

Conversion to Islam is a process, which is quite often misunderstood and perceived in a negative way in Poland. It is mostly the case for female converts, who – by embracing a new religion – embrace also a set of cultural norms, including e.g. new dress code (hijab). For women, embracing Islam may result in acquiring three intertwined types of vulnerability (a religious one – as they have abandoned Catholicism; a cultural one – taking up specific religious norms, e.g. a dress code; a sociobiological one – they become available as potential wives only to Muslim men).

The resulting sense of exclusion is not psychologically neutral. While it might be a choice – i.e. an individual leaves her previous life voluntarily, the exclusion often it seems to be a side effect of a decision to embrace Islam. The question therefore arises on how Polish converts to Islam manage their spoilt identity in relations with significant others: family, other Muslims (female converts and ‘cultural Muslims’), and non-Muslims.

While the research is potentially difficult to conduct, as the success of research participants recruitment relies to a great extent on the networks of trust build up between the researchers and the converts, the team has already some practical experience in this regard. We plan to start with the desktop research on the relationships between identity and conversion, followed by fieldwork carried out in Poland and in other places where converts live.

The core of the project are semi-structured, in-depth interviews with female converts to Islam (around 20 in Poland and 20 outside, mostly in the UK). We are also planning to conduct interviews with ‘cultural Muslims’ and other Muslim stakeholders. Additionally, we will use the Personal Position Repertoires (PPR) method in order to grasp a full picture of strategies employed by Polish converts to Islam in their interactions with significant others. As for quantitative research, an online questionnaire is planned on a sample of around 100 respondents of female Polish converts to Islam from Poland and abroad. The questionnaire will be piloted with several converts from our own network of contacts before implementation.

The project would be innovative for two reasons. Firstly, it tackles the issue of female conversion to Islam from a new perspective – i.e. how they manage their identity in relations with significant others. Secondly, it would be the first comprehensive research on Polish converts to Islam published in English (one of the outcomes of the project will be a monograph in English, as well as several articles in English and Polish) and one of the few studies on Islam in Central and Eastern Europe available in English. We also hope that our project will disenchant the dominating negative stereotype related to conversion to Islam – we believe that also in this case the reality is much more complex, than popular believes.