Pride & Prejudice on the Relationship of True Faith, Muslim Attire & Social Advantages

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Tokzhan Atenbekova

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This master thesis aims to analyse the relationship between Islam and Muslim attire in the context of gaining social advantages. Thus, the study examines the motives and drivers behind women's choice to wear hijab. The research consists of in-depth analysis semi-standardised expert interview, participant observation and focus groups based on purposive sampling divided by age factor with twelve respondents who anonymously shared their personal experience on embracing Islamic teachings and practices that include transforming conventional dressing style to Muslim attire, particularly hijab. The discourse collected during focus groups and participant observation was analysed utilising a theory development approach that contains a constructed set of concepts. The developed theory was identified by meticulously scrutinising existing literature on relevant topics. Thus, the set of concepts on three components such as a sense of belonging and identity, a sense of security and a sense of welfare based on the work of P. Bourdieu, A. Giddens, T. Risse, T. Börzel and J. Migdal, etc. was introduced. The empirical study revealed the following diverse results: the concepts of security and belonging were completely reflected and aligned with the theory set, whereas the sense of welfare was partially approved by the participants, while in some cases the interlocutors raised unexpected and even surprising factors such fear of death.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In recent years Kazakhstan has been experienced the process of "Islamic revival combined with revitalisation of Islam" which impacts on the activities of religious institutions and vastly influences on urban environment, especially in the city of Almaty (Edelbay 2012, 123). Evidently, there is a substantial raise in the number of Muslim infrastructure such as mosques, madrasah, Islamic schools and higher education institutions, which are accompanied with presence of Muslim clothing stores and food products that are being certified as halal. The increasing number of young women wearing Muslim attire, particularly hijab, a headscarf that covers face, neck and shape of body was frequently observed (Edelbay 2012, 124). It is important to mention that Almaty is one of the largest cities of Kazakhstan with diverse population and significant degree of cosmopolitan setting. This thesis aims to explore the potential motives behind these women's decision to veil themselves in secular country and analyse does an increase in the number of people wearing hijab really mean an increase in religiosity.

Regarding the rationale of the research, there is a need to emphasize that based on the conducted literature review I use the following definition of relationship between hijab and Islam: eagerness to practise and follow Islamic dogmas. Considering the wide range of Muslim attire such as *niqab*, a women's garment that covers entire face and leaves eyes open, which is popular in Saudi Arabia; *burqa/chadaree* is an outerwear covering the body and face; *shayla,* a long rectangular handkerchief that is thrown over the head and held on pins on the shoulders (Dosanova 2010, 7). I would like to highlight that in the framework of this scientific work the central role would be assigned to hijab since it is the most popular type of Islamic attire in the country. Thus, this term also will be referred as headscarf cover/dress/veil due common attribution of it in society.

Available literature on this topic suggests that the current grow of religious feelings is connected with Islamisation and radicalisation processes. Moreover, this approach is actively used in Kazakhstani media, where authorities tend to label individuals with active civil position as extremists and terrorists by framing the discourse. For instance, such case took place during the infamous January events,

when President K. Tokayev claimed that Almaty experienced at least six waves of terrorist attacks with the total number of attackers equal to 20 thousand (Radio Azattyq, 2022). Consequently, the statement has been refuted by the President.

In addition, the existing sources on religious matters in Kazakhstan vastly pay attention to the separation of "fundamental" Islam and local Kazakh Islam, which encompasses the components of earlier appeared religions such as Tengrianism and shamanism (Dosanova 2010, 6). According to K. Smagulov, the Agency for Religious Affairs of Kazakhstan formulated a policy aimed to launch and enhance a "moderate form of Islam" within the country. He assumes that throughout the dissemination of Islam cross the territory of Kazakhstan, there were numerous Muslim traditions have emerged and are currently regarded as national characteristics. Consequently, the government's agenda to design and impose its own version of Islam only intensifies the existing tensions between these different perspectives (Smagulov 2011, 67). The development dynamic of Islam in Kazakhstan has a distinctive feature since this process is happening autonomously from the state, which demonstrates incompetence and subsequently hostility by making accusations of extremism, "in fact, the conflict is not between peace and radicalism, but between education and illiteracy" (Smagulov 2011, 67-68). While the aim of this work is not to divide Islam into the categories of 'real' and Kazakh, but to explore how this religion influences society with a special accent on women. Furthermore, there is an uncertainty in how the women who wear hijab can be attributed to radicalisation. Since donning Muslim attire does not potentially mean that people commit violent acts.

In accordance with Giddens's view, religion is one of the most vital institutions in the world since it is the source of the majority of "deep-seated norms and values and is the main source of social solidarity" (Giddens, 2009, 677). The sociologist also emphasizes that the appeal of religion does not purely consist of "personal, spiritual and psychological factors", he argues that religious commitment is not limited to spiritual explanation. Thus, people tend to follow religious dogmas, when they experience a lack of a "fundamental sense of social order" such as financial struggles, poor health conditions and physical hardships, loss and grief (Giddens, 2009, 678). Thus, religion does not only play the role of a unifying component but also becomes a safe haven in one's socio-economic hardships.

By conducting an accurate and meticulous literature review on this topic, I came to the conclusion that Islam solves not only spiritual issues, but it also plays a significant role in solving issues of secular nature such as financial and social problems. Thus, the critical assumption was made, suggesting that the raise in the number of women wearing Muslim clothing can be explained by the pursuit of belonging, security, welfare and respect. To test this presumption in-depth semi-standardised interviews and focus groups were carried out. In order to investigate for the possible motives that encouraged women to wear hijab, the narratives discovered during the discussions were analysed by application of the developed theory, which is based on the concepts of a group of scholars such as P. Bourdieu, J. Migdal, A. Giddens, T. Risse and T. Börzel. Remarkably, the results of focus groups had approved certain concepts, some of them were partially confirmed, while several concepts that were not even supposed, which surprised me.

Literature review

Looking into the available literature on the topic of the of the role of Islam and being a Muslim in Kazakhstan, most literature can be divided into two main categories, one block is sharing the assumption that Kazakhstan is on the radicalisation path, and the other one states that the country experiences Islamisation processes.

As such, Z. Baizakova and R. McDermott in "Reassessing the Barriers to Islamic Radicalization in Kazakhstan" argued that Islam in Kazakhstan evolved in its own unique way due to the following factors such as historical and political development. The historical aspect encompasses the fact that Islam was the official religion of the medieval Turkic Khanates. Despite its official status, the complete number of dogmas of Islamic law was not fully accepted. The authors claimed that visiting the mosque and regular 5-day prayers were optional. The majority of people of that time interchangeably practised rituals from Shamanism and Tengrianism as well as to some extent adhered to Islamic dogmas. The political factor consists of the imposed secularism policy during the Soviet rule which maintained the deprivation of religious beliefs. In sum, these two factors played a key role in the establishment of the "Kazakh Model of Islam" (Baizakova, McDermott 2015, 1-3). The authors

characterised the emergence of Kazakh version of Islam mainly due to a fragmented state of knowledge of the real Islam and the inability to read the original text of the Holy Book of the Koran and preaching in mosques is conducted in Kazakh or Russian languages which potentially can lead to false misinterpretation and manipulation by the interested groups. Most importantly, the authors state that the gradual revival of Islam is observed in recent years, within the particular group in the population which vastly consists of youth. Especially, with growing urbanization the young men move from small rural areas to large cities, where they struggle to find decent occupation and education opportunities. Thus, such groups are considered to be vulnerable to various religious entities. The researchers conclude that Kazakhstani society tends to be more "radicalised" rather than Islamized (Baizakova, McDermott 2015, 33) by conducting an overview of terroristic acts, which happened in between 2010-2013.

Another researcher A. Yashlavsky provided a broad overview of the terrorist cases in Kazakhstan. It is crucial to note that the plethora of terroristic attacks in the country referred to law enforcement institutions such as police stations and the Committee of National Security (KNB) and mostly aimed to intimidate officers and demonstrate enforcement system's weakness. He emphasized that Kazakhstan is less influenced by radical Islam in comparison with its neighbouring countries, which makes it a "tidbit" for caliphate fighters (Yashlavsky 2022, 68). In addition, the author claimed that ideological radicalisation and tendency for extremist actions "is not connected with religion, but with criminal culture and its impact on impoverished youth" (Yashlavsky 2022, 69). The formation of dramatic social stratification and marginalised social groups along with the decrease in the quality of education is a key factor in the emergence of radicalisation processes in Kazakhstan (Yashlavsky 2022, 75). At the same time, the researcher pointed out that during the collapse of the USSR, population experienced a lack of national identity and thus, Islam, which was secretly practised before became an alternative to the former Soviet ideology. Consequently, the number of mosques in the country increased, however, these religious institutions observed a shortage of trained specialists of traditional Islam, which led to various interpretations of dogmas (Yashlavsky 2022, 70).

The article "Kazakhstan and the Threats of Islamic Radicalism and Extremism" by A. Grozin discussed the radicalisation of the homegrown extremists from the South and the West of Kazakhstan. The author also mentioned that "Islam

has become a significant part of not only traditional culture, but a pivotal factor in social and political life" (Grozin 2019, 6). He believes that religion itself does not pose a threat, however its radicalisation and use of radical methods such terrorism and extremism for political purposes. The researcher outlines three key factors influencing on the youth's radicalisation: the decline of the socio-economic indicators due to the devaluation in world prices for natural resources, the growing level of social tension due to economic problems, raising unemployment and falling living standards, an inconsistent state's information policy towards radicals, since the propaganda and methods of latters has an expanding influence in Kazakhstan. In particular, the scholar highlights that Salafist ideological support of the extremist ideas in the country derives from and driven by allegedly related to major businessmen and high-rank political figures who express a desire to oppose "unjust secular government" (Grozin 2019, 14). It is evident that this statement is valid since similar discourse has been featured in the local media for more than two decades, thus journalist A. Kalmurat argues that a Forbes nominee of the list of the 50 richest businessmen in the country and who happened to be a nephew of the first President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev, Kairat Satybaldy is "has often been associated with a circle of people who profess one of the currents of Islam" (A. Kalmurat, Radio Azattyq 2022). Moreover, according to Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, former head of the Personnel Department of the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan, K. Satybaldy allegedly "transfers 50,000 USD to the Salafi foundation on a quarterly basis and has sponsored the construction of another mosque for the Salafis in the village of Kushchi in the Almaty region. And all these activities aimed at creating tension in the religious and socio-political environment of Kazakhstan, are covered by another close friend of B. Tleukhan, M. Sarsenbayev, who holds one of the leading positions in the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan" (Bureau.kz 2010). Correspondingly, D. Kudaibergenova states that the Islamist domain established a subculture that interlinked with both "criminal world and the security services system", and the main role is attributed to K. Satybaldy who was "protecting Islamist cells and trying to launch a traditionalist religious party" (Kudaibergenova, Laruelle 2022, 12).

To support the idea, M. Omelicheva in "Islam in Kazakhstan: a survey of contemporary trends and sources of securitization" explains that securitization of

Islam happened due to the government's "dilemma of reconciling the need to accommodate Islam as part of the greater national idea and positioning their country as a modern secular state" since in European countries Islamic teachings were associated with "traditionalism and danger". Thus, the Kazakh authorities shaped and coined the concept "traditional" Islam that does not contradict to the local "constitutive element of the national identity and cultural tradition" (Omelicheva 2011, 252). I would like to note that securitization of Islam is an ambiguous process that undermines socio-political stability and limits political freedom of civil society, as it serves as an instrument to frame not only political activists, but also regular people practising Islam. Evidently, one of the recent examples of framing is the January events in 2022, which had been flared up by dramatic increase of the price of natural gas. During the virtual meeting with President of the European Council Charles Michel, President Tokayev declared that "I have no doubt that it was a terrorist attack. A well-organized and prepared act of aggression against Kazakhstan with the participation of foreign militants. They are mostly from Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan. There were also militants from the Middle East. The goal was to form a zone of controlled chaos in Kazakhstan forward by forceful seizure of power. That is why, the counter terrorism operation has been launched in Kazakhstan" (Akorda.kz 2022). While Kudaibergenova and Laruelle argue that the dominant official discourse attributing most of the violence and cases of looting to Islamist groups is still unverified (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022, 12). Correspondingly, the government used the terrorist conspiracy and attempted coup d'etat to label the demonstration, which was originally based on re-arrangement of authority that took advantage from people's grievances on low level of socio-economic conditions.

In relation to increased number of people who wear hijab in Kazakhstan, France had similar debates concerning displaying religious signs by wearing abaya in public. Thus, V. Brommer in her "Analyzing the Growing Islamic Radicalization in France" work provides broad overview of the distressing relationships of France with its Muslim population. What distinguishes this article is that the author gives clear definitions of radicalisation by stating that it could be vague that everyone can relate and feel, on the other hand, Brommer outlines specific features of this process. Thus, she uses the following terminology coined by David Mandel: radicalization is "the active pursuit of and/or support for far-reaching changes in society" that may pose a

danger to the "continuity of the democratic legal order, possibly by using undemocratic methods (means) which may harm the functioning of that order (effect)" (Brommer 2016, 5). She notes that Muslims in the country are usually the descendants of migrants, which are economically and socially alienated from the French society and face numerous discrimination cases. Therefore, such situation creates social anxiety and makes Muslims more susceptible to radicalisation. The work also emphasizes psychological aspect of radicalisation, the author claims that mental disorders and illnesses are not the case and factor of conducting terrorism. By applying psychodynamic theory, she explains the essence of radicalisation through psychological loop. Thus, the impact of unconscious forces on human behaviour and social interactions in sum with deterministic influence is the central topic of this theory. Based on this, the individual's actions and personality are shaped by "unconscious desires and external forces and events" (Brommer 2016, 13). Within the realm of this psychoanalytic theory, narcissism stands as the most comprehensive and satisfactory explanation for the personal logic of terrorism. Further, she employs Borum's explanations on the underlying components of narcissism, which consist of overwhelming sense of self and an idealized parental figure. The concept of parental imago derives from individual's desire to have relationship with the person he/she admire and want to follow. The presence of role model, charismatic leader correspond the need for idealized person to follow. This article is included into literature review section, since it provides clear explanation of key definitions and reflects the psychological factor in radicalisation process.

Pertaining to the group of scholars who assert that Kazakhstan is undergoing a process of Islamisation, Saniya Edelbay in "Traditional Culture and Islam" analysed the role of Islam in Kazakhstani society and has helped shaping the understanding of the vast impact of local pagan traditions of Kazakh nomads on Islam. She claims that nowadays Muslim faith in Kazakhstan plays a key role in forming people's self-identification and spiritual identity, therefore there is a rise of Islamisation process and dramatic boost of religious feelings, which she refers as "real Islamisation boom". There is lively debates on two interdependent topics: first considers the differences of perception of Islam in cities and rural areas, where people used to practice orthodox Muslim traditions, the second dimension covers the vague religious identity of Kazakhs, whether they are Muslims or nomads, who incorporated Islamic traditions

into their original ancestral religion – Tengrianism with the components of Shamanism. Moreover, she also emphasizes that there is a complexity of increased level of religiosity among population and the involvement of "fundamental radical trends". This threat is also accompanied by the growing tension between local Kazakh traditions and ongoing Islamisation processes. Thus, the author argues that Kazakhstan experiences significant increase of Islamisation impact within the society. The emergence of Islamic trends can be observed on daily basis, particularly in large cities. Thus, there is a dramatic rise of number of people with distinct characteristics such as beards, short trousers with specific behaviour and religious worldview. Youth with "no serious religious education" are easy targets for radical Islamic recruiters. Another example of growing contradiction between Kazakh nomadic traditions and Islamic influence is fierce debates on hijab. This type of Muslim clothing is a subject of a quite sensitive issue in contemporary society. Edelbay admits that there is a rise in a number of students wearing hijab at her university, young women are eager to practise and follow Islamic dogmas. There is an opinion that wearing hijab "symbolises cleanliness and purity", which I believe paves the way to strengthening and supporting the positions of patriarchy in the country, that is infamously recognized for its widespread incidents of domestic violence and abuse. It is important to note that the author states that the current situation with religion in Kazakhstan is Islamisation processes and its coexistence with local Kazakh traditions is striking question (Edelbay 2012, 122-125).

The author examines the current trend of Islamisation by focusing on one's eagerness to practise Muslim faith on daily basis linked with the change of clothing style such as wearing headscarf. In my thesis I will utilise this very definition of relationship between hijab and Islam, thus my analysis will be based on connection between Muslim attire and religiosity. Furthermore, by analysing this article I would like to address the uncertainty in how the author measures these radical trends, since women who wear hijab and men who prefer short trousers and beard, which is not stylishly trimmed in barber shop does not necessary mean that these individuals are involved in violent act or breached the law. As the scope of Edelbay's research is different, the question of identity is missed. I would like to examine the aspects of identity and belonging, since the article does not cover the issue whether these people do follow Islam or they are socially, and economically benefitting from it. The

narrative framework of the author's study is based on assumption that Islam has been grown dramatically over recent years, offering firm view that one's religious devotion is genuine. While my thesis focuses on the relation of Muslim attire and Islam by scrutinising this assumption with the aim to explore whether it is an increase in faith and sincere religious feelings or growing Islamisation revolves around such concepts as fashion, security, power and identity.

The next scientific work provides a broad overview of the multidimensional role of Islam in women's lives in urban environments based on concepts of Bourdieu on symbolic capital. M. Dosanova in her article "Urban Women in Hijab. A New Phenomena in Kazakhstan?" claimed that there is a rapid growth of symbolic attributes as mosques, shops with Muslim clothing and food, and especially hijab had become the most vivid, notable and novel characteristic of Islamic culture in the country. Thus, she studied religiosity among ethnic Kazakh women, connecting Islam with nationalisation process and examining their adherence to Muslim belonging. She defined young women's identity as "new Muslim", who follow the Islamic faith and change their lifestyle accordingly. The respondents had strong persuasion that Muslim practices are an expression of Kazakh traditional identity and kimeshek, a women's Kazakh traditional headdress, is a prototype of hijab and fully complements it. By following Bourdieu concept, she poses female headdress in the centre, which plays the role of "identification function" and symbol among urban women, demonstrating their belonging to a certain community, which defines women's worldview and life strategies they aim to pursue. She highlights that substitution of the definition of hijab by headdress is specific, since in the urban discourse by hijab people tend to refer to wearing headscarf. By conducting life interviews with a group of Muslim women aged 17-35, the researcher sought to ascertain the underlying motives behind the decision to wear hijab in secular society. What is remarkable, the predominant majority of interviewed women derived from secular, and in some cases atheistic background, assuming that they had no prior supportive conditions for Muslim identity formation. The author explained that "embracing Islam in practice is the constant process of self-education, reflection and personal growth with a particular focus on the practice of wearing a headscarf as a significant element of embarking this journey". By summarising various personal stories, Dosanova concluded that the "act of tying a headscarf became a turning point in women's life, which eventually turns

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into a process of gradual complex changes in practices and lifestyle", thus the headscarf serves as a "disciplining factor", which has a function of a barrier that limits temptations around women such as revealing clothes, going to night clubs, etc. Paradoxically, the wearing headscarf makes these women more publicly displayed. According to the data collected, "Islamic attributes (especially the headscarf) strengthen the position of Muslim women in the public sphere, where they become prominent actors. Women unite in a community (jamagat) in order to solve pivotal issues of their agenda such as marriage, employment, raising children, etc". Consequently, by undertaking sixteen in-depth interviews the author clarified the desire to wear hijab by applying Bourdieu concept: "The main motivation of a woman when choosing a hijab is to consider it as a symbolic capital. Possession of this symbolic capital for these women means a profitable marriage, inclusion in social networks, the possibility of using religiosity as a resource, increasing authority in the family and public life, positioning themselves as having knowledge of what a "real woman" should be", implying that the ultimate purpose of this symbolic capital is not primarily for religious reasons, but rather for secular ones. It is important to mention that most of new Muslim women come from rural areas, which naturally explains why young women tend to maintain and raise their position in larger society, to find like-minded people. One of the drivers of wearing hijab is "respected by men", which tend to add social and cross-gender context to wearing Islamic attire. Thus, Dosanova claimed that "headscarf symbolises belonging to a religious community (jamagat), which is a **source of symbolic capital** and a **channel of access to symbolic resources**". Another notable observation suggests that jamagat establishes their own public communities that provide the women "multidimensional nature of hijab culture" such as religious (guest lectures with Islamic experts, joint prayer and religious, joint reading and interpretation of sacred texts, etc); social (material and moral support of the members of the unity, assistance in employment, match-making for having a marriage partner, re-socialization covering topics of dress code, Muslim etiquette, gender roles, duties of a Muslim woman to her husband and children); and cultural (studying foreign languages, joint leisure, informing about foreign educational programs of both religious and secular nature, organising fashion shows, visits on the occasion of a wedding, birth of a child, funeral). Empirical research illustrates that the respondents was a form of "social protest against globalization and mass Western culture" showcasing their strong civil position against Western values and lifestyle.

Next, the author unpacks the underlying motives of women stating that their "choice of wearing hijab is most often explained by spiritual (duty to God), civil (raising children as patriots of Kazakhstan), personal, pragmatic (the desire to arrange her life with the similar Muslim person), security (ensuring the absence of the risk of violence)" (Dosanova 2010, 5-11). To sum up the described above, I would like to explore the terms of belonging, identity and security to explain the social benefits underlying in wearing Muslim attire. What is clearly shown in the research is that religion plays a role of a provider of collective goods such financial funding, help in seeking employment, and a trophy partner for successful marriage prospect, conducting cultural entertainment and maintaining interpersonal connections. Analysing the activities of the Muslim community "Halife Altay" showcased in the article, which has branches in larger cities of Kazakhstan, I suggest that it resembles a conventional structure of women's club for mutual improvement, where people communicate, spend time together and study, which in our case is 'spiced' by the framework of religiosity. However, it has little to do with genuine religious devotion, if in order one's to economically sustain, integrate into society and socially protect oneself from violence the woman needs to wear hijab. Therefore, it could be assumed that Muslim attire as an attribute possesses a symbolic power that endows its owner with various social advantages. Thus, "tying a headscarf" ensures absolutely secular purposes such as welfare (financial stability), belonging (identity and joint leisure with associates) and security (lower the possibility to face violence), assuming that men express more respect to covered women. In the same way, I am inspired by this article, thus I would the term of symbolic power as well to explain my sense of social benefits through representatives and roles.

Analogously to concepts showcased in Dosanova's article, Asel Dolootkeldieva's research on madrasa-based education in Kyrgyzstan has shed a light on the relationship dynamics between secular state and religious actors that form Muslim fellowships. The article explores the main advantages that students are able to acquire by religious learning. According to the author, there is a substantial increase of "religious educational infrastructure" that consists of courses for men and women, summer camps and full-scale religious 7-year program. The researcher aims to answer to the following question: is it necessary for a population of six million to have such a large number of religious clergy? Thus, there are several large influential Islamic

groups operating in the country: Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), Adep Bashaty, Salttuu Islam. These seminaries provide not only religious teaching and moral upbringing, but also ensure comfortable accommodation, meals, modern sport gym, large library, leisure activities. The teaching staff admits that "even average parental household cannot provide children with such good conditions". It is noteworthy to mention that parents are drawn to such modern facilities, extensive care, and low cost of education, which is approximately equals to 180-250 USD. In certain cases, educational institutions can decrease the tuition fee or provide a grant. According to Dolootkeldieva, since the overwhelming majority of students come from disadvantaged families, for individuals who perceive no alternative means of progress, obtaining a degree from a major religious seminary is crucial for social advancement. It represents the sole path to escape the limited prospects and poverty of their villages. Thus, graduation from religious institutions serves as "social lift" that can contribute for youth's wellbeing. What is notable, in the context of Southern Kyrgyzstan madrasa provides support to individuals and families in dealing with difficulties due to scarce job opportunities, leading many to think that higher education will not yield significant advantages. However, the madrasa offers some prospects, especially for girls. Next component that the author identified is opportunity for low income families to avoid capitalistic competition in secular schools, where children display their status by obtaining pricy smartphones and clothing, which create inequality among students, whereas madrasa nurtures modesty and refuses consumerist behaviour. The author emphasizes the role of madrasa-based education by the following concept: "with its egalitarian philosophy, cheap comprehensive care, rigorous discipline and a moral compass, it represents additional values for certain families against the background of the unaffordable conventional educational system". For instance, TJ greatly contribute to its students' additional qualification by offering plethora of courses on technical areas as "electricity, plumbing and mechanics for young men, and sewing and cooking for girls" (Dolootkeldieva 2020, 3-21). In summary, this article has demonstrated that people's desire to practice Islam and study Quran teachings is vastly supported by social needs such as seeking affordable education, accommodation with latest facilities included for studying and leisure, gaining additional technical speciality. By analysing this article it is clearly observed that the following factors play a key role in pursuing degree. Religion here serves as the most economically and socially beneficial package that would help individual to achieve upward mobility.

I suggest that religious education serves as pragmatic solution to resolve economic, social, cultural issues. It is uncertain whether such decision has deep spiritual commitment. It seems to be practical and ultimately focused on resolving secular questions that preoccupy every person despite of one's religious beliefs. As follows, I would like to pose a logical question: considering the current popularity of madrasas if the state were able to ensure an adequate level of education, sufficient employment opportunities, and a decent standard of living throughout the country, and not just in the capital, would madrasas still maintain their appeal? This inquiry leads to a further question: would parents continue to favour religious education over secular options if the aforementioned conditions were met by the state? Thus, by scrutinising the socio-economic dimension explained in this article, I will conceptualise this narrative and will further examine it in this thesis. Since religion greatly assists in addressing secular problems and demonstrates the lack of essential state-provided services, I will use the term of sense of welfare and collective good to examine the dynamics of these concepts in relation to religion.

E. Nasritdinov and A. Ismailbekova in their joint article evaluated the influence of transnational religious knowledge production in Central Asia based on the case of Kyrgyz Tablighi Jama'at (TJ). Thus, through ethnographic evidence, the writers depicted Kyrgyz tablighi participants not simply as recipients and listeners of foreign influences, but rather as dedicated actors in the international arena, who are proactively involved in the transnational exchange of religious concepts and networking activities, which further would be elaborated and disseminated among local students. The authors argue that Islam in in international scale encompasses more than just religious aspects, it also reflects wider global discussions on political and socioeconomic issues (Ismailbekova, Nasritdinov 2012, 179). Since the multinational character of Islam includes frequent and substantial cross-border movements of the participants, ranging from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent, former Soviet states, and East Asia. This flow of individuals is coupled with the establishment and expansion of "transnational social networks and religious narratives" (Ismailbekova, Nasritdinov 2012, 181-182). What is noteworthy, such missionary travels has a deep binding aspect, thus people from various countries study, live and pray together for 40 days, which undoubtedly involves informal interaction "very often even this time is used for informal talks and sharing of stories

and jokes between members of jama'at" (Ismailbekova, Nasritdinov 2012, 189). The researchers paid attention to unique culture of the TJ members, which is expressed in their unconventional dressing style, which frequently becomes a main topic of fierce debates on increasing impact of Islam in the country. Therefore, the davatchis (local participants) tend to wear Indian inspired s Arabic styled clothing, which is referred ad "sunnah clothes" since it hides private parts of body (Ismailbekova, Nasritdinov 2012, 189). Their stance, rooted in the equitable revolutionary essence of the Islamic teachings they introduce to secular society, positions them in a somewhat contrary role to prevailing cultural norms. The Muslim attire symbolises both their dissent and serves as "visual manifestation" of their affiliation with a worldwide community of the faithful. The transnational nature of their garments stems from the fact that these items are not merely brought in by traders, but are personally acquired by the members on their trips to the Indian subcontinent. The next aspect the scholars emphasized is that due to significant Indian impact, TJ followers use jargon, which signifies "being familiar with them and being able to use them easily makes a person "one of us" for davatchis because the fluency in such jargon comes only with experience in the community" (Ismailbekova, Nasritdinov 2012, 190). By analysing the article, it is observed that such active forms of cross-border and cross-cultural exchange of experience, narratives, personal and informal communication has led to the establishment of strong Islamic network. I suggest that being a part of international religious network fills individual's need in the matter of identity, travelling abroad with a sacred purpose such as missionary and sharing expertise is valuable instrument to develop a sense of belonging. By processing the notions studies above, I would also scrutinise the concept of identity and belonging in this thesis and meticulously examine them in further sections.

Another work of E. Nasritdinov in cooperation with N. Esenamanova "The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek" conducted research on the women's experience of practising Islam, which is expressed in wearing Muslim attire in the complex and ambiguous context of urban environment. By undertaking and further analysing focus groups discussions and interviews, the scholars identified that wearing Muslim attire has a function of obligation, thus "by wearing the hijab, women fulfill their duties to the Creator" and completely embrace Islamic dogmas (Nasritdinov, Esenamanova 2018, 245). Moreover, the interlocutors

emphasises the fact that wearing Islamic head covering provides "protection in their everyday lives in society" (Nasritdinov, Esenamanova 2018, 245). The discourse also revolves around such aspect as *respect,* which is especially noted by men. Additionally, hijab play a role of barrier that limits men's intimate interest by hiding "female beauty" (Nasritdinov, Esenamanova 2018, 246). After processing this scientific work, I would like to note that authors explored the reasons behind wearing Islamic attire. The practical meaning and social components of this dressing choice are clearly evident, as long as its application maintains respect and ensures security. To examine this from another angle, I would like to pose the opposite dimension: why do women wearing conventional Western clothing would receive less respect and could potentially feel more physically insecure? The answer on this question leads us towards the sense of security that, according to the results of interviews, could be ensured by wearing less revealing clothing.

Speaking of security, Y. Shapoval and M. Bekmaganbetova in their research called "Hijra to "Islamic State" through the Female Narratives: The Case of Kazakhstan" explored the underlying motives and drivers behind the migration of Kazakhstani women to the area controlled by the Islamic State. The methodology is based on the interviews collected from the women, who were repatriated to Kazakhstan under the framework of humanitarian operation Zhusan. The scholars adopted the concept of female agency, "considering women as actors", which is vastly relevant for examining the factors of women's departure to the war zones (Shapoval, Bekmaganbetova 2021, 291). In my view, addressing the concept of female agency is a pivotal dimension that could navigate this thesis to further exploration of feminist security studies. Furthermore, in the research process, the authors conducted narrative interviews with 40 women, ranging in age from 16 to 60 (Shapoval, Bekmaganbetova 2021, 293). The discussion indicated that one third of women derived from Western regions of Kazakhstan, which is quite notorious for its exceptional piety, while significant number of women hailed from Central region of the state, particularly from the mono-industry towns of Satpayev and Zhezkazgan, which are known for their substantial socio-economic challenges. According to researchers, the propagation of ISIS's image as an entity adhering to social justice principles, combined with the local socio-economic difficulties and the inadequate response of the Muslim clergy, played a role in the social and political mobilization of some Muslims in the region. These

factors influenced their decision to migrate to the self-declared caliphate. Despite the widespread opinion about the low level of education of these women, it was revealed that the majority of respondents had higher and secondary specialized education. In the discussions, several women admitted to not having enough courage to oppose their parents' choices regarding their careers, thus their major was imposed and did not bring satisfaction. This lack of autonomy impeded their socialisation, exacerbated their identity crisis, and led them to seek their identity through religion. Regarding the extent of religious understanding prior to traveling to Syria, the interviews suggested that the majority of the women possessed only elementary knowledge of Islam before their departure for the Islamic State. The participants, hailing from backgrounds of both religious and non-religious families, indicated experiencing familial issues during their upbringing. These problems included divorce of parents, the death of a parent due to illness, accidents, or violent circumstances, domestic abuse, and struggles with a parent's alcoholism or involvement in criminal activities. Consequently, the young women between faced an identity crisis. This condition is often exacerbated by personal challenges, such as familial issues and psychological difficulties stemming from childhood experiences. According to the scholar, social dynamics and integration of young women into religious communities engaged addressing each other as sisters, fostering strong emotional bonds. This involvement led to the formation of a new inner social circle, redefining their existing social connections. They became part of new social networks that influenced every aspect of their lives. The jamaats helped them in searching employment opportunities within their religious context, such as selling Muslim-specific cosmetics and clothing. For unmarried women, the community assisted in childcare and arranged marriages within the religious group. Subsequently, with whom they migrated to areas under ISIS control with their husbands from the same community. The authors employed that women by being a part of jamaat and attending courses on how Muslim should behave, marked the "beginning of constructing one's identity as a religious subject". During jamaat's forums the respondents were promised to several appeals that had been waited them on war zone, the significant ones I would like to emphasize were "liberation from the degradation and unbelief in which they are forced to live in a secular state, and joining a sisterhood where they will find understanding and support" and "the active participation of women in the life of the Caliphate in various qualities: as wives, mothers, professionals" (Shapoval, Bekmaganbetova 2021, 300-312), which implies

that in Kazakhstan these women experienced difficulties in fully realising potential of their social roles. These results align with my hypothesis that the women struggled to assimilate into secular society, leading them to turn towards religion and its communities for a sense of understanding, communication, and belonging. This lack of a sense of belonging in secular settings contributed to them questioning their identity and finding solace in religious groups. The analysis of this article motivated me to seek answers by using the following dimensions as sense of belonging and sense of welfare, since religion catered to the psychological and social necessities of the respondents, offering support in areas such as employment, matchmaking, childcare, as well as fostering a sense of community and belonging, thereby concluding their search for both personal fulfilment and societal integration.

By analysing numerous sources, I identified that each set of blocks does not fully cover the underlying reason beneath people's adherence to Muslim faith and Islamic attire, the authors connect the radicalisation and Islamisation issues with socio-economic and political aspects and argue about original Islam and Islam with local specifics. It is noteworthy that the aim of my research is not to delineate between authentic Islam and its other forms, but rather to explore its significance for the progression of both the state and society. Furthermore, the majority of the literature reviewed suggests that wearing a hijab is an indicator of radicalisation. However, it should not be conflated with radicalisation itself, as traditional Islamic dress does not necessarily indicate involvement in violence or unlawful activities.

This thesis aims to explore the growing level of religiosity, by implying the concept of relationship between Islam and hijab, which is expressed in willingness to engage in and abide by Islamic doctrines. During the analysis of the aforementioned scientific works, I came to conclusion that there is a crucial emphasise on Islam and hijab's practical and social benefits, which helps the owner of Muslim attire to resolve issues of secular nature. For instance, in certain articles I question the depth of religious commitment if the wearing of hijab is driven by economic, social, and security needs rather than genuine faith since Muslim attire provides symbolic meaning and adds power dynamics, offering social benefits such as common goods, identity and security. Thus, in this thesis I would like explore issues of identity and belonging, security and welfare by challenging the assumption that these concepts reflect genuine religious devotion.

Research question

The major focus of this research lies in examining three concepts derived from analysing literature review and addressing research gap in it. Therefore, the concepts of the sense of belonging, security and welfare would be explored and assessed in the context of growing religiosity. Therefore, this thesis is focused on exploring the role of religiosity and Muslim attire, which are imbued with symbolic power, in bestowing social advantages. Central to this investigation is the question: **Does a rise in the number of people wearing hijabs signify an increase in religious feelings and devotion?**

Hypothesis

The main goal of this thesis is to analyse the relationship of increased religiosity and Muslim attire. Considering that the headscarf defines belonging and adherence to Islam, it possesses a symbolic meaning, which imply power component in it. Based on the undertaken literature review, it is hypothesized that **the growth in the number of women wearing hijab can be explained by search of the sense of belonging, security, welfare and respect.**

Methodology

Within the scope of this thesis, relationship between Islam and hijab in the context of increased level of religiosity was analysed by inductive research approach which employed using a range of qualitative research methods. Thus, to obtain deeper and substantial understanding of the topic, method of data collection involved semi-structured face-to-face expert interview, focus group and participant observation. The selection of these methods is justified by the effectiveness and the direct acquisition of information. Thus, focus groups provided informal setting, where the interlocutors felt comfortable to raise diverse topics and possibility to engage into discussion freely. Data collection technique of focus group encompassed two groups of women divided by age factor. It is important to note that focus group were organised both offline and

online (due to the measles outbreak). The set of questions posed in the interviews and focus groups can be found in appendix of the thesis.

Regarding sampling strategy of the focus groups, it was designed to examine the motives and drivers behind women's choice to wear the hijab and practise Islamic teachings. The study involved twelve women, divided into two focus groups based on age: one group comprised five women, who already graduated and have gained working experience and the other consisted of seven younger women, who are currently pursuing degree. Age group variety was intended to provide a comparative perspective respondent's opinion on wearing the hijab. Considering geographical factor, all participants had a connection to Almaty, which is either currently residing there or having moved to from other regions. It is pivotal to highlight that in terms of understanding the cultural and social influences, Almaty is a regionally significant city with a diverse population, cosmopolitan setting and thus it is necessary to take into account its impact regional and national trends. Participants were selected using purposive sampling in order to maintain a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives on the subject matter. This sampling strategy was aligned with the study's aim to explore the multifaceted reasons behind wearing the hijab among different age groups and from various regional backgrounds, providing a comprehensive understanding of the practice in the context of Almaty.

Research significance

To begin with, as careful observer and curious researcher, I have been noticed the significant rise in number of women wearing Muslim attire since last year. It could be observed in public transportation, educational institutions, shopping malls and in variety of social gatherings. It is important to highlight my personal experience when my closest circle of friends, who before had little involvement with Islam and never mentioned it, drastically transformed their worldview and clothing style. There is a feeling that women may wear the hijab for sense of security. Such suggestion was concluded after being a witness of conversation conducted by young ladies who recently were converted to Islam. The narrative revolved around the men's perspective, their gaze and instincts.

In connection with this, recently famous Kazakh journalist, Dinara Satzhan shared her concerns, which were prompted by reports from women bloggers, who claim to have been offered significant provision of financial resources for changing their dressing style to Muslim one, suggesting external influences impacting local customs and practices (Satzhan, 2023 Instagram post).

It should also be acknowledged that there has been a recent expansion of podcasts and blogs focusing on religious subjects within the Kazakh media landscape such as Orta and Ruh Food. These platforms frequently place significant emphasis on the topic of women and their dressing style, particularly referring to headscarves, which are often portrayed as a means of shielding from male attention, thus becoming a focal point of the discourse.

Therefore, it is assumed that it is a gender issue related to the search of the sense of belonging, security and welfare. Since individual's security and provision of public goods are fundamental components of state-building and these factors are expected in every society regardless of cultural, religious and political views. Consequently, this research aims to analyse the current trend of mass popularity of Muslim attire, considering that it has little to do with radicalisation or Islamisation processes, giving an assumption that such tendency is essentially a secular issue rather than religious.

As a result, the research significance of this thesis lies in expert interview and findings identified during focus groups, which provide comprehensive understanding on Muslim attire's symbolic role in society. Previously, there was no prior research specifically focusing on the position of hijab without applying the components of radicalisation and Islamisation, since these individuals do not involve in violent acts, nor breach the law. Whereas, this work considers the process of veiling as a factor that obtains power dynamics, social advantages in terms of respect, sense of belonging, security and welfare. To analyse the increase of people wearing hijab in secular state, diverse methods of data collection were used, such as participant observation, focus groups and expert interview. During the study, certain concepts were approved, while others were partially confirmed and notably there was a place for unexpected findings, which were outlined by personal communication with respondents and further

commented by the expert. Therefore, the thesis offers vast in-depth analysis, which results in a unique contribution.

Regarding theoretical contribution, the following dissertation involves the process of constructing a set of concepts based on three pillars: sense of belonging, security and welfare. Consequently, the gathered empirical evidence reflects and resonates with the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars like Bourdieu, Migdal, Giddens, and Thomas Risse. Briefly touching upon the concept, it is possible to recognise Bourdieu, when a respondent shares her experience of gaining more respect especially from men while wearing headscarf. Similarly, Migdal's concept of belonging is showcased in the story of other participant, who claimed to be content to be a member of amicable Muslim sisterhood. And Risse and Börzel's voices can be heard in alleged cases of female bloggers, who supposedly had been provided financial incentives to adopt veiling. This suggests that if the state could ensure adequate public goods and services, including a consistent standard of living and respectable employment opportunities, the need to accept such 'business proposal' would not be viable.

Theoretical framework

This inductive research involves theory development to contribute to broader knowledge of the role of Islam in faithful women's life. The initial step to understanding why Muslim attire has gained popularity over recent years is defining three concepts which I outlined in the introductory part such as a sense of safety, a sense of belonging and a sense of welfare. By analysing a plethora of literature on the role of Islam in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, it was traced that the existing sources do not cover the issue of the sense of belonging. Fostering a sense of belonging is a responsibility of the state, but also it is pivotal instrument in shaping an identity that goes beyond nationalism and employs emotional aspect. However, literature on the emotional dimension of belonging is sparse. As demonstrated in reality, individuals often turn to religion as a means of finding their identity. The collected empirical data suggests that one of the drivers behind a woman's choice to wear a hijab is the respect it garners. Wearing the hijab bestows upon its holder a form of symbolic power.

Sense of belonging

There is a plenty of explanations of the term "sense of belonging" in social sciences literature, and their meaning would vary from source to source. When describing sense of belonging Giddens refers to the "sense of group solidarity", which tends to increase if one experiences being the subject of prejudice and discrimination, that leads to growth of "feelings of common loyalty and interests" (Giddens, 2009, 635). The author argues that "social groups are pivotal source for acquiring network, where people share common expectations, values and common sense of identity" (Giddens, 2009, 815), thus people tend to integrate efforts for mutual benefit, while doing so cultivates sense of trust and belonging. This definition of the sense of belonging gives a universal understanding of the term, everyone could relate since it is based on such variables as solidarity, trust and common sense of identity.

Pierre Bourdieu in his work "The Forms of Capital" analyses social world and defines the sense of belonging as social capital, as the sum of existing or possible assets, which is connected "to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition— to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit" i.e. recognition and acceptance. Bourdieu argues that this type of communication and relationships exercised only in practice, attributing to "material or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them" (Bourdieu, 1986, 286). This definition highlights the importance of being a part of a group and share resources and recognition in both material and symbolic manner. In addition, Bourdieu states that sense of belonging is based on the feeling of solidarity and the group tends to establish "select clubs" to accumulate useful connections and concentrate social capital by which an "association with rare, prestigious group" derives (Bourdieu, 1986, 286-287). This notion reflects the results of the conducted focus-group, where the participants mentioned that wearing Muslim clothing makes them feel "elite" (Respondent 3, 2023).

In the work "An Invitation to Reflective Sociology" Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant defines sense of belonging as "the sum of resources, actual or virtual, accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition"

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 119). This definition focuses on relationship that last over time and provides feeling of being engaged and recognised.

Joel Migdal in his work "Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices" gives a definition of the sense of belonging by highlighting emotional component of this feeling and stating that individuals tend to feel safe since there is a need "for their survival in social groupings, whether the state or some other group with a different spatial logic – they invest tremendous emotional capital in the group" strictly dividing who is insider and who is outsider. This means that people tend to maintain their fundamental sense of safety for survival purposes by seeking way to be a part of social groups, which applies both to nation-state or another smaller group organising perspectives. In addition, people spend significant emotional energy in these social interactions, clearly defining who belongs to the group and who is considered as outsider. Further, Migdal elaborates that initial personal commitment paves the way to turning practical cooperation into larger "communities of belonging with deep affective ties". Further, the developed emotional bonds may lead to sacrifice of one's interests, comfort and aims, which cannot be justified by purely "instrumental considerations". He divides belonging into two categories such as formal (considers one's status) with practical capabilities and informal one, which obtains emotional and "affective component" associating with the sense of identity. Thus, the emotional aspect unites people beyond their practical needs and interests, motivating the making sacrifice for the community (Migdal 2004, 14-15). Thus, Migdal argues that people's personal investment in the particular community or group goes beyond pragmatic considerations, when one's had developed deep emotional attachment to the specific group.

In his other work "Strong Societies and Weak States" Migdal explained belonging from the perspective of survival strategy which connects an individual to a larger community or group. This is the "communal moral economy", where actions and identities are devoted to the benefit of the group for mutual cooperation (Migdal 2020, 27).

Overall, the selected definitions of the sense of belonging mentioned above provide an accurate explanation of this term, since they reflect to the topic analysed in this thesis. Following this, Giddens highlights the role of the group solidarity

component in the sense of belonging, including such factors as loyalty and trust, while, Bourdieu and Migdal claim that sense of belonging has material/symbolic elements based on mutual reciprocation and recognition and formal instrumental sense. If we apply these definitions to the case of Kazakhstani women, we can notice that Muslim sisterhood is based on the creation of Bourdieu's "select clubs", where they are united by shared interests and loyalty, which shapes Muslim identity.

Sense of security

What do we mean by human security? We mean, in its most simple expression, all those things that men and women anywhere in the world cherish most: enough food for

the family; adequate shelter; good health; schooling for the children; protection from violence whether inflicted by man or by nature; and a State which does not oppress its citizens but rules with their consent.
(United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette, 1999)

I would like to explain the selection of this quote of Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette since it covers not only broad issues of the security studies but also embrace basic insecurities we human face every day.

According to United Nations Development Program Report of 1994, humanity made a tremendous transition in thinking, as such narrative shifted from nuclear security to human security. The report suggests that for a long time the interpretation of the notion "security" was narrowly viewed only on nation-state level as protection of the territory from external threats, promoting national interests in international arena and maintaining global security. This understanding referred to state's well-being and survival rather than focused on the condition of ordinary people "who sought security in their daily lives" (Human Development Report 1994, 22). For people insecurity appears more dramatically in daily life worries rather than devastating global incident. The report states that "human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities", which implies that security is a universal issue, applicable for both individuals from

wealthy and poor states (Human Development Report 1994, 22). There is a wide range of threats people face on the daily basis, including unemployment, drug addiction, crime, human rights violations. Although the sequence and intensity may vary across different regions, it does not erase its significance and actuality.

People-oriented approach in the human security definition encompasses two main dimensions. The first factor covers safety from chronic and persistent threats such as famine, disease and oppression. Secondly, it implies protection from abrupt and detrimental disruption in the lens of people's routine life within workplace, household and communities. Essentially, United Nations' definition also points out the significance to make decisions without jeopardising one's safety and one's stable flow of opportunities and well-being which will be reasonably protected over time by stating the following: "Human security means that people can exercise the choices safely and freely – and that they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today are not totally lost tomorrow" (Human Development Report 1994, 23).

By looking at the available literature, there is Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova's research on women who repatriated from the territory of Islamic State who were considered as female agents who played a role of actors (Shapoval, Bekmaganbetova 2021, 291), such notion is strongly interconnected with one of the components of the human security dimension is personal security on which I would like to draw special attention. Personal security comprises certain forms of threats, one of them is threats directed against women, which involves sexual assault and domestic abuse. The report emphasizes the harsh reality women face on daily basis: "In no society are women secure or treated equally to men. Personal insecurity shadows them from cradle to grave. In the household, they are the last to eat. At school, they are the last to be educated. At work, they are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. And from childhood through adulthood, they are abused because of their gender" (Human Development Report 1994, 31).

By this way, given special attention to women's component I explored feminist security studies and got acquainted with the work of L. Sjoberg. She analyses feminist influence in international relations and states that gender refers to socially accepted roles, identity, behaviours and activities that is considered to be appropriate for women and men, whereas biological sex means physical and anatomical

characteristics (Sjoberg 2009, 187). The scholar claims that gender is a symbolic system that forms social hierarchies that predominantly focuses on perceived associations that attributes with masculine and feminine characteristics assuming that "to look at the world through gendered lenses is to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation, or to trace out the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes" (Steans 1998, as cited in Sjoberg 2009, 187). It applies the interdependence of power dynamics and gender as key variable in the feminist security studies. In accordance with researcher's view, feminist perspectives are comprehensively defined across various dimensions and levels. Thus, in this understanding security threats comprises not only global issues such as war and international violence, but also it extends to domestic abuse and violence, sexual assault, poverty and gender inequality.

Complementary, it is important to note the definition of another feminist researcher, Laura J. Shepherd. She offers "a feminist reconceptualization of international security and gender violence because the current conceptualizations are not adequate for the task of thinking gender differently in the context of violence and security" in her book "Gender, Violence and Security". Shepherd believes that there is a vital need to expand the concept of security, proposing that it should not solely pay attention to state-level issues but also include the safety and well-being of smaller groups like communities, societies, and individual people (Shepherd 2008, 2). Consequently, it is essential to consider the analysis of rape cases in her research "Critical Approaches to Security: an Introduction to Theories and Methods", where she examines gender as variable in power dynamics and states that rape during wars take place due to the "inherent power imbalance between men and women". The collapse of the rule of law and legal structures in sum with prevailing power enable the "prohibitions to be removed and men therefore rape women in war because they can" (Shepherd 2013, 17). Thus, sexual assault during war is fundamentally rooted in power dynamics, where men exert power over women, and rape is seen as a manifestation of this unequal power relationship.

Thus, I consider definitions of the sense of security through various perspectives such as universally adopted United Nations' perspective and examined several feminist security studies, which put in the centre gender as a variable in its relation to the allocation of power dynamics.

Sense of welfare

In the framework of this thesis I refer to the sense of welfare using multiple terms such as collective good and public good. Based on the conducted literature review, I came to conclusion that wearing hijab is embedded into practising and following Islamic teachings, which holds strong symbolic meaning that is tightly connected to acquiring channels for gaining resources and power dynamics. Since being a part of Muslim community greatly assists in solving issues of secular nature such as provision of financial resources, employment opportunities and matchmaking. Thus, to deeply examine the social benefits of wearing Muslin attire I analysed the work J. Migdal "Strong Societies and Weak States", where he states that "all people combine available symbols with opportunities to solve mundane needs for food, housing, and the like to create their strategies of survival". He claims that in shaping survival strategies, individuals often employ myths and symbols to make sense of their position and future , which are based on tangible elements; they cater to physical necessities and desires, including employment, shelter, and safety. Crafted from these symbols, along with incentives and penalties, these survival tactics serve as guides through the struggles of everyday life, securing one's survival and navigating towards "upward mobility" (Migdal 2020, 27).

Thomas Risse in the work "Governance without State?" claims that there is a consensus accepted by all states that governance is expected to comply with certain standards in domains such as rule and authority, including aspects like human rights, democracy and adherence to legal principles. Moreover, governance's main task is deliver common goods such as security, well-being, and environmental safety (Risse 2011, 1). Considering global and historical aspects, it is important to note that nation-state is an exception rather than common factor. The author asserts that beyond the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world there are areas of "limited statehood", which are the countries that refer to developing and transition status, failing or already failed states. Thus, according to author, such countries as Brazil, Mexico, Sudan and Somali are examples of limited statehood. In such areas characterised by limited statehood, the official government is deprived a capacity to implement and enforce decisions, along with it there is a lack of a monopoly to use of force. Risse cites Stephen Krasner to explain that even though in

international arena these states obtain sovereignty in terms of recognition by global community, these governments lack "domestic sovereignty" thus cannot completely exercise their basic duties and will (Risse 2011, 2). Therefore, he defines collective good as social package comprising "an effective government with the rule of law, human rights, democracy, market economy, and some degree of social welfare" (Risse 2011, 8). The researcher showcases the example of Palestine under the administration of Yasser Arafat, whose governance was corrupted and the financial aid flow ended up in private accounts of the officials. While the Islamic resistance Movement Hamas, a military organisation, delivered to local population vital governance services in the fields of social development, educational and public health fields. Thus, the relevant question derives, as who did really hold office in Palestine at that time? If the current definition is applied, there is a clear dichotomy between the roles of Hamas. On the one hand, this actor provides public goods and contributes to the wellbeing of people and therefore acts as a legitimate government. However on the other hand, Hamas is a terrorist organisation that undermines the effectiveness of the official government to provide security measures. He argues that such informal governance agents who claim the right to be in power often delivers rule of law, social and political order as well as provision of collective goods, thus preventing the region from ruining into total anarchy. Another hypothetical example demonstrates how non-governmental organisations deeply engage into the governance process in the developing countries. If the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation chose to cancel delivering services in the realm of public health, such as medical assistance and children immunization and treatment programs in Africa, these people would be completely deprived from gaining any medical treatment opportunities (Risse 2011, 14-18).

In another research "Governance Without A State: Can It Work?" Thomas Risse in cooperation with Tanja Börzel define governance as the diverse institutionalized approaches of social coordination aimed to establish and enforce binding measures or delivering collective goods (Risse, Börzel 2010, 114), basically stating that the main responsibility of a state is to provide rule of law and public good to the population. The researchers use empirical findings and emphasize the role of non-governmental actors, which include transnational companies, civil society organisations, etc, and their involvement in the governance process. Accordingly, when a country is has no capability or unwilling to offer certain collective goods, non-state actors may

contribute to human capital by providing welfare services. For instance, multinational companies like Mercedes Benz, BMW and General Motors in South Africa needs skilled labour force, however the population suffers from HIV/AIDS pandemic. Thus, these non-governmental actors enter the health realm and provide medical and educational services for not only for its employees, but also for their families and communities. Mercedes Benz is engaged in health and education governance by vastly contributing to the development of medical treatment by giving the opportunity for medical staff from South Africa raise their qualifications by trainings in East London (Risse, Börzel 2010, 121). As a result, by exercising such policies, the non-state actors compensate the lack of effective governance by the official government that incapable to perform basic functions of state.

By analysing the findings of Risse and Börzel and accurately exploring their concept of governance with(out) state, there is clear understanding that the fundamental responsibility of the state is to provide public good to its nation, which encompasses rule of law, human rights, educational and health services. This implies that every individual in every state, despite of one's religious, political views and social status strives to gain these essential components to maintain one's well-being. Since sense of welfare is a third concept that is going to be explored and tested during the implementation of focus groups, the main aim is to analyse the role of this feeling in the relation with adhering Islam and wearing hijab.

B. Ladwig and B. Rudolf in "International Legal and Moral Standards of Good Governance in Fragile States" on more precise elements of welfare dimension. Thus, they claim that individuals have primary interests, which are the key components of successful life. The authors state that what is at stake is not necessary a good life, but a decent mere human life characterised by dignity. Assuming that all people share and pursue the common idea concerning goods such as avoiding premature death, maintaining physical, mental and psychological well-being, having access to opportunities for personal growth and action, recognition by peers and establishing connections with significant others like parents and beloved ones (Ladwig, Rudolf 2010, 210).

Similarly to Risse and Börzel, V. Akchurina and A. Lavorgna have undertaken research on threat evaluation of terrorism and crime by utilising violence as the main

indicator, but had narrowed it down to Central Asia's realities, especially with the focus on Fergana Valley. They argue that existing literature does provide detailed explanation and overlook the unique local characteristics such as the role of mahallas, bazaars and patronage systems such as "halka and daira" (Akchurina, Lavorgna 2014, 325-327). There are certain social groups, who do not particularly engage in violent behaviour, but pose threat in the local territory as well as have significant impact on international community. The authors assess the role of the most influential religious organisations in Central Asia: Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), which maintains its power by non-violent means, whereas the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) plays a role of "community police" (Akchurina, Lavorgna 2014, 327) that simultaneously provides collective good to population based on voluntary donations from individuals and mosques and engage in drug trafficking and patronage networks. These two movements promote the concept of establishing Islamic Caliphate governed by Shariah law and resist the official secular regime. By analysing activities of these organisations, the researchers state that socio-economic conditions may facilitate radicalisation processes through its 'informal institutionalisation' (Akchurina, Lavorgna 2014, 328), which clearly demonstrated in the HuT system that encompasses financing large events such wedding ceremonies and funeral procedures, mutual aid systems called "zakyat and kashar". Another example is "ushr" system, a trust-based policy involving tax payment, which derives from Islamic traditions. In the context of racketeering environment, this system vastly contributes to the wellbeing and security of local population in Fergana Valley's bazzars which is essential to people's economic stability by providing public support and foster self-governance (Akchurina, Lavorgna 2014, 328-329). The described methods effectively address public disorder issues through collective efforts of non-governmental structure. By analysing this article, what was thought-provoking assumption that adherence to Islamic dogmas could be derived from basic economic needs, since involvement in these organisations ensures stable economic means and social safety; for instance, as a container owner, the entrepreneur would be confident that adhering radical Islamic practises would allow one's peacefully engage in trade and not be afraid of being looted or deprived of the business.

Chapter II: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS OF FOCUS GROUPS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

To acquire deep understanding and answer to the research question, focus group and participant observation with two groups of women were conducted. The groups were divided by age factor, thus the first group consisted of five women aged 24-33, while the second group comprised seven female students from aged 18-23. Due to the lack of information on why young women converted to Islam and completely alter their lifestyle, number of questions on the path of embracing Islam (fear of death), impact of wearing Muslim attire and lifestyle changes (sense of security), social and family influence (belonging), Islamic practises were addressed. In addition, the research outcomes of participant observation will also be outlined, since it covered major reasons of converting to the religion. This chapter will focus on the analysis of the empirical data collected during participant observation and focus groups with their application of three concepts discussed below: sense of belonging, sense of security, sense of welfare.

On the sense of belonging

During the implementation of two focus groups, it was identified that, although the predominant number of participants hailed from religious families, there was a notable difference in timing of religious commitment between the two cohorts. The first group, encompassing women aged 24-33, embarked on their religious journey at a comparatively 'later' stage in life, for instance after pursuing Bachelor degree and having working experience. In contrast, the younger cohort, primarily composed of students, demonstrated adherence to Islamic practices from a significantly earlier age.

There is an analysis of the set of personal stories shared by the participants on how they were drawn to Islam and what impact family, friends and personal life events had on this process. It specifically examines the application of one of the key concept, a sense of belonging, an individual's attitude, perception and feeling of being connected, accepted by particular group or community. According to the applied definition outlined in the previous chapter, this sense is based on sharing similar values, principles and norms by the members of the group.

What merited exploration was fact that the participants did not recognise Islam as the youngest religion, they argued that "Islam has been around since humans were created. Faith in Allah begins with the first person, the prophet Adam, that is, the history of Islam does not begin with the prophet Muhammad, on the contrary, he is the most recent prophet. The Bible, the Torah are all the books of Allah that have been rewritten and changed by humans. Whereas prophet Muhammad made sure that the Koran was not rewritten, and it remained in its original form". This claim seems to be controversial, whether Islam considered to be "youngest" religion or not depends on the perspective through which one is assuming: from historical and academic standpoint Islam originates from the teachings and legacy of the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE (A. Giddens, 686), while Muslim theological lens views Islam as timeless and original faith of the humanity. I believe that every system aims to perpetuate itself, which also is one of the marketing instruments.

In terms of religious background, the one of the respondents shared that her close relatives got acquainted her with hadiths and she was so keen to listen more of it, since she had a lot of questions about the universe and origin of human being. And these hadiths explained such topics in a quite simple and accessible manner. Then the participant highlighted that the feeling of the first encounter with Islam "was like a divine portal was opened my head, there was feeling of some kind of discovery" (Respondent 2, 2023).

The interlocutor from younger group highlighted that she has not "gotten covered yet, but already practicing five-fold prayer (Salah)". Her experience with Islam originated from childhood when her mother "used to say that the prayers of a child are accepted by Allah more willingly, since children have pure hearts", thus the participant performed prayer at young age. Further, she started the conscious study of Islam after graduating school, her social circle consisted mainly of people who adhered Islam and they "had a clear understanding that the best meeting is where Allah is mentioned and this is how we often discussed these spiritual topics. I have always preoccupied with the question of our origin, why we came into this world, why we have a lot of divorces and violence in our society" (Respondent 9, 2023). In her search, she found solace and answers in Islamic teachings. Thus, religion clarified the existential questions frequently that puzzled young women, who were eager to understand humanity's purpose in the world and reasons behind prevalent social issues such as violence and divorces.

The group conversation on the belonging to the larger group and its advantages caused a great positive response from the participants and raised a sparkling discussion. The Respondent 2 stated that woman covered in hijab can freely greet other stranger woman in headscarf "you see them and smile immediately, realising that the person is also in Islam. And it is socially acceptable to greet a stranger, knowing for sure that this person will smile back at you and can help if necessary" (Respondent 2, 2023).

In response, the participant 1 had a case of got on the bus with a one-year-old child and needed assistance. She was reluctant to approach women who were being loud or offering a lot of unnecessary advice. The respondent sought help specifically from a girl wearing a hijab, arguing that approaching someone dressed similarly to her, in a hijab. "I had confidence that she would respond in a considerate and responsible manner, as Islam teaches the virtue of having a compassionate soft heart". Then another interlocutor supported this concept by stating that in Islam, "a Muslim is closer to a Muslim than a brother who is not a Muslim, because Muslim believes in Allah and His precepts, and since is more benevolent" (Respondent 1, 2023).

The following respondent also had a religious environment comprised by family members and the roommates in the rented apartment, who rigorously performed prayers on daily basis, they taught her basic prayers and since then she has been reading prayer for three years and got 'veiled' recently (Respondent 3, 2023).

Initially born in religious family, the Respondent 4 has been wearing hijab from the age of seven. She states that she feels comfortable in a hijab and this is already a large part of her without which she can no longer live. Due to the fact that the hijab was banned in public schools, the Respondent graduated from private school for girls, where 99% of the students were covered, wearing hijabs and entire teaching staff consisted of women, "so everything was halal". The impact of the educational institution had also influenced the woman's choice of the school of thought: "in this school that I came to the madhhab that I am following now" (Respondent 4. 2023). In this case, I am uncertain about the free and conscious decision on wearing hijab, since this participant evolved in religious community.

Another Respondent got acquainted with Islam at the age of fifteen, when was first introduced to the group of girls who were wearing hijab and performed prayer. Spending time with them and gradually covering hair, the respondent embraced Islam and this group vastly contributed to such life changing transformation by "helping her

to cover completely, recommending how to wear Muslim clothes correctly and how to perform Salah". The participant noted that religion significantly improved her relationships with parents, since "the satisfaction of Allah is in the satisfaction of my parents and respect for parents is highly valued. For disrespecting them, you can get a very large punishment" (Respondent 5, 2023).

One of the participants of the focus group shared her story of praying Jamaat prayer in the mosque for the first time, which is undesirable for women to recite prayer outside their home. In general, "in Islam it is undesirable for women to recite prayer outside their home. I was afraid to make a mistake in the mosque and was afraid of condemnation due to my little experience. Muslim sisters helped me with preparations, they showed me that it is necessary to read the prayer shoulder to shoulder of a person standing next to me. I was pleased with how delicately these girls, seeing my confusion, supported me. We performed prayer and then they took my hands and wished that my prayers were answered, although I did not know them. I was so grateful" (Respondent M. 2023). Analogously, the respondent A. from different focus group mentioned the same attitude: "When you stand next to the covered women, you feel much more confident. Sisters in hijab are always happy to help other covered ones, if they have any question, they will be happy to answer. The covered ones are treated like siblings, even if they are not got acquainted, they will still have some kind of connection." Summarising these stories, it could be clarified that religious practises provide a strong sense of community and belonging within the Muslim faith, forming a sisterhood that unites all women in Islam. This is evident in the way people feel connected to and supported by others who share their religious identity, such as through the act of greeting each other with "Assalamu alaikum" or by seeking assistance from fellow Muslims.

In the aforementioned narrative we can indicate unspoken rule of conduct based on shared values and principles and the significant role of hijab, which serves as identification, designing a private club. The created concept of sisterhood with embedded notions of assistance, attitude and shared principles comply with concepts developed by Giddens's on the sense of solidarity and recognition. reflects ideas of Bourdieu, Giddens and Migdal on belonging and solidarity.

Islam had its considerable impact in strengthening the bond between partners, thus Respondent 2 reports that her relationship with her spouse has strengthened, since they read prayer together and engaging in discussions about various Islamic teachings,

which also binds them as a couple. She believes that "after all, we know that this worldly life is temporary, and our goal is to get to heaven. In Islam, it is believed that a husband and wife each represent half of each other's iman (faith). This faith encompasses various aspects of life, including rituals like hygienic procedures and eating rules, as well as communication. When someone close to you practices these aspects, they too grow spiritually with you". Thus, Islam plays a significant role in cultivating relationship between spouses, by sharing in prayer and having more topics to discuss, couples find their relationship deepened. This shared practice of faith not only unites them but also fosters mutual spiritual growth.

Another Respondent, whose husband recently started to perform prayer states that he "did not force me to read, but he gradually and patiently brought me to Islam, because according to the Sunnah, there was a grace in observing Salah together for husband and wife". Having arguments on this matter, since the woman was reluctant to rigorously follow Islam on daily basis, but finally she made a decision to order online a prayer garment that would end the constant quarrels: "I sent him to meet the delivery, when he saw the prayer cloak, he was so happy. Thus, I got up for 5 times prayer". The first case demonstrates shared spiritual practises and beliefs. This shared spirituality creates a sense of belonging both to each other and to their faith. The belief that a husband and wife represent halves of each other's *iman* reinforces this sense of belonging, as it ties their spiritual identities and practices directly to their marital relationship. Thus, such mutual involvement in religious rituals and beliefs form a deep sense of unity and belonging within the relationship. While in second case, we might observe an adoption and acceptance of religious practices through compromise, the respondent was surrounded by religious mother-in-law and husband. Though initially resentment, she eventually decided to embrace Islamic practices by ordering a prayer garment, symbolising her acceptance and commitment to their shared faith. This case mirrors Migdal's concept on personal commitment leads to "sacrifice (to some extent) of one's interests and comfort" (Migdal 2004, 15) due to the fact that such decision represents a compromise and an eventual sense of belonging to the practices her husband values.

Overall, a critical aspect of this discourse that was highlighted by the respondents was the sense of belonging that Islam fostered within them. Consequently, this newfound belonging served as a crucial factor in their spiritual journey, providing emotional bond and a sense of identity.

On the sense of security

By analysing the narrative circulated during the focus group session, this part explored experience of the women and following social benefits of wearing hijab. Substantial majority of the interviewed young women had claimed that wearing modest clothing provides sense of security, since "many women may not fully realise the intensity of the male gaze. Men, by their nature, might not always be aware of how deeply their visual attention can affect women. This can often lead to an unconscious awakening of primal instincts in their thoughts". Thus, the interlocutor does not usually go out after the Maghreb (after sunset), shared she met a stranger standing and "his neck almost curled in my direction, which made me so uncomfortable and at that very moment I understood that statement. Men can feel feminine energy and pheromones" (Respondent 2, 2023).

Respondent 1 commented that wearing hijab brings her a sense of calm and peace, as "it reduces unwanted attention and gazes from men, allowing me (her) to feel less observed". Additionally, she noticed the shift in her husband's attitude: previously she would have interacted directly with service providers such as electricians or plumbers in case of emergency. Currently, her husband took over this responsibility: "since I wear hijab, my husband talks to other men himself, he can no longer show me to everyone". Thus, this change is attributed to her wearing the hijab, which is seen as a reason for her to be less exposed to other men. The case highlights the influence of cultural and religious practices on everyday social interactions and relationship dynamics. She noted that "after all, Allah has ordered us to cover ourselves from other people's looks, other people's words" (Respondent 1, 2023).

Next, the Respondent 2 admitted that wearing hijab in different weather conditions sometimes has created challenges. Thus, she stated: "Wearing a headscarf continuously, especially during the hot summer months can be challenging. Nevertheless, each discomfort as every drop of sweat is acknowledged and rewarded by Allah. Similarly, there are consequences for actions deemed negative. For instance, if a man looks at a woman with inappropriate intent, it is considered a fault in him. Likewise, a woman who dresses in a way that draws such attention may also be seen as accountable". She explained that generally, in Islam teachings, a woman's beauty is primarily for her husband. Additionally, the young woman gave an example of spraying perfume is acceptable when it is perceived by other women, but if it attracts

the attention of men, it is viewed as undesirable for both parties. Similarly, drawing attention through one's appearance, scent, or voice is discouraged. Consequently, the woman revealed her experience when her husband reminded the importance of modesty in all aspects since she loudly expressed her reaction in public (Respondent 2, 2023).

The case found a response from many participants, in this way other respondent also supported the statement: "Regarding voice, it is inappropriate to engage in conversations with men using a playful or flirtatious tone, such as stretching words or speaking suggestively. This is advised to prevent giving any unintended signals that might lead to inappropriate thoughts or desires in others".

According to the Respondent 6, "sexualisation of women is an unfortunate societal norm in the country. However, since I started wearing the hijab, I have felt a shift in this dynamic. As being covered, I feel that sin for inappropriate behaviour is not on me, but on lies on other people, who looked at me lustful gaze. From my side, I have done the part I had to do. I feel protected and confident in my path, assured that I am making the right choice. Overall, both physically and mentally, I perceive only positive outcomes from this decision" (Respondent 6, 2023)

Similarly, the following Respondent 3 also suggested her vision on the change in behaviour of people, when she got covered:

"Wearing the hijab has significantly enhanced my sense of security and respect within society. Previously, when I dressed in more revealing way like miniskirts, I often encountered invasive and prolonged stares, energy-draining gossip, and unwarranted discussions. Since adopting Islam and completely transforming my dressing style, there has been a noticeable shift in how I am treated; people generally show greater respect". (Respondent 3, 2023)

The participant observed such shift with taxi rides, outlining the striking difference in attitude. Before wearing hijab, taxi drivers tended to frequently initiated personal and sometimes inappropriate conversations, asking questions about her destination, occupation, private life and marital status. Responding felt obligatory, despite her lack of interest or time for such intervening discussions, and not responding would raise fear for potential negative consequences (deviation from the route).

The respondent, who follows Islam but has not covered yet shared that she "was in a short dress and got on the bus. I felt terribly uncomfortable that you could not freely move, I was limited in movement and these were unpleasant gazes. After that I started to wear loose clothing" (Respondent 10, 2023)

Likewise, the Respondent 7 from younger focus group stated that putting on hijab ensures the sense of security, moreover, she asserted that "boys tend to show greater respect for girls who wear a hijab, compared to those who do not. This difference in treatment is quite distinct" (Respondent 7, 2023).

The interlocutor 5 raised distinct idea, linking interpreting feeling of security in terms of mental condition:

"There are people who do not read the prayer and do not know the truth, often seeking for temporary pleasures instead such as smoking, going to clubs, socializing with men, which are all temporary sources of dopamine that disappears quickly. Two days later, they are again in search of a new dose of dopamine, they unconsciously are looking for their god, their Allah. They want to follow religion, but they do not know how to come to it. They do not even realise that they want to come to religion, they desire to gain a peace of mind. And this emotional fulfilment could be found only in Islam, that is feeling safe. After you get covered, the respect for you grows and you notice it" *(Respondent 5, 2023)*

By analysing the content of the discussion, the discourse of respect was examined, particularly in younger focus group. It can be assumed that seeking respect (from men) could be motivated by various reasons, I assume that one of them is enhanced sense of security. Since hijab symbolises devotion for certain religious norms and behaviour, which beneficially influence on the image of woman in patriarchal society. Due to the fact, that the participants of the younger focus group strictly divide women who are covered and the ones who does not share the same sense of identity, which once again gives a nod to the concept of J. Migdal on emotional capital and Bourdieu' s idea on social clubs based on common identity. Another key observation derived from the analysis of collected data indicates a significant correlation in the narrative, which is revolved around men's perspective, values and reactions, assuming that they have no capacity to restrain and control the "awakening of primal instincts", which contradicts to conventionally accepted notion that human being is a social creature, who is endowed with intelligence, reason and sanity. I believe that such suggestions that a woman has influence on man's thoughts

and has an ability to provoke him by her physical appearance are tricky. One cannot take responsibility for other individual's reaction, thoughts going in his/her mind.

The 'taxi' case and fear of not being compliant and friendly enough, out of concern that the driver could deviate from the specified route reflects the concept of feminist security studies of Shepherd and Sjoberg, who suggest men attack women due to prevailing power dynamics, while gender implies the socially acceptable patterns for men and women, thus the latter are expected to play one's conventional roles. To sum up, application of the sense of security as a variable calibrates the meaning and role of hijab for these women, which for the substantial majority is a social instrument to gain respect and maintain security.

On the sense of welfare

In this section, I explored how notions of well-being and prosperity are closely interlinked to one's faith and practice of religious duties. It was noticed that the interlocutors from the second focus group, being a first-year and sophomore students had no prior working experience, thus could not fully reflect to the posed questions.

The respondent 7 assumes that "Islam suggests if you express gratitude towards Allah, recite regular prayer, read the Quran, and perform good deeds, for example, dhikr, a remembrance of Allah etc., and bring wealth and prosperity to the household" (Respondent 7, 2023). Correspondingly, the participant 8 believes that "trusting in Allah's plans alleviates worries about the future, thus, you do not worry about what will happen to you tomorrow. He also has 99 names and one of them is Ar-Razzaq, the Total Provider. The practice giving sadaqah, charity, especially on Friday is how many bonuses you will get. In my opinion, the best way to get rich is to perform 5 times prayer, and even better to do it with the whole family" (Respondent 8, 2023).

During the conversation, the Respondent 3 shared her experience of having financial issues and further leading to debts that she could not cope. She explained this situation as a "trial sent by Allah to test her faith to achieve spiritual growth and deepen commitment to Islam". The respondent was sure that every person had to be tested, suggesting that "if one had happy childhood, then in adulthood one would be

challenged by Allah and vice versa". I assert that such conclusion was made to justify the financial problem she faced, however to presumption that every individual must deal with hardship of life and endure struggles tend to have a programming effect on the believer.

To summarise, the findings suggested that the connection to the sense of welfare in this context is spiritual and material. In terms of material dimension, these practices are believed to result in tangible benefits such as prosperity and wealth. Correspondingly, this combination of spiritual fulfillment and material welfare creates a holistic approach to sense of welfare in the Islamic faith. In terms of limitations, the concept of the sense of welfare was not thoroughly identified as I expected by two potential reasons. Firstly, the group which consisted of students was not representative in these questions due to natural factors as young age and absence of professional working experience. Secondly, if there was an access to a group of female bloggers who allegedly were offered financial assistance for promoting Islamic culture via hijab, the results would be distinctive. Considering the sensitivity of this topic, it would imply one's reluctance to discuss such cases.

On the fear of death

One of the unexpected findings that were revealed during the interviews was the concept of the fear of death. Despite of the prior religious family background, it was identified that the overwhelming majority of the participants has their own story of deeply converting to Islam due the death anxiety.

Likewise, the turning point on the path towards Islam of another participant was the realisation that "time and life are short, if you want to read the prayer, start now" such idea was concluded from the Time Management based on Sunnah course she took in the local mosque (Respondent 2, 2023).

Thus, one of the respondents highlighted that her way to Islam was not smooth in comparison with others, since her parents were not religious. It is notable that the critical point in this complicated relationships with religion were concluded, when the respondent heard the news about the death of her closest friend's relative: "after this news, I got up for prayer, the girl died so suddenly and she did not read the

prayer, that I realised that there was no guarantee that she would go to heaven. I began to pray for her, because there is no guarantee that I will live to be 40 years old" (Respondent 4, 2023).

Further, another interlocutor shared the similar concern by mentioning that recently one of her relatives passed away at very young age during fire evacuation operation. The respondent was frightened since she does not know when "our time will come, there is no guarantee that I will live till 40-50" by claiming that death comes unexpectedly:

"In another life if I do not have spiritual experience and insurance, I will not want to burn in hell. Therefore I came to the decision to start wearing a hijab. It was said in the Quran that a large number of Muslims would appear before Judgment Day, but they would not be true Muslims. I clearly see signs of Judgment Day"

(Respondent 3, 2023).

"I always knew I was going to perform a prayer, but when I get much older. And then Instagram played its role, I started to see how normal girls who, in my opinion, were walking around (which means drink alcohol and wear revealing clothes), started to wear hijab at such young age. But I did not think that I would cover up so quickly." The woman shared that she started to perform Salah 5 times a day, only when her closest relative was diagnosed with serious illness (Respondent 1, 2023).

To sum up, based on the experience of the respondents fear of death played a key role in the decision of deep conversion to Islam. Such concept suggests a novel approach in studying motives and drivers for increased religiosity. It is evident that Islam helps to maintain a sense of peace about mortality and afterlife aspects by trusting in divine providence.

Additional findings

The undertaken focus group and participant observation uncovered several minor findings, including correlation of wearing Muslim clothing and women's mental health. Therefore, by analysing the discourse I explored certain narratives such as stable self-esteem, self- trust, femininity and fashion.

Respondent 3 claimed that before Islam she was "at the bottom in terms of emotional state and did not feel any happiness, and by the command of God" she came to prayer. She believes that Muslims are considered to be one of the happiest people and less prone to depression and stress, because whatever happens – happens for your good. Such deep spiritual experience with the religion immensely helps her to gain stable emotional and mental state (Respondent 3, 2023).

An interesting pattern emerged when one of the respondents explained that before drastically changing her clothing style she felt forced to style her hair, apply makeup, and carefully select the right outfit, which further led "comparisons with others", which further paved the way to depression. She emphasised that "since wearing a headscarf, these concerns fade away because there is no need for such comparisons. Society does not judge you as it did before, and you naturally stop evaluating yourself based on appearances" (Respondent 6, 2023).

The same discourse of comparing oneself with other women took place during the second focus group when respondent 5 suggested that the presence of peers who "apply makeup and style hair can awaken the desire to prioritise your physical appearances. But being covered provides a feeling of completeness. Wearing hijab made me realise that I began to perceive and adapt beauty standards to own my needs, that first of all I am beautiful for Allah, who created me. This is another level and you grow up" (Respondent 5, 2023)

Notably, the Respondent 4 perceives hijab as feminine fashion statement, by stating "they [women in hijab] look elegant and feminine, they exude an aura of grace and sophistication. The long skirt that comes with wearing a hijab encourages a slower and more deliberate pace, leading to an improved, more feminine gait. You will not find these girls rushing around in such elegant and refined attire. Hijab enhances one's individuality".

The findings consistently discovered that Muslim community is quite delicate and attentive in communication. Likewise, the same participant observed that "Muslim society is gossip-free", due to the fact that one can engage in meaningful conversations without fear of judgment. For instance, when it comes to physical appearance, she faced shaming regarding her weight, but within the Islamic community, she never encountered such negativity. On the contrary, "People within the Islamic faith consistently offer compliments and support" (Respondent 4, 2023).

Overall, this section suggests the correlation between adopting Muslim traditional clothing and such dimensions as mental health, physical appearance and femininity. The analyses revealed that women wearing hijab experienced a positive shift in their self-esteem, sense of self-worth, body image and physical appearance. They tend to no longer seek for external validation from others by shaping self-image by oneself. However, it is important to note that the discovered findings are not the main focus of this thesis. Thus, I suggest that the aforementioned discourse would benefit and support further research works that would be primarily orientated on examination of hijab and mental health advancement.

Expert interview

In the pursuit of acquiring deeper understanding of the complicated dynamics of psycho-emotional well-being and religious beliefs, I aimed to examine this aspect from psychological point of view. In essence, this inquiry sought the consultation of a renowned psychotherapist and expert with over fifteen years of experience in the field of psychology and psycho-emotional correction. His vast competence paves the way for a profound exploration into the psychosocial aspects of individuals deeply connected to their faith. Through this interview, I pursue to identify the complexities, nuances, and gain a more profound comprehension of the multifaceted world of psychology in the context of religion.

The interview commenced with his own definition of religion, stating that "religion can be viewed as a system composed of specific regulations. This system comprises various restrictions, norms, and orders, which are neutral in nature – neither inherently good nor bad". According to the expert, this concept also touches on the topic of critical thinking, where many individuals tend to pass on responsibility.

The question of why numerous individuals initiated the practice of prayer after witnessing loved ones death was addressed. According to the specialist, the women were afraid of the potential consequences in the afterlife and they felt compelled to begin performing the five daily prayers. To begin with psychological and neurological standpoint he defined several factors that motivate people to engage in various actions. "Every action is influenced primarily by one's environment, the norms one is accustomed to due to upbringing and survival strategies adopted by their ancestors.

For instance, if an individual deviates from the group one belong to or joined, consequently, one experience a fear of death. Therefore, this fear of death constitutes the foundational instinct upon which all fundamental human needs are constructed". Furthermore, the expert shared that there are only eight primary instincts, with self-preservation being the foremost and most essential. Overall, he insisted that the majority of behaviours and instincts are shaped and interpreted in relation to the individual's environment, upbringing, and cultural values, which are a pivotal concept if we apply it to the sense of belonging. Thus, the narrative identified during focus groups verified that the overwhelming majority of respondents felt irresistible death anxiety, which served as a trigging mechanism for praying and wearing Muslim attire that in sum with religious family background has led to practicing Islamic norms and procedures.

The expert drawn parallels with an atheistic perspective, who places faith in themselves, believing that their destiny, actions, outcomes, standard of living, level of consciousness, and perception are entirely under one's control and responsibility. This shift in responsibility is one of the reasons people immerse into religion, especially when they cannot find logical and rational answers to disturbing questions and make decisions beneficial for their lives – leading them to embrace religious beliefs. He shared an excerpt from his book, which accurately explains the reasoning behind religion: "*When one is confronted with a thought that existence is meaningless, cognitive dissonance arises. Consequently, many turn to spirituality and religion, rejecting scientific resources, which fails to address existential queries like "Who am I and what is my purpose?" In such scenarios, where life's purpose seems unclear and yet there is an internal drive towards certain goals, an individual may experience a mental conflict. Science and rational thought do not provide enough answers to these existential dilemmas, leaving a void. To break this cycle, individuals often resort to religion, attributing the responsibility for their lives to religious doctrines, believing that a higher power has predetermined their path and life choices*" (Personal communication 1, 2023)*

In accordance with expert's view, people are inclined to interpret, retell, and shape religious narratives through their own worldviews. This perspective is supported by Giddens', who argue that humans are limited in their knowledge of their "own history, they tend to attribute socially created values and norms to the activities of gods"

(Giddens 2009, 679). Consequently, the decision to follow religious teachings and adherence to modest clothing, might stem from shifting responsibility, environmental influences, and a desire to avoid stress at any cost rather than a pure understanding of divine love and punishment. Since love in its purest form is "an unconditional acceptance of someone or something, without the desire for alteration. The paradox arises when considering an all-loving deity who also punishes. If God's love is unconditional, the logic of divine punishment seems contradictory. It implies that God, aside from love, may have other motives or an unfulfilled ego, which appears to be illogical. The idea of a God who has prepared punitive measures for transgressions challenges the notion of purely altruistic divine love" (Personal communication 1, 2023).

According to the expert, the underlying reason why women wear headscarf lay in a shift of responsibility, the environment, and a secondary benefit not to experience stress. Based on his statistical data, it appears that individuals of a religious inclination who seek his consultation "increasingly report feelings of anger, contrary to what one might expect". This phenomenon appears to be in contrast to the norm, suggesting that it occurs primarily when one does not willingly selects their religious affiliation.

To test the variable of the sense of welfare questions on material gaining strategy were addressed. As a result, the specialist claimed that "financial resources and wealth are constructs of human's conscious cerebral cortex, while the primal, triune brain focuses solely on ensuring survival. The fundamental driving force behind all human decisions is the fear of death, which can be triggered by various circumstances or provocations" (Personal communication 1, 2023).

Overall, these results align with the theory that the main driver of religious adherence that drive an individual to recite prayers and wear modest clothing is deep-rooted fear of death and outcomes that would await the person after demise. Thus, the expert interprets such situation as cognitive dissonance, when one doubts the meaning of existence and strives to seek answers to such philosophical questions from religious teachings. Moreover, the interview findings indicate a significant correlation between one's environment and religious inclination, akin supports the sense of belonging concept, which was outlined in focus groups. On the contrary, from the perspective of neurology and phychology sense of welfare does not play a significant role in individual's decision to follow religious doctrine, since "it is considered to be a conscious element of the brain system" (Personal communication 1, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Recently the growing number of young women wearing hijab was frequently observed in the context of southern capital of Kazakhstan, which is famous for its diverse population and cosmopolitan features. The thesis' primarily objective is based examining the role of religiosity and Muslim attire, which obtains strong symbolic power, in bestowing social benefits. The research provides an analysis of the hypothesis on whether an increase in the number of women wearing hijab reflects an increase in religiosity.

This thesis presented an in-depth analysis of the current dynamics of relationship between following Islamic teachings and wearing hijab and acquiring social advantages from it. Thus, the focus group with twelve young women was conducted to identify the potential reasons behind the choice of wearing Muslim attire. Based on the research gaps outlined in literature review, the constructed theoretical framework was developed by examining and testing the concepts of belonging, security and welfare. According to the results of interviewing, the majority of women hailed from religious background, which in the future suggested reading prayers and following Muslim dogmas. Moreover, the young women indicated that praying without accepting headscarf made the conversion incomplete.

By analysing the empirical data it was proved that the sense of belonging based on the ideas of Giddens, Bourdieu and Migdal in the context of Islam provides a symbolic power expressed in the tying headscarf, stable network of Muslim sisterhood, raise respect especially from men and create a mutually adopted code of conduct. Furthermore, the sense of security based on concepts coined in the UN Development Program 1994 Report and feminist security studies of Shepherd and Sjoberg was thoroughly reflected, raising the issue of inappropriate male gazes and safety during safety during trips. Interestingly, the concept of the sense of welfare was not fully reflected in the empirical data due to age limit and lack of another representative group of bloggers influencers, who could possibly take advantage from promoting Muslim attire. The most intriguing part of the findings was the discovery of the death anxiety, which prompted the majority of women embrace Islamic teachings and donning hijab. The concept of fear of death was also confirmed by the expert in psychotherapy. Additionally, the sense of welfare as a driver to follow Islam was not supported by the specialist, who claimed that belonging i.e. habitat and safety are the

key factors in the majority of decision-making processes. The secondary narratives on the relationship of hijab and women's well-being, mental health and self-esteem dimensions have a strong potential to contribute in the future to further researches on the relevant topic.

To sum up, the research discovered that the rise in the number of women wearing hijabs does not signify an increase in religious feelings. The analysis carried out demonstrated that relationship of increased religiosity and Muslim attire with special attention to the symbolic meaning of head cover has an embedded power dynamic, which allow one's to gain social benefits such as ensured sense of security, respect and the sense of belonging that helps t a woman who dresses o maintain identity, pivotal networks and solidarity. Thus, the concepts mentioned above could reflect to every individual despite of one's religious beliefs.

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Respondent 4. Focus group by Tokzhan Atenbekova. Tape recording. Face-to-face, November 2023.

Respondent 5. Focus group by Tokzhan Atenbekova. Tape recording. Face-to face, November 2023.

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Appendix A

Questions for the participants of the focus groups

1) Could you share your story of taking the path of Islam. Is there a noticeable change in self-perception before and after adopting the hijab?

2) Have you experienced an increased sense of safety in public spaces or during late hours subsequent to wearing the hijab?

3) Has your decision to follow Islamic teachings influenced your relationships with your closest circle i.e. family, friends, and relatives?

4) Do you perceive a sense of belonging to a broader community after your conversion?

5) Do you feel an overall improvement in your well-being following your conversion to Islam?

Appendix B

Questions for expert interview with competent professional in the field of psychology

1) How do you personally define and perceive the role of religion in your life?

2) In your experience, how do societal attitudes and expectations affect women's decision to wear hijab?

3) Considering the case of one of the respondents, who derived from non-Muslim background and got married to religious family. How did this scenario impact on her personal and social dynamics?

4) During focus groups there was a plenty of narratives on fear of death and being "burnt in hell", what does it signify?

5) How does the decision to wear a hijab influence family and social dynamics for these women?