer emphasized that her mother gave her and her girlfriends privacy within the female spaces. The separation of the sexes had the favorable effect of hiding same-sex sexuality from the rest of Jennifer’s family, as well as the community. But because of the strict laws against LGBTIQ people in Jennifer’s homeland, she stressed that she was highly cautious with her girlfriends. After a yearlong relationship with a Norwegian woman, she was encouraged by her mother to move to Norway. Jennifer explains:

I love my country, but I need to be free. That is why I came here [to Norway], and moving to Norway was a new freedom. It was nice to be able to get married, and to kiss my girlfriend in the street. I miss my home country, but I am not free or safe there. I sometimes visit [country of origin], but I keep the visits secret.

Jennifer acknowledges that she loves and misses her homeland, but emphasizes the freedom she experiences as a queer person in Norway. Jennifer’s conceptualization of freedom is related to being able to marry her girlfriend and having the ability to show her affection publically without fear of persecution. The overarching power structures in her homeland with laws condemning LGBTIQ identified people and behavior, created implications for her freedom. Her safety was at risk because of her sexual orientation, which, in the end, resulted in her migration. The role of her mother is significant, because ultimately her mother enabled her to migrate to Norway. Her decision to leave her home country was prompted by the desire to continue her romantic relationship in a more open and tolerant environment. For Jennifer, freedom is clearly connected to the ability of expressing her sexual self.

Sumaya, Zara and Jennifer’s narratives all include becoming aware of their sexual orientation as children. Both Sumaya and Zara’s narratives echo feelings of difference as it pertained to

their non-heterosexuality. However, their sexuality became important as they got older and experienced contexts wherein their sexual selves could be performed. In addition, Sumaya's story illustrates how an embodied experience of heartbreak was decisive for how her sexuality became important.

The other participants in this study also explained how they became aware of same-sex sexuality, and their narratives similarly reflect experiences of changing context as crucial for accepting their sexuality. The following narratives also foregrounds feelings of difference, however, they emphasize connections to other queer people and communities as salient for how their sexuality became important:

I knew that I was queer when I was a child, but I spent years thinking about what my sexuality really was. I came into contact with openly queer women when I attended university. I was curious because up until then I had not been to any queer places and I didn't know any queer women, so a lot was going on in my head. [After being acquainted with some queer women] I was invited to a party, where only queer women attended, and I met a girl [at the party]. The girl was an artist, so I went to one of her exhibitions and used my charming [country of origin] ways of flirting and we became a couple shortly after. This was my first girlfriend. What happened inside me was just 'wow', like many pieces that fell into place. (Hawa)

Similarly, another participant explains:

A friend brought me to a queer café, and everything fell in to place. I liked it there [at the queer café], it was such an including space. Maybe I found my place there because there was someone that took me in. (Farah)

Hawa's excerpt explains that she knew that she was queer when she was a child, but needed time to contemplate if what she was feeling towards women was more than infatuation. Both Hawa and Farah's excerpts articulate that something 'fell into place' which prompted a shift in their 'selves'. Farah's story, for example, is mirrored by how being a minority has informed her life. During our interview, Farah further asserted that when she grew up she felt like there was no-one that she could associate herself with, because of her ethnic background. Everyone she knew was white Norwegians. When she became aware that she was lesbian, she stated

that “I found my place”. She discovered another aspect of her identity that was empowering. Her race and Muslim identity was cause of her feeling excluded and not belonging, wherein her feelings of not being part of a community can be said to have created a sense of “Otherness” for Farah, which left her ethnic background vulnerable. Farah also expresses feelings of not being part of a Muslim community, a theme I will discuss in the next chapter.

Hawa and Farah’s excerpts elucidate their experiences with Norwegian LGBTIQ communities as central for realizing and accepting their queer selves. Their narratives show the importance of the queer community, facilitating feelings of identification and belonging. This is reflective of Najmabadi’s point of the self being relational and expressed in and through performance with others. By belonging somewhere and by performing narrations of the self to someone who accepts, understands and relates to these narratives can be said to have empowered Hawa and Farah’s sexual selves. In order to express one’s self through performance participants were seen and understood within these queer communities, hence, I interpret the queer sites as giving new meaning to their sexual selves.

Another participant, Ganimete similarly narrates her experience of when sexuality became important within the Norwegian context:

When I was younger, many of my friends told me that I was lesbian. Apparently there was something about how I acted around them [her friends] that made them view me like that. I moved to Norway with my mother when I was 16 years old, and [after a few years] I started attending the Pride festival. I read more [about queers], attended queer gatherings, and I have always thought women are very beautiful. Was it [finding women beautiful and attractive] more than admiring? Gradually, I felt that there was something more. I accepted it [sexual orientation], and there was no longer anything to wonder about.

Interestingly, Ganimete was perceived and experienced as lesbian by her friends when she was young. During our interview, Ganimete also asserted that she had not thought anything of being attracted to girls until it was pointed out to her. In her country of origin, similar to Jennifer and Sumaya’s narrations, heterosexuality constituted the norm. When Ganimete moved to Norway, she was able to attend the Pride parade and queer gatherings, her new context made it possible for her to recognize and accept her sexuality. Through this excerpt,

we can see how subject formation (Najmabadi 2014) does not only relate to how one perceives or experience oneself, but also about how others perceive and experience you, which in turn inform how you perceive and perform your own self.

The three excerpts above show how participants began to articulate queer identities when a community of queer individuals constitutes a supportive framework. In this sense, queer communities played an important role in the queer identity formation, performance and conduct for Hawa, Farah and Ganimete. Indeed, social involvement and community participation gave the primary means by which reciprocity, respect, and constructing new meanings of the self was achieved.

From the excerpts presented in this section, it becomes clear that most participants had an explicit recognition that same-sex sexuality was unacceptable within their community of origin. Heteronormativity is prevalent in the aforementioned narratives, in which the notion of living a ‘double life’ was foregrounded by several participants. The notion of a ‘double life’ says something about dominant paradigms and understanding about ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ behavior. Notably, heteronormativity influence bodies, where the feeling of difference that several participants mentioned, affects how one lives in the world. They felt out of place, a sense of restriction of what they could do. It is noteworthy that for many of the participants in this study, it was salient that a change of context from either country of origin, or inclusion into a queer community gave new meaning to participants’ queer selves. The ‘migrant’ experience that both Sumaya and Jennifer experienced implied a new sense of ‘freedom’ for their sexual selves, with enjoyment of LGBTIQ rights in the context of Norway. The queer communities can be said to facilitate a different kind of performance and formation of self in relation to others who are same (yet still different).

5.2 Family negotiations and performance

Family ties and obligations constitute a big part of queer Muslim women’s lives, as demonstrated in Siraj (2011; 2012; 2015), Saed (2005) Al-Sayyad (2008; 2010) and Kugle’s (2014) research. In each of my interviews, participants discussed family relationships with varying ties and obligations. The majority of my participants’ narratives featured different negotiations and performance with their families. As already briefly mentioned, some participants have disclosed sexuality to parents and siblings, while others have not. The

parents of participants that know about participants' queer sexuality have reacted in various ways. I want to illustrate by means of quotations some examples of how family relationships have informed participants' selfhood in relation to sexuality.

One example of a complicated relationship between a participant and a parent is that between Zara and her mother. Zara told her mother that she was lesbian when she was 17 years old. She says that her mother was being fairly supportive up until her mother realized that her sexuality was not a passing phase. One episode is particularly illustrative. Zara recounts: "My mother found a sex toy in my room. She [her mother] told me that if I liked this [sex] toy, I must have a need for a man, and that marrying a man should not be a problem". Zara's mother clearly implies that her daughter, having a penis-shaped sex toy, 'naturally' needs a man. Her mother was confused because she assumed the connection of vaginal penetration and heterosexuality. This assumption can also explain her mother's misunderstanding for Zara's sexuality. Zara repeatedly communicates that she does not need or want a man. On account of her mother getting confused about Zara's lesbian sexuality as not a passing phase, Zara was given the ultimatum. She could live with the family, marrying a man and having children, as her mother wanted her to. Or, move out of the family home. Zara chose the latter, and explains:

I felt like I had been through so much that it was time that I took control [of her own life] and decided for myself. I am not trying to punish them [her family]; I am trying to be myself. I feel that I have done everything everyone else wants me to do, and catered to everyone else's needs.

Because of her mother's ultimatum, and knowing that she could not please her mother in 'becoming' heterosexual, Zara moved out in order to be herself. I see her choice of moving out as her taking ownership of her own sexual self, meaning that she could live out her sexuality outside of the family. Regardless of deciding to move out of her family home, Zara describes her family as the most important part of her life. She has chosen to continue to live close to them and tries to be what she calls a 'good daughter', meaning that she helps around the house, and attends the mosque with her mother regularly. When Zara visits her family home (which is often) she does not talk about her girlfriend or love-life. The kind of dynamics she engages in when with her family leaves her feeling like being 'two people', not able to be who she is, openly.

Despite her mother's non-acceptance and not understanding Zara's sexuality, Zara's obligation to her family remains a main priority. In order to stay close to them, she continuously negotiates her own sense of self and self-presentations in that she professes her self in two different ways. Here Najmabadi's notion of 'self-in-conduct' is helpful as Zara clearly is able to (and have learned to) perform another self when being with her family. Her expression of her sexual orientation is thus performed dependent on context. Her choice to not talk about her girlfriend and their lives together is part of this performance; hence, expression of queer sexuality is also about revealing/not talking about aspects of one's life otherwise deemed important. In the context of her family she silences her queer self, in order to be a part of the family. At the same time, her family chooses to ignore Zara's sexuality in that they do not bring this up as a topic either. Zara's negotiation of her queer self with her family is reflective of the 'don't ask don't tell'-mentality that denies the existence of a queer identity at the surface level while at the same time acknowledging its existence. The abovementioned silencing of her queer self illustrates this mentality, and for Zara, her connection to her family is at stake. Arguably, Zara's relationship to her family informs her expression of her sexual self. She does experience that this aspect of her being is not being acknowledged, however, her desire to maintain a close relationship with her family leads her to accept the situation.

Similar to Zara, Hawa also asserted that her family is a main priority. For the purpose of clarity, I want to include that Hawa's parents are divorced. Her father lives in her country of origin, and her mother and siblings live in Norway. During our interview, Hawa explained that disclosing her sexuality to her mother and siblings, whom she still lived with at the time, was a difficult experience due to her fear of the consequences that disclosure could lead to. She was, like Zara, afraid of losing her family. Also similar to Zara's experience, Hawa's family assumed that Hawa's sexuality was a passing phase. Her mother's reaction to Hawa's queer sexuality not being a passing phase, was that of non-acceptance, due to the strict laws against LGBTIQ people in their country of origin. The fear her mother had for Hawa being 'revealed' as queer in their homeland, resulted in the family not wanting to meet Hawa's girlfriend. However, the non-acceptance of Hawa's sexuality changed over time:

When I introduced my second girlfriend [to her family], my family understood and started to accept that this [her sexuality] was a part of me. I am pretty stubborn, and I have not changed anything about myself for them [her family] to be pleased with me. I

have always been true to myself. What helped in that difficult time [when her family thought her sexuality was a passing phase], was not to be angry with them for not letting me be myself, but rather to try to understand their perspective and not be ... selfish.

In this excerpt, Hawa describes that when she introduced her second girlfriend to her family, they understood that Hawa's sexual orientation was not a passing phase and gradually began to accept her sexuality and girlfriend. As we saw in Zara's story, Zara moved out of her family home in order to take ownership of her queerness. Hawa's understanding of her family's negative response on the other hand, as the excerpt illustrates and as she communicated several times during our interview, was to consider her family's point of view and not be 'selfish'. For Hawa, to be selfish in the context of disclosing her sexuality, she means that she did not expect her family to understand her (sexuality), which reflects the importance of the family over the individual. Further, during our interview, she also expressed how disclosing her sexuality to her father affected her relationship to him:

When we [Hawa and her father] have a disagreement or fight about something, he uses it [her sexuality] as a weapon, and tells me that if anyone in [country of origin] finds out [that she is queer], I cannot return to Norway if I visit [country of origin; implying that she would face reprisals]. It is incredibly hurtful that he uses something so intimate and personal against his own daughter. I know that he does this [uses her sexuality against her] when he can't win discussions with me. If he says something [about her sexuality to her extended family in country of origin], I am finished. In [country of origin] men have a lot of power.

As mentioned above, Hawa's parents are divorced, and her father resides in her country of origin. When her father visits Norway, he uses her sexuality against her when they have disagreements. Consequently, Hawa deeply regrets having disclosed her sexuality to her father. The excerpt also demonstrates that she fears penalties in form of either being forced to marry a man, which can be one possibility for same-sex sexuality, or the death penalty, which is a reality in her country of origin. Despite her father's threats, she further stated that she knows that his threats can be a demonstration of power, because male-centered state policy in combination with dominant patriarchal attitudes extends through Hawa's country of origin. Her ongoing conflict with her father displays delicate and difficult family negotiations.

Another interesting example of family negotiation comes from Sumaya. Contrary to the above excerpts told by Zara and Hawa, Sumaya has never disclosed her sexual orientation to her parents. Throughout the interview, Sumaya discloses various tactics that she employs in order to ‘camouflage’ herself as heterosexual. Sumaya went to great lengths to protect her secret, even committing to a yearlong engagement with a man at one point during her university years. Because all the girls she knew were getting engaged or married she needed what she called a ‘cover up’ for not ‘standing out’ among her family and in her community. For this reason, she entered into a yearlong engagement with a man so that she would be able to enjoy her final year in university without fearing her same-sex sexuality being revealed, and continuing romantic relationships with girls at school. This means that she willingly entered a heterosexual relationship, not only to seem ‘normal’, but also so that her final year of university could be enjoyable. Because, as she further stated, “My cover was complete [by being engaged to a man], I could flirt and make-out with girls at school without worrying”. The conscious choice of engagement to a man can be seen as empowering to her sexual self, in that she was more free to act upon her same-sex feelings within the context of the school.

Sumaya further tells me that her parents never knew and still does not know about what she calls her ‘double life’. Subsequent to finishing her university degree, she set her heart on moving back to Norway. She describes that her parents were hesitant, but in the end gave in to her request to go to Norway. Sumaya then experienced that her father ‘cut her off’ by breaking ties with her. When she was about to move, her father had said to her: “here is your passport; I am not your father and you are not my daughter”. Sumaya understood him to be saying that he was cutting her out of his life because she was leaving to Norway. Leaving home to live independently in a western country might have been viewed by her father as leaving her family and religion, which could have prompted her father’s harsh words.

Farah is a notable exception when it comes to negotiating her sexuality and her family. Farah told me that she moved out of her family home relatively early, and earlier than the other participants of this study. She informs me that she has never had a talk with her parents about her sexuality, yet explains that her parents know that she is lesbian:

I have never had the need to inform them about it [her sexuality]. I had my own space to do what I wanted, and I did not have to report anything to them. It was my life, and it was very separate from theirs. (Farah)

Farah stresses the importance of her own space as salient to the way in which she could perform her self by doing what she wanted, without informing her parents. Arguably, Farah's experience of living independently from an early age, proved fruitful for her, as her queer identity could be expressed on her own terms and in her own pace. I interpret Farah's early independence as giving her an outlet to become comfortable with her sexuality without having to negotiate when she became aware of her sexuality with her parents. Farah's formation of self was indeed constituted outside or beside family relations. However, constituting her sexuality outside the family was an active act by Farah, and thus her distancing from her parents is arguably decisive for her sexual formation.

From the above excerpts it becomes clear that participants had varying experiences of family relations when it came to expressing their sexuality. Negotiations with family members, as expressed by participants, can be seen as related to certain choices participants made in their lives. For some, independence from family empowered participants to more easily live out and perform queer selves. For others, like Zara, the family's non-acceptance of her sexuality made her develop different senses of self. Relationships with family members and expectations from families made participants take different choices, and develop different senses of self, dependent on the quality of the family relationship. Nonetheless, the consequences of their experiences with family members have clearly influenced how the participants negotiate naming their desire, which will be explored in the next section of the chapter.

5.3 Naming desire

As LGBTIQ individuals publicly declare sexual orientation, one becomes part of a larger social movement. LGBTIQ identities are commonly situated in larger political and social movements, with the aim of ending discrimination based on sexual orientation. Various identity labels operate through recognition of difference and lesbian sexual identities depends on this framework as much as any other. Some participants mentioned not having heard of labels for same-sex sexuality in their homelands. However, through the narratives it becomes

clear that the lack of language, for some participants, has not had an effect on their sexual identification. The narratives included in this section present the main views on naming sexuality as expressed by participants. I find that the participants were divided regarding naming sexuality. Some were empowered by the lesbian label, while others did not see naming as empowering to who they are. I will engage the latter first. For example, Sumaya explains:

I like women, and that is what I am most comfortable saying. I do not like the word 'lesbian', and the reason for that is that no heterosexuals have to describe [or disclose] their sexuality. It feels like we as minorities have to be placed in some kind of box, while the majority is not [placed in a box]. I will not tell people what makes me a minority. Why do queer people need to say that they are queer? I like women, and that's that.

Sumaya does not frame her sexuality using labels. She rejects naming her sexuality because she feels like she is being placed into a marginalized 'box', criticizing naming sexual identification for further dividing non-heterosexuals and heterosexuals. She further explained that when she meets new people she repeatedly gets asked about where she is from, because people who engage with her in conversation do not see her as Norwegian because of her race. Being placed in a 'box', both as a foreigner and as a not heterosexual, is one of Sumaya's reasons for not naming her sexuality. She expresses that naming is used to marginalize. In addition, both Sumaya and Hawa emphasized that they want to avoid negative connotations associated with the label 'lesbian', as stereotypically 'butch' – indicating short hair and manly clothes that many consider 'masculine'.

Another participant, Hawa, also explicitly rejects naming her sexuality, for some of the same reasons as Sumaya. However, Hawa's main reason for rejecting the lesbian label has to do with her not wanting her sexuality to be what defines her. She asserts that "I don't want me being queer to be something big, because it is only one part of the whole of me". For Hawa, her sexual identity is only *one* part of who she is, implying that she also has other subjectivities, other parts of self that she values. Valuing other parts of the self are of course applicable to other participants as well. For example, for Zara, within the space of her family, her sexual identity is not as important as being a part of her family wherein she is a daughter.

For Hawa, being queer is only *one* category of her intersectional identity, and for her, the queer identity is not the only identity that defines her.

Both Sumaya and Hawa's racial and sexual identities not only inform how they see themselves, but also how the world perceives them. I see Sumaya and Hawa's rejection to naming their sexual identity as pertaining them taking ownership of self-definition, which can be empowering for their selves. Yet, there are discourses that perceive them in different ways and might want to place them in certain 'boxes', which in turn can articulate feelings of being discriminated. As Najmabadi argues, the self is constructed in relation to others. It is through interaction with others that you express who you are, yet this expression is also informed by others perceptions of you. If you are perceived as a foreigner by others, your perception of your self can be negative, feeling marginalized and discriminated against. Different markers of identity take part in forming the self, while you are always also affected by how the world sees you (Najbamadi 2014, 83).

The division based on sexual identity between heterosexuals and queer individuals ignores the various ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, class, and so on influence the embodiment, connection to, and performance of sexual identity. Disadvantaged identities (i.e. queer, racial and Muslim) experienced in tandem can be seen to result in more positions of disadvantage. Sumaya and Hawa undermine the privileging of sexual difference; sexuality is not the definitive aspect of their identities. Sumaya and Hawa expresses that the naming of sexual orientation does not give meaning to their lives, and find the naming restricting to their selves, due to the fact that they do not want to be placed in a 'box', and be further marginalized. I understand them to mean that by rejecting to name sexuality, they are able to take ownership of their sexual selves in a way that is empowering.

In contrast to the participants who reject sexual identity labels, Farah and Jennifer explain that the term 'lesbian' is hugely important for them. Both participants employ the term to describe themselves. Contrary to Hawa and Sumaya, Jennifer expresses that she wants to 'own' the lesbian 'box'. She tells me that she introduces herself as both lesbian and Muslim every time she has the opportunity because she refuses to let her most important identity markers be cause for marginalization. She also informs me that the more people she tells of her lesbian Muslim identity, the greater the chance for acceptance of other lesbian Muslims in the future. Similarly, Farah describes the importance of naming herself lesbian:

I used to describe myself as queer, but now I use the term lesbian. I use this term [lesbian] consistently, because I think that there are many people that associates the term [lesbian] with something negative and thinks the word is disgusting. It is a word that many find uncomfortable. I want to reclaim the term and own it. I like other women, and I do not need to use another word. It is an important term for me to use about myself. (Farah)

In this excerpt, Farah firstly illustrates that you can choose what you want to name yourself, and that you can choose what the naming of sexuality signify. Reclaiming the lesbian term is an important strategy for Farah. Contrary to ‘popular opinion’, the term queer is often perceived to be a broader category, her use of lesbian thus says something about how she wants to be very specific about who she is and reclaiming seems important for her. Interestingly, Farah previously used the term queer to describe herself, but is now more comfortable with naming herself lesbian. This is not to say that naming herself as lesbian prescribe her sexuality, rather, she defines what lesbian means to her. Interestingly, Farah wants to utilize the lesbian label in order to *reclaim* the term as a positive term for same-sex sexuality among women. The power embedded in reclaiming the lesbian label is clearly illustrated in that both Farah and Jennifer deliberately employ it. Reclaiming the lesbian label is a powerful strategy in the deconstruction of the belief that a lesbian identity and Muslim identity are mutually exclusive categories.

The naming of sexuality is connected to subject formation in that it includes a conscious choice. I find Jennifer and Farah’s narratives to be expressing the importance of the lesbian label as a tool of resisting heteronormativity as well as disrupting dominant understandings of Muslimness. Making the *intersection* of lesbian sexuality and Muslim personhood ‘disruptively queer’, the insistence on being a lesbian Muslim powerfully negotiates and *queers* both ‘western and eastern’ heteronormative orthodoxies (Rahman 2010).

This section of the chapter has demonstrated participants varying approaches and complex understandings of naming same-sex sexuality. Some participants demonstrate concerns of the understandings that are already embedded in the label ‘lesbian’, but more importantly, rejecting being further marginalized into a ‘box’. Other participants explained their desire to reclaim the term lesbian. Within the context of naming same-sex desire and constructing a

sexual identity, 'coming out' can often be viewed as a natural way of disclosing ones sexual identity. In the following section I explore participants' views on 'coming out'.

5.4 Views on western queer visibility and 'coming out'

In the western sense, 'coming out' often includes disclosing non-heterosexual sexuality to family and friends. Entwined into the 'coming out' narrative is the visibility/invisibility binary. As illustrated, most participants of this study all describe negotiations with either family, ethnic community in Norway, country of origin; or all three. In the Norwegian LGBTIQ movement, one can see extensive usage of images of openness and its opposite, 'the closet', in relation to queer sexuality, wherein being 'out' is a crucial marker of queer identity. It is noteworthy that several participants articulated the notion of a tacit assumption surrounding the western 'coming out' narrative as commonly viewed as having an empowering outcome for the queer individual. Arguably, for some queer individuals 'coming out' can be empowering. However, many participants in this study expressed ambiguity pertaining to the 'coming out' narrative as it exists in the western world and the perception of 'the closet' as a negative space. This has to do with the kind of social scripts they ('coming out' and 'the closet') entail, which are not consistent with participants lived experiences. Farah, for example, asserts that there was never a need to talk about, or put her sexuality into words to her parents. She elaborates:

Some keep their sexuality secret, and then feel a need to verbalize it [sexual orientation], either for themselves or for others. For me, it does not make sense to announce that there has been a change in how I see myself. (Farah)

Farah acknowledges that some queer people are 'closeted', and 'come out' of 'the closet' by articulating their queerness. However, her perception of her own queerness is that she has never been in 'the closet' because her experience of her own self has not changed. In her account, Farah seems secure and unconcerned about her sexuality. Perhaps this sense of security is due to her early independence that allowed her to have her own space. Because she does not see a change in how she perceives herself, she resisted the need of having to announce her sexuality. By 'revealing' one's queerness, heterosexuality is acknowledged as the natural condition, and she does not align her sexual life with the grain of

heteronormativity. Her decision against declaring her lesbian self shows that not ‘coming out’ is not always a reaction to an unfriendly climate that censure queer life.

Sumaya, on the other hand, asserts that she does not see the need for her family knowing her sexual orientation. Additionally, she does not tell them because they live in her country of origin and can never find out that she is not heterosexual, due to the fact that she lives in Norway and barely have any contact with them. Despite that, Sumaya decided to tell her brother about her sexuality:

Some years ago I celebrated my birthday, where I had invited all my friends, including my brother. My friends wouldn’t stop asking me if my brother knew that I had a girlfriend. My brother heard them, turned around and asked “what do you need to tell me?”, so I told him that the woman I was living with was my girlfriend, not just a friend. He replied that he knew, and gave me a high five. I couldn’t believe it, was it [telling her brother about sexual orientation] that easy? Everything I had ever thought [and felt] came before me, and I felt liberated. Blood is always thicker than water.

This excerpt clearly illustrates Sumaya’s sense of relief after having disclosed her sexuality to her brother after her friends pushed her to tell him. Sumaya further states that for her ‘blood is thicker than water’, which I interpret as implying that for her, family relations are incredibly valuable. Sumaya’s sexual self can be said to have been exceedingly supported by her brother’s reaction, in that all of her past thoughts and feelings of rejection was refuted by him acknowledging and supporting her. Further in our conversation, related to her experience with her brother, Sumaya challenges the notion of ‘the closet’:

If I am open about my sexuality to my coworkers and friends, it does not mean anything compared to being open [about sexuality] to my brother. Am I ‘in the closet’ if my boss knows [sexual orientation]? Or am I ‘out of the closet’? Does it mean that I am ‘out of the closet’ if all of my coworkers and friends know? So If I meet new people, but I don’t tell them [about sexual orientation], am I then ‘in the closet’? I feel out [of the closet] because I have a brother that knows, and friends that knows. But in a western sense, I am probably still ‘in the closet’, but for myself, I am out.

In this excerpt Sumaya questions the western notion of 'the closet', due to her family not knowing of her sexual orientation; she is 'out' to her friends, coworkers, and most importantly, her brother. Yet, she problematizes the western conception of 'the closet' in that she does not see herself as 'closeted'. The workings of 'the closet' as a suppressive space for queer people is challenged by Esack and Mahomed (2011) who argues a reclaiming of 'the closet' for queer Muslims in particular, as a valuable space of protection. As we see through Sumaya's excerpt, she challenges and problematizes both the western conception of 'the closet' in addition to Esack and Mahomed's description of 'the closet'. She sees her sexual self as 'out', but acknowledges that others perception of her 'out-ness' can be different from her perception of herself.

Ganimete is the only participant in this study that has not disclosed her sexual orientation to any family member. She asserts that she actively hides her sexuality from her family:

I'm not planning on staying 'in the closet' for the rest of my life, but I have to tell them when I am strong enough. The worst case scenario is that they disown me, and I cannot handle that right now. It is family we are talking about, and while I am where I am in my life [she is in her final year of studying] I would not have managed to be banned from the family right now.

It is important to note that the participants who have either explicitly told their parents and siblings about their sexual orientation, or for participants where there exist an awareness that the family knows (e.g. Farah), none have experienced being disowned by their parents. Nevertheless, Ganimete brings up the fear of being disowned by her family if she discloses her sexual orientation, emphasizing that she is not strong enough to live without the support of her family. Her fear of negative family reactions is reflective of the theme found in international research of family and/or ethnic community reacting negatively to revealing a homosexual identity (Yip 2007). Ganimete describes her queer sexual self as being 'closeted' from her family, evoking Esack and Mahomed's (2011) notion of 'the closet' as a safe space. She does not, as Farah and Sumaya's excerpts reveal, question the notion 'the closet'. Her conception of being 'in the closet' is intrinsically connected to choice, in that her choice of not making her queer self visible to her family is her way of being in the world, at the moment of our interview. Her family is an important factor for her being 'closeted', which is interesting as many would say that the space of the family is a 'safe space'. Cultural norms

concerning sexuality and gender within her family and community can seem to have created social conditions in which her sexuality clashes with the sexual norms, and can face denunciation from her family.

The excerpts in this section show ambiguities with how participants engage with ‘coming out’ and the notion of ‘the closet’. Whereas Farah does not see ‘the closet’ as a good space, arguably she does not see it as a productive space, but a debilitating space. Sumaya and Ganimete’s ‘coming out’ narratives are part of a manifold process of negotiation. Negotiating multiple and intersecting identities also entailed rejecting mainstream notions of queerness and hetero- and homonormative scripts of ‘coming out’. Arguably, homonormativity’s disregard of the difficulties surrounding the demand for visibility can be seen as incompatible with participants’ stories that problematize the conception of a ‘closet’ for queer people who are not expressing their non-heterosexual sexuality openly. The unifying discourse of ‘coming out’ of ‘the closet’ does not take into account the range of factors (e.g. religion, ethnicity, dis/ableness, geographical location, age, class etc.) infused in participants lives, and suggests a more nuanced understanding of cultural differences. Hence, being ‘out’ and the dominant script of ‘coming out’ seem to have limited relevance for the queer Muslim women of this study, and in its monolithic relevance, visibility can erase the variety of queer realities and existence, for those who do not have visibility of sexuality as their goal.

5.5 Discussion and summary

The excerpts in this chapter present the ways in which participants thought about their sexuality early on and when sexuality became important in their lives. Furthermore, the narratives showed different family attachments and ties to countries of origin. Some participants have lived relatively unproblematic after accepting their same-sex sexuality, while others articulated more demanding journeys. But shared among my participants is how they have skillfully maintained a delicate balance between family, community, culture and love.

Firstly, one of the major themes that emerged from these narratives was the salience of most participants’ families, which facilitate certain expressions of sexual orientation. For some participants, the spatial construction and experience of their queer self may defy or complicate the dominant conceptions of ‘the closet’ model. There is clearly a tension between western

expectations for queer visibility, and participants' experiences. When the current goals of the LGBTIQ movement revolve around acceptance, they simultaneously include the right to be different and to be accepted based upon that difference. The visibility and "out-ness" is seen as instrumental in achieving acceptance and liberation. Most participants in this study, however, are inherently incompatible with such visibility claims. Rooted particularly in family connections and belonging is central to the structures of some of the participants' expressions of sexual selves. Arguably, participants' intersectional circumstances depart from the western LGBTIQ identity formation model, wherein the western model of disclosure can be seen as irreconcilable with how participants negotiate their sexuality.

Notably, through talking with participants, some point to the fact that they do not see the purpose of the metaphor of 'the closet'. By engaging Esack and Mahomed's (2011) insights pertaining to reclaiming 'the closet', I find that Sumaya counters the 'coming out' narrative that is prevalent in western gay and lesbian discourses, which can be said to ignore the situation of those holding multiple identities. Sumaya questions when she is 'out' as queer, and on the whole challenges the value of 'the closet'. Esack and Mahomed (2011) problematize the use of 'the closet' in a different way, upholding the space of 'the closet' as a space of protection, wherein Sumaya appreciates other ways to be queer, but that the metaphor of 'the closet' does not fit for her reality. The fear of isolation from family is hence not the sole factor hindering some of the participants from disclosing their sexuality. Instead, it is noteworthy that what emerged from these excerpts are questions of the value of 'the closet'. Estimating queerness 'invisible' and concealed via 'the closet' arguably undermines that queer desires and acts exist previous to the articulation of queerness. Hence, participants' formation of self and intersectional identities give new meanings to how one can understand queer lives. Being visible is commonly understood as the central component of LGBTIQ identity and the twin figures of 'coming out' of 'the closet' that structure this particular understanding of queer visibility. Sumaya here illuminates that this binary can obscure as much as it enables. The subject formation is arguably context dependent, wherein contextuality affects the intersectionality. The intersection of family relations is given different degrees of meaning, and notably, sexual orientation has a different meaning within the context of the family. As shown, the situatedness of participants' identity markers delicately changes in different contexts. In the next chapter, I will explore the place of Islam in participants' lives, also demonstrating a delicate balance.

6 The place of Islam

As this study seeks to explore participants' relationship to Islam, an overarching theme that emerged from my interviews was how participants situated themselves as queer/lesbian within Islam. The first part of this chapter enquires into the ways in which participants make meaning of being both Muslim and queer. Further, this chapter foregrounds the meaning of Islam in participants' lives, and how they related to Islam.

At the time of the interviews, one participant identified herself as formerly Muslim, whereas five participants identified themselves as Muslims. All participants described a particular childhood connection to Islam and a recurring theme were how participants were raised in families and communities where Islam played a considerable role. Some participants asserted that they attended Qur'anic schools and learned to recite the Qur'an, attended the mosque regularly, and so on. Other participants stressed the importance of religion as related to family belonging and connection. For many, the childhood connection to Islam was important for the particular ways in which participants relate to Islam today.

6.1 Surviving and thriving: on being queer and Muslim

My belief in Islam has not affected my sexuality, but my sexuality has affected my understanding of my religion. (Sumaya)

At the time of the interviews, several participants stressed experiences that had affected their connection to Islam, wherein many of these experiences was related to participants' sexuality. The belief that Islam accepts sexual diversity among humans was recognized among all participants in this study, however, several stressed that they did not always hold this view. Most of the participants describe a process of comprehending what it meant for them to be Muslim and what it meant for them to be queer and, finally, what it meant for them to be queer and Muslim and woman. Other participants describe a process of having to choose between religiosity and queer sexuality.

A number of the interviews are illustrative of how various discourses (for example Muslim culture, ethnic culture, Norwegian culture), hold distinct ideas of what it means to be queer, Muslim and woman. The narratives below demonstrate some of the participants' experiences

within these discourses that have had effects on their self-understandings as queer women and as Muslims. I will here elaborate on the narratives that highlights how participants' lived experiences as queer women might have shaped their understanding of Islam. The following excerpts illustrate some of the ways in which participants grappled with connecting their sexuality with their religion:

There was a collision between the lesbian and the Muslim inside me. I knew that it [same-sex sexuality] was not accepted in my religion, [because] I searched on the internet [searched for Islam's view on same-sex sexuality] where I found some forums that said many troubling things... When I saw this [what people had written in the forums], I thought I had to leave Islam, I didn't know any better. (Zara)

Zara stresses that her understanding initially revolved around her sexuality not being accepted in her religion. Zara's thought of leaving Islam is reflective of international findings pertaining to queer Muslims having feelings of having to choose between sexuality and religion (see for example Al-Sayaad 2008; 2010). In our interview, Zara further told me that she once wrote a note to her Imam. The Imam had encouraged the female attendants at the Friday prayer to ask the Imam questions that they sought answers to, and that the Imam had stressed that the questions were anonymous. Zara asserted:

My question on the note was 'what does Islam say about homosexuality?' The imam quickly figured out that it was me who wrote the note. What happened to anonymity? The imam told my mother that I should keep busy, and that I should be married [to a man] soon.

Zara was curious of what the Imam would answer to her question of Islam's stance on homosexuality. Responding the way that he did, Zara felt utterly disappointed. Instead of giving her an answer, the Imam told her mother that Zara should marry a man in the near future. One could argue that Zara's question was answered, because the Imam told her mother that she needed to get married, hence, clearly not entertaining the idea of any other forms of sexual relationships other than a heterosexual one. Through Zara's narrative one gets a sense of how religious authority function to perpetuate gender norms and regulate (sexual) behavior. Zara's sexual orientation was to be 'solved' through marriage. Zara was left troubled and stated "my religion played a big part in me feeling this way [troubled in regards to her

sexuality and faith]”. Zara was left in distress concerning her faith in Islam, and her sexuality. One of the reasons for which was the experience with the Imam that avoided discussing the topic of same-sex sexuality within Islam, when she posed the question. In addition, the Imam saw her sexuality as a ‘problem’ that could be solved through heterosexual marriage. Nevertheless, she states that her self-acceptance as a queer Muslim changed when she went on hajj.¹⁰ She describes the experience of the hajj as a journey of total transformation of her religiosity as “everything became clearer”. She relays the following in our interview when she reminisces arriving at the Kaaba in Mecca:

Everything around me disappeared, except the Kaaba. It was a strong divine experience. Seeing so many other people [Muslims] believing in the same God as me was surreal. I understood how important [Islam] was. In that moment, it [Islam] became more important than me. [Today] Islam gives me strength, and if I am in doubt I pray. If I need answers for questions in my life, I read the Qur’an, and it guides me.

Zara expresses a transformation of her religiosity. As the above quote show, in the moment of her seeing the Kaaba and all the Muslims that were devoted to the same God as her, she realized that Islam was more important than herself. Islam gives her strength in life and she uses the Qur’an to help her if she is in need of guidance. The ritual experience of hajj inspired the experience, and the outcome of her pilgrimage was that her Muslim identity became a strong marker of her identity. The divine experience that she explains can mean that she shut all other impressions out, and had an experience of God’s presence/connection with God that she further formed to strengthen her Muslim identity, but also empower her as a Muslim individual. Hence, Islam became a more integrated aspect in her life, and the pilgrimage made her resist abandoning her faith and rather live her life as Muslim and queer. Islam acted as a source of support for her and provided her with a framework with which to grasp her religion as more important than her. Islam became bigger than her, Islam in an abstract form, by establishing a more personal relation to the divine that make her empowered to read the Qur’an, and lets the Qur’an guide her.

¹⁰ Hajj – annual pilgrimage to Mecca, a mandatory religious duty for all Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey, at least once in a lifetime. Zara was the only participant in this study that had done the pilgrimage at the time of the interview.

Similarly to Zara, Sumaya stressed that she experienced an initial struggle with accepting her sexuality:

I cried on the prayer mat, and asked God about what was happening to me. Life was tough, and I thought, do I deserve this? I could not talk to my family about it [sexuality], I kept everything to myself. I prayed. I had an honest conversation with God. I asked [God] if my sexuality was deviant from my faith, and if it [sexuality] was deviant He had to give me a sign. I never got a sign. It [troubles in life] has always worked out for me. But, if something bad happens [in the family], I always think what if this is a consequence of me not being open with my family?

In the course of our interview, Sumaya repeated several times that she “cried on the prayer mat”; asserting that she always prayed and spoke to God when she felt troubled. In the excerpt, it becomes clear that God’s acceptance of her sexuality is important for her, asking God for a sign to indicate whether her sexuality was deviant. A sign, she told me, involved her being caused harm by other people. As God never gave her a sign that rejected her sexuality, her belief in an accepting God was strengthened. On this basis, Sumaya became more accepting of her own queer Muslim identity. However, Sumaya also places emphasis on certain negative situations that have occurred, perhaps as a result of her not being open about her sexuality with her family.

The meaning of religion and God, as expressed by Zara and Sumaya, demonstrate how religion is intertwined with sexual identity. Zara’s divine experience at the Kaaba and Sumaya’s connectedness with God is explained as their justification of both their Muslim identities and sexual identities. Their embodiment of religion can be said to have changed how they experience their sexuality in relation to Islam.

Another participant, Hawa, stressed that she sees herself as a cultural or ethnic Muslim and that the meaning of Islam for her is connected to family. She stated that “in my family and my upbringing, it [Islam] was not important. It was the [Islamic family] values that were important, not the religion in itself”. Hawa’s statement demonstrates how her Islamic family values that have shaped both her Muslim self and queer self. I first want to highlight her experience of ambivalence with her Muslim identity as it pertains to her country of origin’s negative views and strict laws against same-sex sexuality:

Because I come from a country where religion and politics are intertwined, religion is not a private matter. This has created distress [for her]. It [Islam] limits my freedom. If [country of origin] was only concerned with the emotional aspects of me [being queer] as wrong, [and] if it hadn't been the additional anxiety of the death penalty, it [being Muslim] would have been easier. I know that my family in [country of origin] can never know who I really am [because of country of origin's strict laws against same-sex sexuality].

Hawa clearly expresses how she feels torn between her sexual identity and the traditions of her religion and country of origin. The death penalty in Hawa's country of origin is her greatest concern and she further told me that the fear of being exposed as a queer person in her country left her troubled for many years. Her association of same-sex sexuality with the death penalty lead her fearful of her life if she was to visit her country of origin. As she got older, she felt that she had a greater need to get to know her culture and heritage:

I took charge of my life and traveled to [country of origin]. Before I left, I deleted all traces [of her queer sexuality] from my social media accounts that could expose me. I wrote a will [legal declaration], everything had to be done right. I thought if something happened [in country of origin], I would take responsibility for it [if her sexual orientation was revealed], if not [revealed], it would be a great relief.

Hawa's writing of a will is a clear indication of the seriousness of her fear to be exposed. I interpret the last sentence of the excerpt to mean that if exposed, Hawa was ready to deal with the consequences of being queer in her country of origin. If she avoided exposure, on the other hand, she could get to know her heritage and hopefully her fear would decrease as a result. Further in our interview, Hawa explains that when she set foot on the soil of her country of origin and the security check at the airport was over, she was not scared anymore because she could not be found out unless she told her extended family. When returning to Norway, she additionally explained that her fear of her country of origin exposing her queer self is now gone due to her seeing this fear as irrational within the context of Norway.

Contrary to being anxious about exposure of sexuality in country of origin, Hawa recounts one incident of being discriminated against based on her sexuality and race in Norway. Some

years ago, Hawa was in a relationship with a white Norwegian woman. Holding hands in public in a central part of Oslo with a large Muslim population, they experienced uncomfortable stares and comments:

I look like an immigrant [because] I am not ethnic [white] Norwegian. I look Muslim, and maybe that was a trigger for the people who felt the need to comment that she [Hawa's girlfriend] was white and I am not. It [the stares and comments] was so uncomfortable that we changed that behavior [holding hands] so as to protect ourselves from discomfort. It ruined our day. I have thought a lot about it since. I think that instead of limiting myself [by changing behavior] I rather think that God is much bigger than certain human interpretations [condemning lesbians and homosexuals]. I have rather trusted what I feel and know in my heart and *that* is how Islam is.

The bad experience of being subject negative comments seems to have happened because Hawa and her girlfriend holding hands, in light of the fact that Hawa's girlfriend was white – and Hawa is not white. Hawa interprets the discrimination as an intersectional issue. The people who stared and commented on the couple's public affection of holding hands saw Hawa's external identity markers as either Muslim or non-Norwegian, without knowing if she is either. Categorizing and imposing meaning onto people because of external identity markers such as race and sexuality was concretized by the act of holding hands. Hawa's identity creates difficulties for other people's categorizations of her. Arguably, to be white and queer is a more socially accepted intersectionality in more environments than it is to be a non-white and queer. The incident changed the couple's practice; how they performed their bodies (i.e. holding hands). The experience can be said have become a concretization and embodiment of the intersectional issue.

Another participant, Jennifer articulated experiences with other Muslims, who have told her that she can “change” – meaning “transform into a heterosexual” if having sexual relations with a man. Jennifer stress her frustrations with being told that other Muslims want to pray for her, because they consider her sexuality to be “curable”. She explains:

Why would they [Muslims] want to pray for me? I take care of my family, I work full time, and I am healthy! I am not sick, and everything [in her life] is good. So I do not want to hear those words that they want to pray for me!

Being told that she can be “cured” and “turned” into a heterosexual, and that other Muslims wish to pray for her, makes Jennifer clearly frustrated. However, regardless of being frustrated with Muslims that do not accept or understand her sexuality, Jennifer is not ambivalent about her sexual identity and Muslim identity. The reactions she experiences from Muslims are however disappointing to her. While some states that she can ‘change’, others have simply stopped talking to her. Despite these experiences, Jennifer does not feel isolated. Because she experiences her Muslim community to react negatively towards her sexual identity, her reaction has been to distance herself from her Muslim community. Yet, she says that she has never considered leaving Islam, and emphasized her faith in Islam, and the importance for her to be religiously dedicated to God.

Ganimete is the only participant in this study that identifies as formerly Muslim. She explains that in her childhood and teenage years, she identified first and foremost as a Muslim. When I asked her to reflect upon why she chose to leave Islam, she disclosed several reasons. First, she describes that since she was a child, she repeatedly felt guilty for not being what she calls a ‘good Muslim girl’. By way of example, she tells me that she stopped drawing pictures of animals when learning that one should not draw anything that has a soul. Shortly after moving to Norway, Ganimete experienced being raped. The following rather powerful narrative demonstrates the way in which Ganimete thinks about this experience in relation to her Muslim faith and identity:

It was a Muslim man [whom she knew and trusted] who raped me, and I thought “wasn’t he supposed to share the same Muslim values as me?” There was a war inside me. For a period [following the rape], my faith got stronger, but then it [her faith] decreased. Sex outside marriage is considered a sin in Islam. [But] the main reason [in the end] for leaving [Islam] was my [queer] sexuality. It [leaving Islam] took a while because I could not accept my sexuality since I come from [country of origin] where heterosexuality is the norm, and that [heteronormativity] was a big part of my upbringing. I realized that my religion did not give my life meaning anymore.

Ganimete’s experience of being raped left her in disarray. The ‘war’ inside her, was due to feeling shame and guilt of having (non-consensual) sexual intercourse outside of marriage,

which is considered zina in Islamic jurisprudence.¹¹ In addition, she expressed resentment about the man who raped her being Muslim. Poignantly, she draws attention to the notion of shared Muslim values, which, according to her, does not include rape as an acceptable sexual expression. As she further stressed in our conversation about this difficult experience, the reciprocal ideal of chastity interweaved with her understanding of her religious identity since she was a child. For Ganimete, to be a virgin was paramount for her Muslim identity, and how she saw herself as a Muslim. Prior to the rape, she recounted that she knew that she was queer, which in turn also had invoked feelings of guilt for her due to the clearly communicated heteronormative scripts in her upbringing. Through our interview, she continuously stressed the condemnation of homosexuality and queer identity in her country of origin and religion. Subsequent to the rape and feeling her faith as increasingly stronger, her guilt culminated as she realized Islam did not have a purpose in her life.

Today, Ganimete no longer identifies as Muslim. She made a conscious decision to leave Islam, ultimately due to her experience of constant guilt for several reasons: the experience of being raped that destroyed the religious ideal of chastity. Moreover, the man who raped her represented “Islam” clearly did not share the same values as her, at least partly informed her decision to leave Islam. When she became aware of and accepted her queer sexuality, which is condemned within her religious community, she saw her sexuality as further limiting her Muslim identification. Ganimete’s understanding of her religion was not conducive to how she ultimately wished to live her life. Ganimete’s grounds for leaving Islam is similar to that found by both Rørlien (2003) and Narvesen’s (2013), where participants in these studies left Islam because they saw Islam’s view on same-sex sexuality as condemning their way of life. However, in Ganimetes narrative, there are also the above-mentioned factors of constant guilt, and not singularly queer sexuality that informed her decision to leave Islam, wherein I see a sense of disappointment in her religion that ultimately made her reach her decision.

Navigating through the intersections of queerness and Islam informed Ganimete’s process of reflection and, in the end, her queerness became more important than conforming to her religion. Ganimete’s sense of professing self involves singling out and choosing one identity over another. In order to survive, she chose her sexual identity. Inner conflict and turmoil is not uncommon for individuals who identify as queer and feel belonging to a religious faith

¹¹ Zina is an Islamic legal term referring to unlawful sexual intercourse (adultery, fornication).

(see for example Siraj 2011; Al-Sayaad 2010). It is not an easy decision to choose between the two identities, and much time is spent agonizing and reflecting on what to do, and what is the right decision.

Farah also articulated having experienced trouble with and doubt concerning her Muslim identity. Contrary to the other participants, her doubt did not originate in her sexuality. She is the only participant who described her sexual identity in relation to her Muslim identity and family negotiation in positive terms, in stark contrast to some of the experiences of other participants. As outlined in the previous chapter, Farah experienced no trouble with her lesbian identity. However, she stresses having experienced difficulties with her Muslim identity. Farah explained during our interview that a series of moments in her life have given different meanings to her Muslim identity. For example, when she was young, she did not want to identify as Muslim, because she knew no-one that was not white Norwegians or Muslim outside her family. When she became older, she stated that Islam came to be a source for her to feel closeness to her ethnic roots, with special emphasis on her family, not religiosity. Farah explains that her family represents her connection to her Muslim identity: “I have doubted my Muslim identity, because it has been challenged. But for me, being [Muslim] feels like “home” in a way”. She found that appropriating the ‘category Muslim’ with her own meaning, that she herself determines, namely the connection to her family. Hence, one can say that Farah re-invented what it means for her to be Muslim, and how it makes sense for her to identify as Muslim. Seemingly, Farah holds an individual perception of her own Muslim identity and her way of being Muslim. Farah demonstrates that the experience of being Muslim is deeply complex and nuanced. Farah identifies as Muslim, but not religious, with emphasis on her heritage and history. Farah illustrates the rich diversity among Muslims, in that both internal and external pluralism within parts of the religious landscape in contemporary society has motivated growing diversity in religious expression, practice and identity. By inscribing to her identity what is important to her, her individualization of her Muslim identity can be said to undermine traditional authority, yet also empowering her Muslim self.

We can clearly see through the above excerpts the diversity of experience relating to the possible intersections between religion and sexuality. Several participants communicated a strong religious identity as essential to their lives today. Sumaya, Zara and Jennifer emphasized the importance of prayer, Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, and following

Islamic principles, as some of the ways in which they understand and express themselves as Muslims.

The excerpts have shown how participants trace various changes within their sexual identities and religious identities. The majority of my participants grappled with connecting their sexuality with their religion, wherein most of them articulated feelings of contradiction, because their countries of origin condemn homosexuality. Several participants mentioned having contemplated leaving Islam because of their sexuality; however, with the exception of Ganimete who left Islam, the others were able to reconcile their Muslim identity with their sexuality. It is particularly noteworthy that Sumaya and Zara's stressed how they used Islam and God as an empowering framework in which they justified their sexuality in relation to their faith, which I now will engage further.

6.2 Sexuality as legitimized by God

This thesis does not aim to debate the origins of sexuality, which can be said to be a fairly controversial issue. Regardless, understanding how participants of this study came to understand their sexuality in relation to their religion is interesting, and very different from discussing questions about nature versus nurture. Most of my participants articulated their sexuality as an essence in the sense that they were born with their sexuality. Within the narratives, I find that some participants found affirmation in being born queer, because God created them. I here want to highlight two excerpts that demonstrate this view:

God has created me, he has created my brain and the thoughts that I have. My thoughts and feelings is not something that I myself choose. When God have created me this way [queer] there is nothing I can do about it [being queer]. This took me years to understand. [Because] God created me, and if he didn't want me to be like this [queer], I wouldn't be. I think there is a meaning behind everything, and I believe in Him. And if it [being queer] is not accepted by God, he would have done something about it.
(Zara)

For me, to be a Muslim means to believe in God, and that God is good, kind and loves every human He has created. God wishes only good things for what he has created. God has created the feelings I feel inside; happiness, sorrow, fear, etc. God has created

everything inside me, if I then go and enjoy being with women, have sex with women, that feeling I get inside my heart... God has created it [her feelings]. If I go after those feelings [for women], where we love each other, God will be happy. But if I do someone wrong, for example hurt someone with words or behavior, I know I will get punished [by God]. (Sumaya)

In the above excerpts, Zara and Sumaya stress the significance of God creating them. Both excerpts elucidate same-sex sexuality as God-given. Both participants embrace the belief that God created them queer, thus justifying their sexual identity as a tool or mechanism so as to produce an identity in which Muslim identity and queer identity is reconciled. In addition, the excerpts show that religion and their trust in God is empowering for who they are. God's involvement in their creation provides great comfort. Furthermore, their belief in God's creation reflects the ways in which their connectedness with God has facilitated their embodiment of their queer selves. The significance of their trust in God's creation can be seen as a way through which Zara and Sumaya have allowed for the simultaneous cultivation of their same-sex sexuality and religious identity. It is noteworthy that the focus on embodiment of sexuality came from God. The individual embodied feelings rationalize the corresponding identities as queer and Muslim as fully part of God's creation – an internal process also found in international research on LGBTIQ Muslims (see for example Siraj 2012; Yip and Khalid 2010).

In sharp contrast to the above excerpts, Farah asserts a social constructionist view of her sexual orientation, which entails the belief that her sexuality is socially constructed and therefore fluid: "My experience is that it [sexuality] is something cultural or social, I was born with a sexuality and my circumstances made things more flexible for me". Farah here states that she was born with a sexuality – which can be read either as if she believes that everyone is born heterosexual, or only that she was born heterosexual, and then changed sexuality due to her environment. The excerpt can also be read as she believes that everyone is born with sexuality, meaning that all people are sexual beings. As described in the previous chapter, Farah experienced belonging to a queer community. Her experience of her sexuality, she states, is that her sexuality was shaped by her social circumstances – something that could indicate that her sexuality as a lesbian woman became more pronounced after starting to participate in the queer community.

Farah invokes a particular understanding of the nature of her sexuality as socially constructed. Perhaps reflective of Najmabadi's (2014) critique of an inherent essence, Farah illuminates how her self, her subjectivity and sexuality is fluid. Arguably, she is open to the various ways in which identity is embodied, performed, and shifting. Her complex understanding of identity as fluid is a perspective that resists mainstream and dominant understandings of who she is as lesbian. The specific queer scene she found herself in, at the intersection of various relations and social identity markers, formed the scene of conduct of her lesbian self. In the queer scene, one can say that Farah expressed her lesbian self through her specific location and context, through performance with other queer selves.

Being lesbian can be said to have given meaning to Farah in terms of her specific queer location, and by naming herself lesbian she manifested her sexual self. Farah's social constructivist view also means that she cannot be closed to the possibility of her sexuality changing; this might imply Farah's relationship with God. As previously stated, Farah is not religious, whereas other participants view their sexuality as innate, as God-given. In the next section of this chapter, I engage with participants' views on Islamic texts that are commonly known for condemning homosexuality.

6.3 Connection and change in lived religion

The Qur'an states that humans have to respect and love one another. I only love, so I deserve respect. (Jennifer)

In the same way as Jennifer articulates the importance of love and respect in the Qur'an, other participants echoed corresponding feelings of Islam as infused with love and respect for human beings, regardless of sexual orientation. Participants' narratives illustrate multifaceted navigations of their selves as both queer/lesbian and Muslim in a contested landscape. There is a vast diversity of how Muslims across the world interpret the Islamic scriptures, whereas homosexuality broadly is viewed as explicitly stated in the Qur'an through the story of Lot (Ali 2006; Siraj; 2011; 2012; 2015). Alternative readings of the Islamic texts are emerging, with the pioneers like Yip (2005) and Kugle (2010; 2014) in the field of 'queering religious texts'. These scholars are opening up for a 'sexually-sensitive Islam' with a primary focus on pluralism, diversity, dignity and love. Through extensive research on LGBTIQ Muslims in the UK, South Africa and the U.S, Yip and Kugle find that many queer Muslims develop

alternative readings and interpretations of Islamic texts as beneficial for living out their sexual selves within the framework of Islam.

Among the participants in this study, it is a shared view that same-sex sexuality is negatively interpreted as a result of particular understandings of Islamic texts. This part of the chapter focuses on participants' views on Islam as a queer friendly religion, with the aim of upholding acceptability of their sexual orientation, of which participants denote varied knowledge, which can refer to that some participants do not relate themselves to the texts, among other things. However, shared among the participants was the understanding that the most commonly used passage to condemn same-sex sexuality is the story of Lot in the Qur'an. Because the story of Lot is commonly used as confirmation of God's punishment of same-sex sexual acts, it was to be expected that participants dispute the interpretation of this story. During my interviews, the majority of participants expressed that for them, the original, authentic Islam was characterized by positive views towards sexual diversity, a view contrary to a common belief of how Islam view same-sex sexuality today. For them, the people in the story of Lot were not punished because of same-sex sexual practices; rather, Allah punished the people of Lot because of their immoral acts of rape and murder. The following narratives demonstrate these perspectives:

There are many feminist and queer interpretations of the Qur'an. One can argue that the story of Sodom and Gomorra does not depict homosexuals, because it [the story of Lot] described a situation and a people where immoral behavior took place; rape is described, and non-consenting relations. This can be interpreted with new eyes, and should be considered from the time it [the story] was written. (Farah)

I believe in the Qur'an, but I think [the story of Lot] being about homosexuals is added by humans. God would not have turned the city upside down if it was only love there, but there was rape and immoral behavior. What is good in Islam comes from God.

That is my opinion. (Sumaya)

Participants' narratives are undoubtedly informed by Muslim LGBTIQ affirming interpretations that argues that the destruction of the cities was because of inhospitality to strangers and sexual assault (Yip; 2005; Kugle 2010; 2014). Notably, Farah and Sumaya do not reject or dispute the religious text, but they challenge the human interpretations that deem

LGBTIQ sexuality as immoral, sinful and punishable. Sumaya has an interesting point saying that “[I] think [the story of Lot] being about homosexuals is added by humans” – by this she meant that she thinks that the story being about homosexuality is added by humans. This means that Sumaya does not reject the revealed scripture, but disputes with human interpretations, and that human interpretations are fallible. Together with contesting human interpretations, the majority of the participants also call attention to the historical and cultural specificity that informed traditional interpretations of the story of Lot. Interestingly, this is also reflective of Yip’s (2005) findings. Participants acknowledge that the story of Lot can reflect the time in which the story was written, and that the interpretation of the story condemning homosexuality should not be implemented today because it is inadmissible in today’s western contemporary society which largely respects the diversity of sexuality.

I find the narratives as challenging the infallibility and literal employment of religious texts because historical and cultural specificity is essential in understanding human sexuality. The importance of understanding human sexuality is reflected by Hawa’s excerpt:

I do not think Islam is as harsh as the interpretations are; seeing homosexuality as taboo, disgusting and shameful. Is that what Islam really says? I don’t think so, and I like to think that it [Islam] is much more inclusive and [that Islam] accommodates the variations of human sexuality. It [Islam] is supposed to be based on that only God can judge you, not humans.

Similar to Farah and Sumaya, Hawa sees the interpretations of the Islamic scriptures as human made. Her view of Islam is also quite empowering in that she finds Islam to be embracing of all people, including queers. In addition, Hawa puts forward an oft forgotten principle that in Islam it is not humans that can judge other humans, only God can judge.

Ganimete, who no longer identify as Muslim, asserts a similar understanding of human interpretations of Islamic texts, and foregrounds what she sees as hypocrisy of judging queers:

When I see Islam from outside, and not being Muslim anymore, I see that negative attitudes towards queer people stem from humans. [When she identified as Muslim] I thought that the condemnation of homosexuality came from God. [Today] I think people can pick and choose what they want from their religion. I see the negative focus

on homosexuality as hypocritical [because] I know heterosexual Muslims who have sexual relations [outside of marriage] every other weekend, and according to their faith it [sexual intercourse outside marriage] is not acceptable. It's like they [Muslims who have sex outside marriage] don't think that God sees how they act.

Similar to other participants, Ganimete asserts that the prohibition of homosexuality is human interpretation, and not reflected in Islamic texts. Notably, she calls attention to her experience of hypocrisy with heterosexual Muslims having sexual relations outside marriage, while same-sex sexuality is subject to condemnation. Clearly she is expressing an internal criticism of Muslims, in that she criticizes how Islam is being practiced by (heterosexual) Muslims. She places emphasis on how people act and points to existing discrepancies within heterosexual practices as morally hypocritical in view of their Islamic faith.

Through these excerpts we are reminded of the importance of Muslim LGBTIQ communities that can promote acceptance of LGBTIQ Muslims through alternative readings of religious texts. There has been an emergence of various international organizations that engage with issues of sexual diversity, as shown in the chapter on international research. The LGBTIQ Muslim communities around the world are a testimony to the need to engage with queer people's lived experiences of negotiating multiple identities and multiple belongings. Farah importantly emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging heterosexual Muslims who support LGBTIQ rights, and fight for queer rights:

Negative attitudes towards queers still exist in Norway. When it comes to traditional and conservative Muslims, many are not very queer-tolerant. [However] there are also [heterosexual] Muslims that have positive attitudes towards queers, Muslims that support our fight. We have allies. That is something that does not get much attention, [heterosexual] Muslims that fight for queer rights. (Farah)

In this excerpt, we are reminded of how Muslim communities are diverse. We are also reminded that you can find interlocutors in all communities, because readings, performances and how one embodies Islam can flourish within the Muslim community. The Muslim community is one of several networks that can contribute to human and queer flourishing.

This section of the chapter illustrates participants' understandings of religious texts. It is important to emphasize that the participants do not disregard the relevance or value of the texts, but clearly challenge the traditional interpretation through their lived experience and personal reflection of Islam. By interpreting and engaging the story of Lot as 'queer friendly', the story is re-interpreted into a narrative that is about rape and in-hospitality, not homosexuality. As such, many participants construct an interpretive space that is accepting of their sexual self. Moreover, this section also shows how LGBTIQ Muslims can find support within their Muslim community.

6.4 Discussion and summary

The narratives presented in this chapter clearly reflect some of the central ways in which several participants' relation to Islam informed their expressions of sexual identity. The excerpts show deliberate attempts to transcend the dichotomy between sexual and religious selves, hence, entwining queer and Muslim identities. From the narratives, we can see that participants' perceptions of religion vary, in what Islam means to the individual. Islam plays an integral role in most of the participants' constructions of selfhood, where some emphasize personal relationships with God as constituting the principle way in which they related to Islam. For others, however, personal relationships with God, and religiosity, were not emphasized, but they foregrounded the importance of being Muslim as related to their cultural heritage and connection to their families. And, one participant could not entwine her queer and Muslim identity, which resulted in her leaving Islam.

Intersectionality is a point to explore here, in that the intersecting identities of religion and sexuality is not necessarily at an equilibrium point; they can be in imbalance. The intersections between religion and sexuality sometimes coincide, which can be said to have to do with centrality. One of the identities is not less important than the other; the participants grapple with how to melt the two identities together. If you are a queer Muslim, one might think that you *have to* find a balance between the two identities so that they can melt together. However, that is not to say that both identities are central at every moment. Through prayer, for example, one asks for a sign of acceptance from God, in the intersection between religiosity and sexuality. With regard to the narratives that highlighted legitimization of sexuality by God, it shows how some participants understand God's creation and how one is

part of that creation. For others, created-ness is irrelevant, and the meaning of religion is attached to family and culture.

The narratives included in this chapter have illustrated that Islam can be both empowering and disempowering for participants. In that the chapter has shown participants resilience in overcoming negative social and psychological experiences that empowered them to either live as queer Muslim women, or leaving Islam so as to live out a queer identity. From the narratives, we can see how participants crafted their own Muslim identity through broadening the concept of 'Muslim' in order to conform to their intersectional identities as queer Muslim women in Norway. Similar to international research (Yip 2005; Kugle 2010; 2014) the majority of my participants highlight the discursiveness and fluidity of religious texts' meanings. By re-conceptualizing the condemnation of same-sex sexuality and constructing a discourse that includes queer Muslims, we can see the intersection of the personal, religious and secular, which in turn can signify the authority of the self and the construction of individual lives.

7 Embodying the everyday life

From the experiences outlined in the previous chapters, we can see how participants have navigated, in particular, family and religion. In this chapter, I foreground how the participants spoke about their sexuality in different ways, often depending on the context wherein which they were situated in. I problematize how participants live and how they embody everyday life in relation to their intersectional identities and in particular contexts wherein which forms of heteronormative and homonormative discourses influence participants' self.

7.1 Situated expressions of sexual selves

As shown through the previous chapters, with one exception, all participants described how their religious and cultural backgrounds influenced the process of sexual self-understanding and acceptance. Yet, fear of isolation from family and community is not the only factor in choosing not to disclose sexuality. On the one hand, for several participants, their religious and cultural background echoed strong norms of family honor and loyalty. The interviews suggest that for most participants, their queer selves were dependent on the context wherein which they were situated. I here want to highlight two excerpts that revealed how some participants reason their concealment of their sexual orientation in their country of origin:

I have two separate Facebook accounts because I am scared for what consequences my siblings can face in [country of origin] if I am open [about sexual orientation] on that [Facebook] account. I have to be careful. (Jennifer)

Another participant, describes her queer self as non-existent when relating to her family:

I know my culture and I know my family; I am not worried about them threatening me, I worry about my siblings. When they marry, family is everything. If they [her siblings] have a lesbian sister it will not be good for them, everything stops. In our culture, family is power. No matter how much my siblings are in love, I would have been their hindrance to getting married. It is all about clan, and clan structure; the name of the family and education level. I will break it [the family name] if I tell them [that she is queer]. The whole strength of the family is our name; you do not mess with it. My education and my work is something that gives the family name power, I am a

gigantic pole that holds everything together. It would have been selfish of me to be open [about sexuality to her family]. Nevertheless, I am open [about sexuality in Norway], I have lived with someone [a girlfriend], been in several relationships [with women], but I have kept the [family] honor. (Sumaya)

Sumaya is clearly invested in preserving and maintaining the family honor and she considers openly expressing her queer self as selfish. It is particularly noteworthy that both Sumaya and Jennifer describe their choice of not disclosing their sexuality in their country of origin in order to protect their siblings. Apparently, children's social behavior is a reflection of the family as a whole. In Sumaya's excerpt, we clearly see that the reason for her to keep her sexuality hidden from her family and community is that others (siblings) that are 'innocent' can be unjustly punished. Arguably, once there is a 'black sheep' in the family, everyone is potentially 'black sheep'. As a consequence, the impact of Sumaya's sexuality on her sibling's future, and family name and honor can be destructive. Sumaya's choice to not disclose her sexual orientation to her family can be said to be her ultimate sacrifice. The code of honor places family interests and tradition before individual needs, wherein Sumaya accepts her responsibilities within the family.

With the aim of not implicating cultural relativism, which again can feed Islamophobic constructions of Sumaya's family honor and clan structure, an understanding of the family/clan structure can be shown through the lens of heteronormativity. The heteronormative lens reflects the regulation and control of sexuality as a collective operation, and can be considered irrespective of the cultural norms within Sumaya's family. Through the lens of heteronormativity, the social, familial and individual imperative of upholding the honor becomes clear. The heteronormative 'honor culture' illustrated in Sumaya's excerpt can be understood as regulating the embodiment of sexuality and performance of gender, thus compelling a particular heterosexualized and gendered order.

I interpret the honor code that Sumaya grew up in and which she still conforms to as an ingrained part of her self, due to the honor code being a system and tradition. Importantly, heteronormativity is a regulative norm, and is reinforced by 'ideals' that equate other forms of conduct with sexual conduct. The integrated performance of heteronormativity creates a space in which the normative code of honor and conduct is upheld, and Sumaya is participating in holding it together. Sumaya's narrative illuminates the family honor as a construct of power, a

form of wealth that can anchor the success and the power of the family. All family members have a responsibility in its perseverance. If the honor is damaged, leaving the family dishonored, the family collectively is destroyed.

Sumaya's excerpt illustrates how the honor of the family name extends across national borders, which means that Sumaya's sexual self is transnational by virtue of her keeping her family's honor intact irrespective of her being near them in geographical location. Her transnational self illuminates the circulations and connections between sexual discourses, cultures and subjectivities across borders. The transnational sexual formation can be interpreted as imbued with meaning within boundaries of cultural contexts and is embodied through upholding the family honor and protecting her siblings from being punished for her 'sins'. Sumaya is acutely aware of the performances and scripts she is expected to perform to fulfil the role she plays in the collaborative family dynamic.

As I showed in the chapter dealing with family relations, Zara, Hawa and Jennifer's narratives similarly evoke situated expressions of their sexuality. Zara silences her sexual self when in the space of her family, in order to stay close to them, while Hawa and Jennifer actively hides their queer selves from their families and communities in their countries of origin, due to the fear reprisals they can face for their non-heterosexual sexualities. The participants remind us that even though selves and identities can be perceived as multiple and fluid, power operates through and in the spaces in which we live and move through, resulting in excluding particular groups, such as queer individuals.

Arguably, participants' narratives espouse a different kind of meaning system than the dominant western LGBTIQ discourse that highlights 'coming out' of 'the closet' as an individual and liberatory act. Most participants of this study's sexual identities can be interpreted as situational and contingent on circumstances and geographic location. Thus, some participants maintain two separate selves, one self that they share in the country of origin or in the space of the family in Norway, and one space where they can nurture their queer self. However, the upholding of the family honor does not create borders that participants do not cross, therefore, the next section of this chapter enquires into how some participants spoke of queer belonging in Norway.

7.2 Questioning intersectional queers

In addition to participants foregrounding their navigation of family and country of origin, the interviews show that participants experience queer belonging in Norway in different ways. For most participants, sexuality has no decisive meaning for their social network. However, I find that there is a clear tension in some participants' experiences with Norwegian queer communities and spaces which will be demonstrated through the following narratives:

My intersecting identities are so fundamental to me. So I surround myself with people that agree with me on these [LGBTIQ] issues. (Farah)

Because her identities as a lesbian and as a Muslim are essential to her, Farah expresses her choice of not wanting to surround herself with people who challenge these aspects of her self. Notably, Farah finds her circle of friends to be liberating for her sense of self. Other participants did not, however, emphasize a queer network as important for their social queer lives. Hawa, for example, asserts that she knows only a few queer people and that she has no queer network. As explained in the chapter on when sexuality became important, Hawa does not want her queer self to be a big part of who she is, because she has other parts of her self that she values as equally or more important. Nevertheless, it came forth during our interview she does not want to be part of a queer community due to negative experiences:

I was active in a queer community [she is not active today]. I did not think that they [queer community] protected people as well as they should. For many, to 'come out' can be burdensome and that vulnerability needs protection [by the queer community]. I question if the content and approach [in the queer communities] include [queers] strongly enough. I am a triple minority, as queer, my ethnicity [country of origin], and I am Muslim. If the organizations focused on other areas of inclusion as well, then the organization could help with more challenges in life. What is strange is that I feel like an outsider in queer communities and places. I do not see the lesbian community as inclusive for new members. Some people [have asked her] if I am there for sex and do not believe that I am lesbian and that I am there to experiment [because of her race]. The inclusion [in a queer community] that I actually miss, I cannot find, therefore it [seeking belonging] becomes a threshold.

Hawa here describes that she was active in a queer community, but left due to not seeing them as protecting queers in difficult situations, in particular she emphasizes the ‘coming out’ process, wherein queer people are in need of support. Hawa also describes herself as being a triple minority. For her this means wanting an organization that is inclusive of other marginalized identities, not only sexuality. Hawa, like other participants in this study, can be subject to experiencing homophobia, racism and Islamophobia, and expresses her wish for a community that can take her and other marginalized groups intersectional identities into account. Her experience with some lesbian communities is described in negative terms, always feeling like an outsider. Hawa has experienced prejudice and marginalization in lesbian spaces, having had her sexual authenticity questioned due to her race. These experiences have led her to feeling rejected in a space that she originally wished to be included in. It is noteworthy that one of the consistent themes found in international research was how some participants in these studies experienced racism and discrimination in western, mainly white LGBTIQ communities (Abraham 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005). Hawa’s narrative poignantly evidence that marginalization also finds expression within queer communities. Zara also stresses a similar issue:

White lesbians question my sexuality. I have met several self- identified lesbian women that previously were married to men, have children etc. but they ‘came out’ as lesbian in their 40’s and 50’s. Some of these [white lesbian] women have asked me how I can know that I am lesbian when I am as young as I am. This provokes me; just because they took so long to realize they were lesbian, they question me. In addition, heterosexual men tend to find me exotic. When I tell [heterosexual] men that I am lesbian [due to men making sexual advances towards her], I often get asked to ‘prove it’ [her lesbian orientation] and they insinuate that I have to kiss a girl.

Zara’s excerpt reveals that her sexuality is questioned by two different ‘groups’. First, white lesbians question how she can know that she is queer at her young age, due to their own experiences of not knowing and living out their sexual orientation until they were older. Second, heterosexual men question her queer sexuality due to her race (or, at least there is a sense that the way she looks is ‘exotic’). The workings of homonormativity and whiteness emerge as two operative discourses in the excerpt above. Zara’s queerness is not taken seriously by either white women or heterosexual men. Her experience with heterosexual men can also be a consequence of homonormativity, which upholds stereotypes for lesbians based

on gender, race and sexuality. Zara's experience of being asked to prove her queerness, by heterosexual men, can suggest that her experience can be related to ethnic minorities not being viewed as authentically queer. In addition to not being viewed as queer because of her ethnicity, the men actually just continue to flirt with her – in a way her being a lesbian is even more a 'turn on' for the heterosexual men, which fits with the fetishization of her. Her self must act, for the pleasure of a male audience. Because of her intersectional identities, she is not seen as a 'standard' queer woman and her mode of queerness is not validated. Zara expressed that she felt objectified and pressured to prove her orientation as degrading and disrespecting.

The two excerpts above are arguably reflective of Rahman's notion of queer Muslims as "disruptively queer intersectional subjects rather than identities that are minorities *within* either LGBT or Muslim minorities" (Rahman & Valliani 2016, 84). Hawa and Zara's excerpts illuminate particular difficulties that queer Muslims face. Participants can be said to disrupt the consistency of dominant identity categories, ultimately resulting in experiences of discrimination and exclusion. What follows can also be seen as reflective of the workings of homonormativity and homonationalism, which maintains stereotypes for queer people based on gender, race and sexuality. As a part of an intersectional analysis, homonationalism can be understood as an additional dimension, that alongside the racial dimension, gender dimension and religious dimension, create a queer hierarchy in which participants can be subject to questioning and discrimination. The social spaces wherein which Zara and Hawa were located notably presume particular queer and racialized bodies. The *perceived* incompatibility of their queer and racialized selves was illuminated in a context that does not account for their culture or religion.

As previously described, Farah deliberately surrounds herself with people who agree with her on LGBTIQ issues, however, during our interview it came forth that she similarly experienced that her lesbian identity was sometimes not taken seriously. Contrary to the other participants, she does not connect this to other aspects of her self:

People often presume that I am heterosexual. When I am in situations with a majority of men that I suspect are heterosexual, I am less open [of expressing sexual orientation]. People can be rude, so I think I prevent a lot of comments due to the manner I express my sexual orientation.

Farah explains that she can feel out of place within spaces that are (perceived) to be quite male. Because of the presumption of heterosexuality, passing as heterosexual can be an easy alternative within male dominated spaces that Farah describes. Arguably, her being female could probably also evoke inappropriate comments, but by not expressing her lesbian self, she finds that she prevents rude comments connected to her being lesbian. The concept of ‘passing’ is also connected to privilege, which concerns particular advantages that the majority group experience and enjoy in their everyday lives because society presumes that their position is the norm. White heterosexual men, for instance, has privilege compared Farah (and of course all the other participants in this study). Participants might have to correct inaccurate assumptions that others make of them, stares from people when they are holding hands with their girlfriend in public, or the constant mental evaluations of whether or not it is safe to explain their sexual orientation to people they do not know. This mental overhead that participants experience in their everyday lives signifies a lack of privilege.

In this section, I have foregrounded how some participants struggle to negotiate ‘impossible’ positions, because they are a racialized sexual “Other”. The narratives have shed light into how marginalization of sexual orientation can occur within queer communities and spaces due to a homonormative discourse. Some participants experience queer communities and spaces as normative, wherein the positionings of these participants resulted in embodied and felt exclusions. Others did not articulate negative experiences within these spaces, and some felt liberated by surrounding themselves with likeminded.

7.3 Empowerment of the self

Although the majority of the participants expressed experiences that in general could have been disempowering to their self, spaces that served as a source of empowerment seem to have enabled participants to live their lives as queer/lesbian Muslims. Several components have played a role in participants’ construction of their sexual identity and Muslim identity so as to achieve a sense of coherence and continuity, wherein most participants mentioned their work place being an important space of empowerment, wherein which they experience acceptance and respect:

I think I deliberately have not fought the queer fight [through engaging in queer organizations]. I think that I give my queer contribution through my work. What I create there, is that everyone can be the whole rainbow by creating open spaces, and that is important to me. (Hawa)

At my place of work, I experience so much support [from her colleagues], everyone respects me. (Jennifer)

We are several queer people at my place of work, my boss is gay and one of my close colleagues is also gay. They know about my sexual orientation, and we support each other. (Ganimete)

In these excerpts, participants emphasized that they express their queer selves in their place of work. Hawa is engaged in creating ‘open spaces’ at her place of work, wherein which the people that she works with can express their sexual selves in a safe space. Similarly, Jennifer and Ganimete experiences support and respect in their place of work, which can be read as a space of nurturing their queer selves. They receive recognition of their sexual selves, by being open in their place of work. Sumaya on the other hand, does not express her sexual self at her place of work. During our interview, she told me that her boss and a few of her colleagues know that she is not heterosexual. As previously shown in the chapter dealing with ‘the closet’, Sumaya does not see the need to tell everyone that she is not heterosexual. However, she sees her place of work as an important space in which she expresses her Muslim identity:

I express my Muslim identity when I am at work, in that Islam is a hot topic of discussion, and I love discussing Islam with both Muslims and non-Muslims. When it comes to my sexuality I cannot discuss it as I can with Islam. It is too personal, and I have to be professional. I am secure on my stance on Islam, because I grew up with it, and I can recite the Qur’an and teach people about my religion.

For Sumaya, her Muslim identity is more important for her to be recognized for at her place of work, because she is self-confident in her knowledge and belief in Islam. At the same time, she acknowledges that discussing and expressing her sexual self in her place of work is “too personal” for her. Arguably, expressions of self are dependent on which identity participants give centrality to in different contexts. Sumaya also highlights that in the context of Norway

she can nurture her queer self in the spaces that she chooses, keeping it outside the realm of her family. Seemingly, the participants that migrated to Norway have opened new possibilities for their sexual freedom. The narratives acknowledge that they maintain of their ties to their societies of origin, at the same time as they build ties to the Norwegian society that they live in now. Durable and coinciding links to countries of origin and Norway define their lived realities as queer Muslim women.

7.4 Discussion and summary

This chapter has dealt with some of the participants' experiences with both heteronormative and homonormative discourses that inform their realities in different ways. Participants intersecting realities have shown how they enable particular kinds of action for bodies that are marked as disruptively queer. Firstly, one of the major themes that emerged from the narratives was how some participants are shaped by gender relations within their heteronormative family and society. It is important to note that participants' sexuality does not change when crossing borders or contexts, however, their queer self is expressed differently dependent on context, and that does not diminish their queerness. Multiple subjectivities and contextual conditions such as family and community in country of origin show how some participants profess themselves in different ways. Professing selves hence varies from which contexts participants move through and between. Arguably, Sumaya's ultimate sacrifice of her queer self within the context of her family can provide a sense of belonging and feeling like one has a place in their families and community that can nurture a cultural identification, and a sense of ethnic heritage and faith values.

What may strike from particularly Sumaya's excerpt in this chapter, is the western LGBTIQ discourse that encourages no split between private life and public appearance, and that not 'coming out' is seen as a denial of one's true inner self. For Sumaya, it makes no sense to perform her same self in different sites, because her located queer self constitutes her sense of being in the world (Najmabadi 2014, 298). She sustains the ideals of family norms and the heteronormative framework that is deeply embedded in her country of origin. Seemingly, she does not transgress these boundaries within the nuclear family and across religious boundaries. By holding up (non-queer) appearances she sustains the nuclear family, the extended family and clan at a larger scale.

From an intersectional perspective, another major theme that emerged in this chapter was that we can here see how sexual difference is problematically read as not including “other” non-white queer women. Hawa and Zara’s excerpts highlight how certain intersections enables particular experiences of oppression and marginalization, by the ways in which racial ‘difference’ can be read off their particular bodies, and also that their embodied ‘differences’ are socially and discursively produced by the relations of power within homonationalism. Homonormative ideals pick some groups out as different from the mainstream homonationalism. These relations of power mark some bodies differently than others (read white), by perceived “differences” such as “traditional” dress, visual markers of skin color, etc. Arguably, the homonormative ideals allows for only specific types of queer visibilities, namely those who adhere to particular racial and gendered norms.

8 Conclusions

This research project turned out to be so much more than exploring the views of a supposedly ‘hidden’ population. The study takes on the novel aspect of the queer Muslim female experience, which has not been subject to research in the Norwegian context before. The participants in this study show how nuanced and complex queer Muslim women’s lives are in Norway. The thesis in its entirety demonstrate the importance and value of including perspectives and experiences queer Muslim women, because queer Muslim women experience particular challenges that is under-researched. The theoretical tools have traced how identity markers are expressed through actions and interactions of an embodied self, which has helped me to unpack some of the dynamics of what is going on in participants’ lives, and can make the study useful in several other research arenas.

In the previous chapters I have presented a variety of narratives, paying special attention to the various ways in which participants live out their same-sex sexuality and how they navigate and perform their self in relation to family, culture and religion, in particular. I chose to focus on participants lived experiences in order to highlight the shifting and fluid formations of selves. The main objective of this thesis was to identify the dominant discourses that participants navigate in everyday life. Furthermore, the thesis set out to analyze the ways in which participants understanding of Islam inform their expressions of sexual identity, and how participants’ sexuality affects their religiosity. In this concluding chapter I will engage with the above mentioned research questions.

8.1 Intersectional selves within dominant discourses

The excerpts presented in the previous chapters illustrate that my participants move through and in various social structures in ways that are creative, and that both resist and conform to dominant discourses, dependent on participants’ situatedness. The operative discourses in my findings the heteronormative discourse and the homonationalist discourse. Participants are embedded and embodied within these discursive intersections, and in the following sections I will discuss how queer Muslim women are situated within, and speak about these discourses.

The participants that have migrated to Norway know the social context and the social codes in their homelands, wherein strict moral discourses find the only acceptable sexual orientation to

be heterosexuality. Heteronormativity establishes this framework, leaving non-heterosexual people on the outside of the framework. Several participants show that cultural codes do not cease to function or operate regardless of moving or migrating, because values that have been instilled is brought with you through the experience of migration. The contrast between the heteronormative ‘script’ and participants’ queer bodies involves ‘reworking’ the ‘script’. Notably, the narratives have shown how most participants’ sexual selves are situated, and some participants’ queer selves are shaped by having to live in close proximity to heterosexual families. The silencing of queerness within their Muslim communities contributes to the continuing of the binary queer/Muslim.

Interestingly, some participants mentioned that by not disclosing their sexuality in their country of origin was due to not wanting to cause harm to their siblings, hence, their queer selves extends across borders and has transnational meaning. Several participants articulated that they did not want to be “selfish”, in living out their sexual selves, evoking the family/community as more important than the individual. The individualism that encourages mainstream movements for equality can be said to be in stark contrast to several of my participants’ family obligations and cultural awareness. I also find that it is important to take centrality into account, due to the fact that identity is positioned in relation to centrality; the centrality of the identity can vary in relation to life experiences and contexts. Arguably, the centrality of the identity varies rather than the identity – the identity does not change, but the centrality of the different components of the identity changes dependent on the context and the situatedness of the body. Professing selves hence vary from which contexts participants move through and between.

I also find that my participants, within the context of Norway, find spaces wherein which they can nurture their queer selves, which is not always within Norwegian LGBTIQ communities. This brings us over to the second operative discourse that participants navigate, namely the homonationalist discourse. As maintained by Puar (2007), the effect of homonormativity involves the restructuring of the “Other”, thus constructing hegemonic sexuality by marginalizing all non-normative forms of identity. What becomes clear through my participants’ narratives is the continued existence of dominant discourses on sexuality underpinned by forms of homonormativity. Some participants articulated the importance of belonging within queer sites that give meaning to their sexual selves. However, several participants revealed that there were moments when they were subject to marginalization and

exclusion set out by dominant homonormative discourses. Culturally specific queer practices, norms, terminology etc. creates a specific queer subject, and a specific discourse that upholds normative understandings of queerness can be said to contribute to the invisibility of queer Muslim women's voices. The LGBTIQ movements in the west have struggled vigorously to 'normalize' queerness both socially and culturally. However, queer Muslim women continue to be on the sideline in these changes, because they are entwined in very individual struggles with the self, their religion and faith, family and homelands.

The combination of being non-white, Muslim and queer seems to marginalize queer Muslim women through the homonormative paradigm, because it is simply not enough to identify as queer. Even within the queer discourse, queer identity is not the only central marker. Currently, queer Muslims face challenges within this discourse, because they are not seen as belonging within it. Hence, the homonationalist discourse limits individual abilities to inhabit one's own sexuality in different ways. I therefore argue that there is an intrinsic contradiction within queer politics that seeks to include queers, yet does not see the diversity of the intersections of queer subjects.

In different locations and geographies, participants' identitarian markers are embodied in different ways and the dominant discourses within these locations and geographies are decisive of how their selves are performed. Arguably, these discourses, among others, illuminate the multiplicity of experience that queer Muslim women's bodies move through, and the different ways in which queer Muslims profess themselves as queer Muslims.

The theoretical frameworks of subject formation, intersections of identity and social interactions enables us to see the significance that gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion has for participants' identities. These identity markers shape their sense of who they are, in addition, their identities inform and influence social interactions. As some of the narratives have shown, people read participants bodies for signs of these social categories. How participants' identities are read can, as shown, result in marginalization, discrimination and exclusion.

8.2 Interpretive authority of the self

My second research question concerns in what ways participants' understandings of Islam inform their expressions of sexual identity, and how participants' sexuality affects their religiosity. I find that participants' understandings and relation to Islam varies, but that it changed from when they were young until becoming adults. Because non-heterosexuality was understood as incompatible with their faith, many expressed times of distress. When participants became older, by undergoing periods of reflection and meeting likeminded, most were able to reconcile their sexual identity and Muslim identity meaningfully. On the one end of the continuum, some participants narrated connectedness with God through prayer, and feeling their queer selves as created by God. They found Islam to be a source of empowerment for their selves, and were able to validate their sexuality through their connection with God. The embodiment of religion can be said to have changed how they experience their sexuality in relation to Islam. Hereunder, these participants' religiosity changed from fearing reprisals from God, to a personal relationship with God.

On the other end of the continuum, some participants distanced themselves from their religion when they were young, and when becoming older found that they could choose what it meant for them to be Muslim, which they predominantly connect to their cultural heritage and family. These participants do not identify as religious or practicing Muslims, which they articulated had no connection their sexuality, but how religion was practiced within their families.

One participant in this study could not express her sexual identity until she left Islam, because she saw her sexuality as incompatible with her faith. She conveyed feelings of constant guilt in her everyday life when she identified as Muslim, because her understanding of her religion was her that sexuality was incompatible with her faith.

What can be seen from the narratives as to participants' overall experiences as queer Muslim (and formerly Muslim) women, is how they draw strength from their various struggles, by transforming their obstacles into new understandings of their sexual selves and religion.

Many of the findings of this study are reflective of findings and consistent themes in international studies that include empirical research with queer Muslim women. That is,

many of the participants interviewed in this research felt some difficulty reconciling their sexual and religious selves, due to feelings of having to choose between sexuality and religion (also found in the studies by Al-Sayaad 2009; Siraj 2012; 2015). Furthermore, my findings are reflective of the international findings that reveal fear of family and/or community reacting negatively to revealing non-heterosexual sexuality (Yip 2007), and experiences of racism and sexism within western LGBTIQ communities (also found in studies by Abraham 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005). In addition, I found that some of my participants' internal process of reconciling faith and sexuality was fully part of God's creation, which resonates with Siraj's (2012) findings, and that re-interpretations of religious texts function as a means to understand themselves within Islam, also found in both Yip (2007) and Kugle's (2014) studies.

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is the time frame, wherein I had to consider the scope and time limit. Including this, the sample size of this study limits my ability to make broad conclusions regarding the generalizability of findings. However, the study gives a framework from which further studies can build. I want to emphasize the richness of the stories that was obtained. If I had interviewed more participants, it would have been difficult to give each participant's story the place that it deserves, which has to do with the limited space of a master's thesis.

I note that this brief account of some of the existing experiences of dominant discourses that my participants navigate in their everyday life is by no means a conclusive or representative for all queer Muslim women in Norway. I also recognize that my interpretations of the participants' life stories are one of many possible interpretations. I hope that this research can inspire future research to further investigate the lived experiences of sexual minorities and Muslim cultures.

This thesis has touched upon a number of aspects that can be fruitful for future research. The aspects include the emphasis on lived experience as a means to explore lived lives and lived religion. In line with Rahman and Valliani (2016), I argue that it is important to challenge the perceived opposition between LGBTIQ rights and identities and Muslim cultures by contributing to the production of further knowledge about the experiences of LGBTIQ Muslims.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

DELTAKERE SØKES TIL STUDIE OM SKEIVE MUSLIMSKE KVINNER

Mitt navn er Ida Dalslåen, og er masterstudent ved UiO, i studieprogrammet Religion og samfunn. Jeg skal skrive masteroppgave om skeive muslimske kvinner, og deres forhold til religion og seksualitet.

Både praktiserende og ikke-praktiserende muslimske kvinner er av interesse (også de som ikke lenger identifiserer seg med Islam). Det finnes svært lite i litteraturen om skeive muslimske kvinners opplevelser, noe jeg ønsker å utforske gjennom denne studien. Derfor søker jeg deltakere som vil dele av sine erfaringer. All informasjon som kommer frem i intervjuene vil bli behandlet konfidensielt, og deltakerne vil ikke kunne gjenkjennes i den endelige teksten. Du kan når som helst trekke deg eller avbryte uten å måtte begrunne dette nærmere.

For mer informasjon om hva studien og deltakelsen innebærer, kontakt meg gjerne på idadalslaen@gmail.com

Appendix 2

Interview guide:

1. Childhood; earliest memories of sexual orientation.
2. Education experiences (school, friends, and relationships).
3. Family (relationships, religiosity, background and migration).
4. Place of work.
5. Spaces; when you are in different roles (e.g. with family, friends or at work), how do you express your sexuality or religion, or both?
6. Can you explain what being Muslim means to you?
7. Views on sexual orientation; how do you describe your sexuality?
8. Views on Islam and sexuality.
9. The politics of the closet (i.e. “In the closet” and “out of the closet”).
10. Social network; queer community?
11. Anything the participant would like to add.

Appendix 3



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Vår dato: 01.11.2016

Vår ref: 50230 / 3 / AGL

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 26.09.2016. All nødvendig informasjon om prosjektet forelå i sin helhet 31.10.2016. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

50230	<i>Don't ask, don't tell: queer Muslim women's relationships to Islam</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Nina Hoel
Student	Ida Strømsvik Dalslåen

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.12.2017, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Kjersti Haugstvedt

Audun Løvlie

Kontaktperson: Audun Løvlie tlf: 55 58 23 07

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Appendix 4

Student: Ida Strømsvik Dalslåen tel: 454 81 838, e-post: idadalslaen@gmail.com

Veileder: Førsteamanuensis Nina Hoel (e-post: nina.hoel@teologi.uio.no)

Samtykkeerklæring

Embodying intersecting selves: exploring the lived experiences of queer Muslim women in Norway.

Takk for at du har sagt deg villig til å delta i denne studien. Du har blitt bedt om å bidra fordi du identifiserer deg som kvinne, skeiv eller lesbisk, enten praktiserende eller ikke praktiserende muslim, eller tidligere Muslim.

Oppgavens formål vil være og utforske skeive muslimske kvinners opplevelser, deres forhold til Islam, og deres forståelse av religionen. Gjennom å undersøke skeive Muslimske kvinners opplevelser av Islam, vil studien se på forholdet mellom religion og seksualitet.

Dette studiet vil være anonymt; noe som betyr at all informasjon som innhentes under intervjuet vil bli oppbevart sikkert, trygt og konfidensielt av studenten og veilederen. Hovedfokuset i dette studiet er din forståelse av religion og seksualitet og dine erfaringer forbundet med dette. Intervjuet vil bli brukt som grunnlag for en master-oppgave ved Universitet i Oslo. I master-oppgaven vil jeg anonymisere all informasjon som kan føres tilbake til deg. Dette vil jeg gjøre ved hjelp av blant annet pseudonymer. Jeg vil heller ikke publisere personidentifiserbare opplysninger utover identifikasjoner knyttet til kjønn og religiøs tilhørighet.

Det gis ingen garanti for at du vil dra direkte nytte av dette studiet. Samtidig håper jeg, og min veileder, at din deltakelse kan bidra til å belyse hvilken rolle Islam har for skeive muslimske kvinner. Hvis det er ønskelig, sender jeg deg gjerne en elektronisk kopi av masteroppgaven når denne foreligger.

Intervjuet vil bli tatt opp på lydbånd og studenten vil ta notater under intervjuet. Det er kun studenten og veileder som har adgang til å gjennomgå lydfile og intervjunotatene. Denne informasjonen vil lagres trygt. Ingen andre vil ha tilgang til dette materialet og ved prosjektet avslutning vil lydfile og notater bli slettet/makulert. Du kan når som helst trekke ditt

samtykke uten å oppgi videre grunn til hvorfor du trekker deg. Dette gjelder i forkant av, under og etter intervjuet.

Hvis du har noen spørsmål om denne samtykkeerklæringen, vennligst spør meg (studenten) før du signerer.

Etter at du har lest dette dokumentet og blitt gitt mulighet til å stille spørsmål, kan du signere.

- Jeg har blitt informert av _____ (studenten) om dette prosjektets formål og gjennomføring.
- Jeg har mottatt, lest og forstått overstående informasjon om studiet.
- Jeg gir mitt samtykke til at det blir gjort lydopptak av intervjuet.
- Jeg er klar over at informasjonen gitt under dette intervjuet vil bli anonymisert.
- Jeg er klar over at jeg når som helst, uten å oppgi grunn, kan trekke meg fra studiet.
- Jeg bekrefter at jeg har fått tilstrekkelig mulighet til å stille spørsmål.
- Jeg bekrefter at jeg etter egen fri vilje samtykker til å delta i studiet.

Jeg gir med dette mitt samtykke til å delta i studiet beskrevet over.

Navn (fornavn og initialer i etternavn)

Dato

Jeg (studenten) bekrefter med dette at jeg har informert deltageren om studiet og at deltageren har fått tilstrekkelig informasjon om samtykke, samt mulighet til å stille spørsmål.

Studentens navn

Dato

Samtykkeerklæringen vil bli signert i to versjoner. En signert kopi vil bli bevart av studenten og en signert kopi vil bli gitt til deltager.