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This book is an important contribution to the literature on European Muslim political participation. The aim of the book is to offer a comparative study of the nature of Muslim women’s political participation in France and Belgium. Correspondingly, the book outlines the principal motivations, opportunities, and barriers to Muslim women’s political participation in France and francophone Belgium. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 29 women from France and Belgium who self-identify as Muslim and are active in terms of political participation, the author outlines their experiences and perceptions on the role of “European Islam”, political opportunity structures (POS), secularism, and Muslim women’s dress in France and francophone Belgium. In parallel with Muslim women’s qualitative accounts, the author provides an analysis of the objective structures and norms in place in France and francophone Belgium, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors that define the nature of Muslim women’s political participation in each case. Importantly, Muslim women’s intersectionality is central in this discussion. Throughout the book, the author draws on Muslim women’s intersectional identities in order to demonstrate the interplay between their identities with context-specific factors relevant to each case, in terms of shaping their experiences and outcomes of their political participation.

The book successfully establishes the principal motivations, opportunities, and barriers to Muslim women’s political participation in France and francophone Belgium, and positions these in reference to the context-specific structure and norms in place in each case. Given the book’s qualitative focus coupled with its comparative and participant-centred approach, the author gives voice to Muslim women who often remain “invisible” as active agents in a variety of modes of political participation at both state level and non-state level. As such, the author provides readers with a framework that can be used in future studies of European Muslim political participation.

The book is divided into chapters centred on Muslim women’s motivations to participate in politics (chapter 2), the opportunities for Muslim women’s participation (chapter 3), and the barriers to Muslim women’s political participation (chapter 4), in France and francophone Belgium. In chapter 1, the author effectively “sets the scene” for the discussion and defines the terminology, which helps to
clarify future discussions. This is followed by a concise outline of the main issues that the author intends to address in the following chapters. In chapter 2, the author discusses Muslim women’s motivations to participate in politics. The chapter contributes to a gap in the literature by exploring the extent to which “European Islam” motivates Muslim women’s political participation in either France or Belgium, and provides insight into the motivating factors specific to European Muslims. The chapter begins with a brief review of what “European Islam” means before examining participants’ perceptions of, and identification with “European Islam”. Importantly, the author employs a comparative consideration of the extent to which participants felt that “European Islam” had motivated their political participation in France and francophone Belgium respectively as well as their general motivations to participate in politics in each case. The author highlights that participants differed on the extent to which they identified with “European Islam” in each case. To illustrate this, the majority of French participants largely rejected notions of “European Islam” whilst the majority of francophone Belgian participants were largely accepting of notions of “European Islam”.

In light of this, the author proposes defining identification with “European Islam” along a spectrum from strong, to moderate to very little identification, rather than viewing identification or non-identification with “European Islam” as two discrete categories. Combining the “Beyond the Self” model and the “Issue Public” model, the author goes beyond traditional models of motivation to reflect the motivations expressed by participants in this study. Indeed, the author explains that participants’ motivations to participate in politics were informed by the notion of political efficacy, personal experiences, social justice, and identity. For example, the author argues that participants’ perceptions of efficacy varied as some participants felt that state-level political participation was the only level at which participation would be effective whilst for others, efficacy meant that they participated in only non-state-level political participation.

The author also notes that participants’ motivations to participate in politics were informed by the notion of social justice. Specifically, French participants saw this as stemming from Islam whilst francophone Belgian participants saw this as linked to both Belgian and Muslim values, which indicates sample diversity. In both cases, participants were motivated to participate in politics by their previous experiences. The author highlights that the type of previous experiences mentioned by participants differed, with French Muslim women referring to experiences of rise of the far right, racism, and Islamophobia, whilst francophone Belgian Muslim women referred to experiences of political dissatisfaction and previous encounters with positive role models. It is concluded that Muslim women’s motivations to participate in politics are comparable to those faced by wider society.
In chapter 3, the author considers the nature of the principal opportunities for political participation by Muslim women in France and francophone Belgium. Specifically, the chapter is centred on the extent to which political structures in France and francophone Belgium provide opportunities for Muslim women to participate in politics. In this regard, the author examines both the formal political opportunity structures and participants’ perceived opportunities for political participation. Again, the chapter contributes to a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth study of the influence of POS on Muslim participation. By studying the formal and reported opportunities, the author provides readers with an understanding of the ways in which participants’ motivations to participate in politics translate into actual political participation but also why some participants’ political aspirations remain unrealised. The chapter begins with an overview of what POS means before examining its effects on political participation by women, ethnic minority communities, and Muslims. The author notes that, although women’s political participation and representation are shaped by the extent to which the political system and culture are dominated by a “masculine model”, an existing female presence in politics creates opportunities for political participation/representation by other women. The author also notes that minority inclusion quotas create opportunities for political representation by ethnic minority groups, although these quotas are less likely to be implemented. State policies and norms also shape opportunities for political participation and, as a result, political representation for Muslims. For example, hostile or Islamophobic policies limit opportunities for Muslim participation. Importantly, the author compares participants’ perceptions and personal experiences of opportunities for their political participation in France and francophone Belgium.

The author highlights that, at state level, francophone Belgian Muslim women encounter increased opportunities for political participation/representation due to the fact that the political system creates opportunities for gender, ethnic, and Muslim representation, existing high levels of Muslim political participation, gender parity legislation, and the tradition of ethnic minority candidate inclusion. Similarly, at the non-state level, participants reported encountering numerous opportunities to pursue political participation in francophone Belgium. However, in France, Muslim women encountered limited opportunities for political participation/representation at both state and non-state level, due to French assimilationist norms which contribute to the “othering” of Muslim women, especially if visibly Muslim. The author notes that this is further compounded by the majoritarian structure of the French political system, non-compulsory voting, and existing precedents of low levels of Muslim political representation in France. The author highlights that, although in theory, POS in France and francophone Belgium provides women, ethnic minorities, and Muslims with formal long-term opportunities
for political participation, the differing short-term features of POS in each case result in contrasting patterns of reported opportunities for Muslim women’s political participation in France and francophone Belgium.

In chapter 4, the author comparatively explores the principal barriers to Muslim women’s participation in France and francophone Belgium, and considers whether secularism constitutes a barrier to political participation by Muslim women in each case. Again, the chapter contributes to a gap in the literature as this area remains understudied to date. The chapter begins with an analysis of French Muslim women’s perceptions of *laïcité* and the extent to which French secularism constitutes a barrier to their political participation. The author then considers Muslim women’s perceptions of secularism in Belgium, and whether or not it had influenced their political careers. The author argues that, in France, the rise of “combative” *laïcité* has contributed to gendered Islamophobia and the normalisation of the “othering” and discrimination against visibly Muslim women. Barriers to political participation for French participants were posed by either wearing or expressing support for the right of others to wear the headscarf. However, in Belgium and especially Brussels, “organised secularism” is more multicultural in nature and allows for the recognition of religious groups. That said, in some parts of francophone Belgium such as Wallonia, secularism and the headscarf limited Muslim women’s political participation.

The author notes that regional differences in Muslim women’s reported experiences in Belgium can be understood when taking into account the role of population sizes (e.g. large Muslim demographic in Brussels), compulsory voting, gender parity legislation, the full PR political system, multicultural norms, and the inclusion of ethnic minority candidates. Nevertheless, as this chapter shows, French secularism and, specifically, the French-style “combative” secular model appear to be increasingly influential in Belgium, especially in Wallonia but less so in Brussels. The author outlines the coping strategies adopted by participants in order to continue to participate in politics. It is argued that French Muslim women adopted strategies that enabled them to continue to pursue opportunities for political participation, including a) not wearing the headscarf (although they wanted to wear it), b) continuing to wear the headscarf but doing so in “safe” political spaces that were accepting of the headscarf, and c) wearing the headscarf generally but removing it and replacing it with “something culturally French” during their political engagements. Importantly, this discussion demonstrates how Muslim women’s awareness of the French-style “combative” secular model necessitated the concealment of their Muslim identity. Muslim women in Wallonia adopted similar coping strategies in order to overcome this barrier. The author highlights that, beyond secularism and Muslim women’s dress, principal barriers to Muslim women’s political participation at both the state and non-state level included the rise of
the far right, racism and Islamophobia, sexism, faith-related barriers, and limited resources in each case. In chapter 5, the author provides an overview of the principal findings that emerge from the previous chapters and concludes with reflections on the implications of the issues raised for understanding and promoting Muslim women’s participation in politics more broadly. The conclusion summarises the main points of discussion well. It provides a clear final viewpoint and successfully draws the book to a close.

As indicated above, the book contributes to a gap in the literature by presenting the views and experiences of Muslim women related to their political participation in France and Belgium, in conjunction with an analysis of the context-specific structure and norms in each case. Taking an intersectional approach, the author outlines the points of convergence as well as the factors that differentiate Muslim women’s reported experiences in each context. Given the paucity of research related to Muslim women’s experiences of political participation in France and Belgium, along with the limited focus on Muslim women’s voices in academic, political, and social discourses, this is an important contribution to the literature on European Muslim political participation.