

Muslim women join Catalan politics

Najat's and Flavia's struggle against discrimination and stereotypes

Muslims represent around 6.6% of the Catalan population, amounting to over 0.5 million people out of a 7.6 million population. However, they still have a minor representation in public institutions and have to face discrimination in several aspects of their daily lives, which is even sharper in the case of women. In order to explore their experiences, I have interviewed two Muslim women who decided to step up and became involved in Catalan politics.

Najat Driouech Ben Moussa is the first Muslim women to be ever elected for the Catalan Parliament and **Flavia Reina i Fajardo** is a social activist who became recently involved in politics and is now the first Muslim women at the City Council of Sant Feliu de Llobregat, a medium-size town in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area. Najat is a daughter of Moroccan migrants and Flavia is a Catalan-born converted, but they both had to face similar challenges in their personal and professional lives as both women and Muslims.

“It is like you are in the middle of a river, between two streams, and each of them tries to bring you in its direction”, says Flavia, referring to the fact that she has felt

pressed by both the Muslim community and the Catalan society as a whole in order to become what they expected her to be. Najat also shares this feeling and states that she has always had to demonstrate more than the others due to the fact of being not only a woman, but also Muslim: “I completed my first Degree, but felt that people was still hesitant about me; so I decided to study a Master’s, and felt that wasn’t enough yet; then I did a second Degree, and a Post-Graduate Degree... and, anyways, people was not confident about my capabilities, so I wondered if anyone of my age would be required as much as I was.”

Najat and Flavia wear hijab and both acknowledge that this has somehow hinder their careers, particularly for Flavia. “When I was unemployed, I decided to stop wearing the hijab in job interviews after many failed attempts. In fact, I didn’t wear it again in my workplace until two years ago, when I made a decision because I felt that this is my life, this is how I feel, this is my identity and this is how I want to live it”, she explains. Now they both wear it in public institutions, which has not been free of criticisms, particularly from right-wing and far-right parties.

When asked about why and how they became involved in politics, they manifest different paths aimed at the same goals: the

fight for equality and non-discrimination and the representation of the diversity of the Catalan society, and not only the Muslim community. “Some of the accusations that I received from right-wing parties at the City Council are that I am here just to give more social benefits to Muslims and migrants. It is a deeply rooted prejudice against the Muslim and migrant communities, who actually only represent 12% of all social benefits in Sant Feliu”, asserts Flavia, who is not afraid of what these parties’ political leaders may say because, according to her, “it is their way of making politics”.

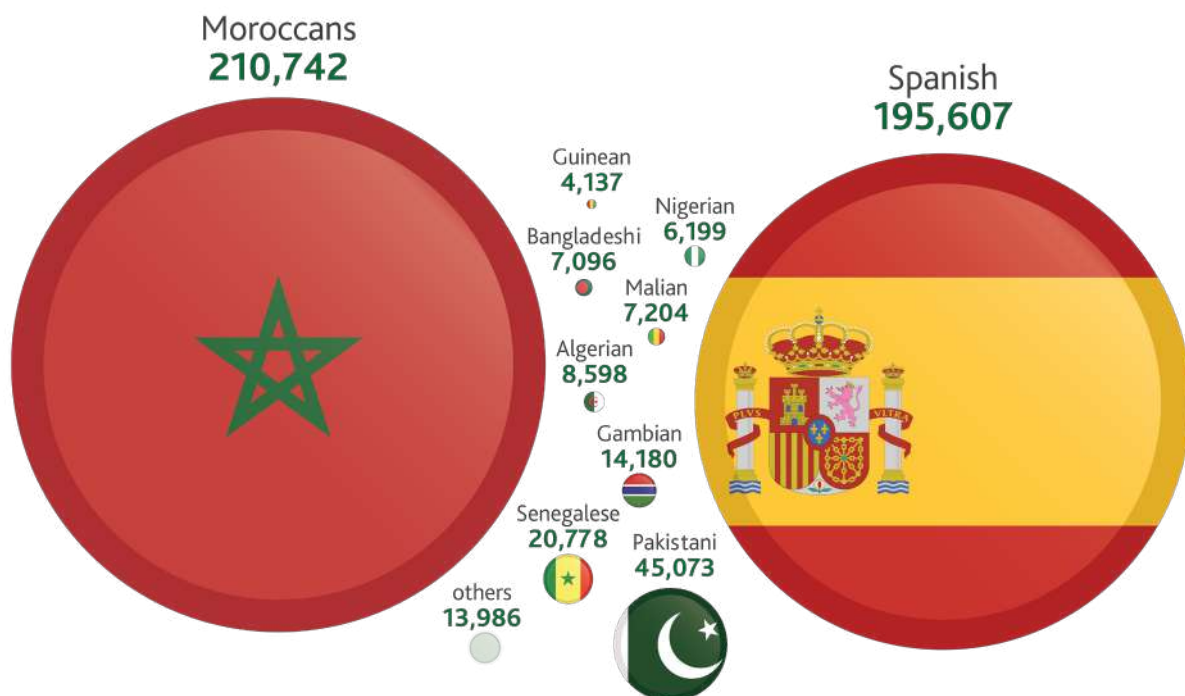
For Najat, one of the biggest challenges of the Catalan society is “the fight against discrimination and inequality”, since she had to face many cases of young people – either Muslims or not, women or men – who did not find job opportunities due to their skin color, their Arabic names or the way they wear during her period as Migration,

Training and Occupation technical advisor at her hometown’s City Council. Thus, she decided to become involved in politics because “someone needs to speak for us, and I am not only referring to the Muslim community, but to the whole citizenship, because our citizenship is diverse”.

Muslims in Catalonia: a story of integration?

Catalonia is the Spanish region with the greatest Muslim population (0.5 million), followed by Andalusia (324.680) and Madrid (290.991). Most Muslims in Catalonia, as in the rest of Spain, are Moroccans (210.742) or Spaniards (195.607), although there is also a significant Pakistani community (45.073), mainly concentrated in Barcelona, whose province hosts 63% of the Muslims living in this region.

Muslims in Catalonia by nationality



Source: Demographic Study on Muslim Population, Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE), 2018 | Infographic: Oriol Vidal

▪ Najat Driouech

Najat Driouech Ben Moussa is the first Muslim women to be ever elected for the Catalan Parliament. She was born in Morocco on 1981 and moved with her family to El Masnou, a middle-size town on the seaside 20 km north of Barcelona, when she was nine years old. Since she was very young, she became involved in the associative life of her municipality, participating at the Student Council since the primary school. Later on, she became one of the first Muslim girls to go to the secondary school in El Masnou, a decision that caused some controversy within the local Muslim community: “The group put pressure on my parents, telling them that they would lose control over me if they allowed me to go to high school. Fortunately, my mother never fell under anyone’s influence and since she hadn’t been able to go to school when she was young, she was clear that she wanted me to study and thrive no matter what the community said”, Najat recalls.

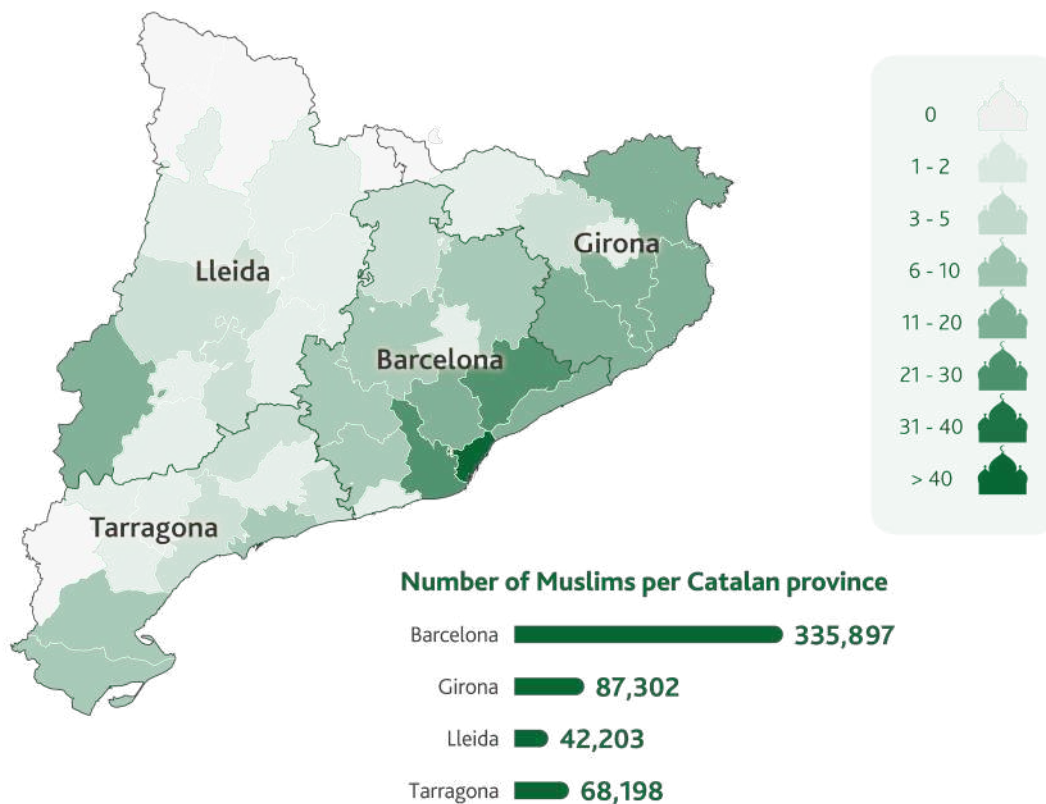
The situation became even more complicated when she decided to attend college in Barcelona. “Barcelona was seen as a very far place, identified with luxury and prostitution, so the community was afraid of what could happen to me and that other young Muslims – either women or men – would follow”, she says. Even though, she persisted and pursued a Degree in Arab Philology at University of Barcelona (UB). Later on, she also became graduated in Social Work and pursued



a Post-Graduate Degree on Migration, Identity and Religion and a Master’s on the Construction and Representation of New Cultural Identities, also by UB. Then she came back to El Masnou, where she worked as technical advisor in the City Council for more than 16 years, first at the Migration department and then in the Training and Occupation area. She has also been teaching Arab Studies in a Master’s on Arab and Islamic World at UB.

In 2017, she became involved in politics in a decision that she describes as natural and an act of responsibility given the under-representation of the Catalan Muslim community in politics and many other realms: “What we cannot do is to say that we consider ourselves citizens, with the same rights and obligations than anyone else, and claim that we are not represented when people like me, who have the chance of doing so, don’t step up”, Najat states. She then joined the candidature of Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) as an independent candidate in the December 2017 elections, and got elected to the Catalan Parliament, where she is member of several commissions, such as Childhood, Health, Senior Citizens, Families, Employment and Social Affairs, and also the Investigation Committee on the Terrorist Attacks of August 2017.

Number of mosques per Catalan county



Source: Directorate General of Religious Affairs. Department of Justice. Catalan Government, 2018 (gencat.cat); Demographic Study on Muslim Population, Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE), 2018 | Infographic: Oriol Vidal

From the Spanish and Catalan Muslims, over 50% are descendants of migrants and roughly 25% are newly arrived ones. That means that most of the Muslim population living today in Catalonia are sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters of the Muslims who arrived during the migratory fluxes of the 1990s and early 2000s.

In that sense, the migrations expert Jordi Moreras already identified four periods in the evolution of Islam in Catalonia back in 2000: the 1970s and early 1980s, when the first mosques and Islamic associations were established in Barcelona; the first phase of expansion to the rest of the Catalan territory (1984-1987); the second phase of expansion, characterized by greater presence in the public sphere (1988-1992); and the 1992 onwards, when mosques

and Islamic cultural centers began to be regularized. The number of mosques in Catalonia has in fact doubled in less than 15 years, from 139 in 2014 to 280 in 2018.

In that sense, this region is frequently portrayed as an example of inclusion for migrants and refugees, with many public statements, civil demonstrations and NGOs working in favor of asylum and integration. According to the 2016 Catalan Barometer on Religious Diversity and its Management, 48% of Catalan citizens believe that there is a positive relationship between the different religious communities of Catalonia, representing a 13% increase in comparison with the 2014 Barometer.

However, some recent events – such as the arrival of near 3.500 unaccompanied minors in 2018 and the terrorist attacks

committed by radical Islamists in 2017 – have tested the resilience of this decades-long peaceful cohabitation and have fed some far-right discourses.

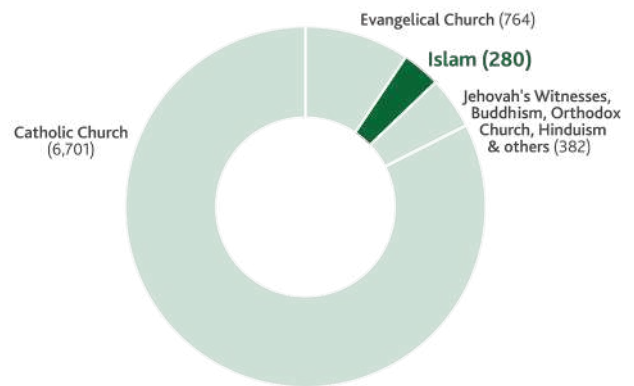
According to Najat, the overall situation is not as bad as some media portray it. Although she recognizes that she and her family have suffered racism, particularly when she was young, Najat also recalls how some neighbors opened up their homes when they arrived to her hometown, El Masnou, and how they tried to introduce them to the local traditions and festivities.

She also points out some positive initiatives regarding unaccompanied minors: “Many of these youngsters come from rural areas and all they want is to work. We have many small rural villages that are getting deserted and there is a lack of new workforce in agriculture and cattle industries, so many of these municipalities are already taking advantage of these newly arrived youngsters and are giving them an opportunity to make a living”, she states.

For Flavia, the picture is a little bit more pessimistic: “People think that they are criminals and these centers for unaccompanied minors [the place where they stay until they turn 18] are thought to protect them, but they also contribute to create a barrier between them and the local community”, she assures. From her point of view, the situation has worsened in the last decade and it is due to both racism and the own Muslim community’s self-absorption. “The first generation of migrated Muslims did not have much problems for integration, but current migrants, even young ones, seem to be more clung to their own culture, as if they were afraid of losing their identity”, she explains.

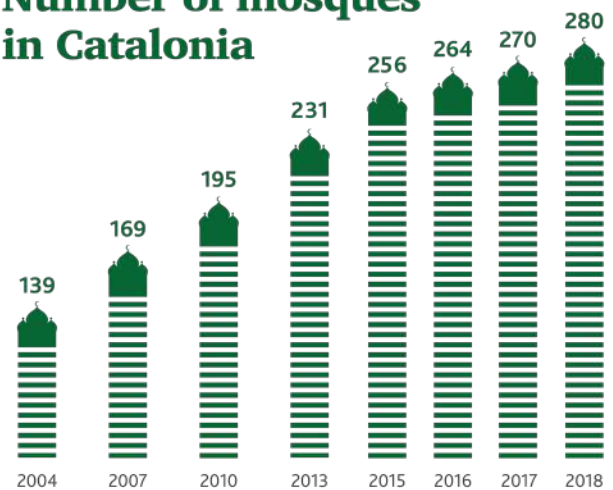
On the other hand, Najat, who is a migrant herself, thinks just the opposite: “The first generation of Muslim migrants came here to work, with the idea of returning

Number of worship centers by religion



Source: Directorate General of Religious Affairs. Department of Justice. Catalan Government, 2018 (gencat.cat) | Infographic: Oriol Vida

Number of mosques in Catalonia



Source: Directorate General of Religious Affairs. Department of Justice. Catalan Government, 2018 (gencat.cat) | Infographic: Oriol Vidal

to their home countries, so they didn’t make many efforts to become integrated into the Catalan society. They didn’t have the time either, since working conditions were very hard, nor the democratic culture to become involved in the political, cultural and associative life of Catalonia”, she asserts.

Najat doesn’t think that youngest migrants’ attachment to their culture of origin is a cause for non-integration either since, according to her, Moroccans – who are the biggest group among Catalan Muslims – do not have many problems in

▪ Flavia Reina

Flavia Reina i Fajardois a 31-year-old politician who lives in Sant Feliu de Llobregat, a medium-size town in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, where she has become the first Muslim women to be ever elected to the City Council. She was born in Sabadell, a small city near Barcelona, from Catalan parents and converted to Islam as a result of a personal loss. “After my father died, I started to look for some spiritual guidance. The first thing I came across was the Bible and then also Buddhism, and I don’t know exactly how I arrived to Islam, which I didn’t know much about, but it was the most appealing to me”, she explains.

Flavia attended professional training courses on Public Health and Care for Elderly/Dependent People, although she has mainly worked for the Catalan Citizen’s Advice Service. She has combined her work with social activism on women’s rights and the fight against the far-right. “Everything started in the mosque, where a group of women decided to advocate for our role within the Muslim community in order to break some stereotypes. We started to gain some visibility at the local level and we were offered to join Sant Feliu’s Anti-Fascist Platform, which was already present at the mosque, but only for men”, she states.

Due to her intense activism and growing public visibility, she was offered to join the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) candidature for Sant Feliu’s City Council in the May 2019 municipal



elections. After some hesitations, she decided to step in and run as an independent candidate within ERC’s electoral list. “I was a little bit afraid of the possible consequences for me and my family, since I have three children, but my husband and other close friends were convinced that I should do it and I thought it could be a good opportunity for learning and personal growth”, Flavia recalls.

She confesses that she did not have very high expectations regarding her election, since ERC was not part of the local government at that moment and had only gotten three representatives in the previous elections – she was running fourth in the electoral list. Now Flavia is the Head of the Social Policies and Citizens’ Rights Area at the City Council and leads three different departments: Activities, Social Services and Attention to Citizens of Diverse Origins. She is also the third deputy mayor within the local coalition government between ERC and the leftist party En Comú Podem (Together We Can); in fact, she had to act as provisional Mayor during her colleagues’ summer break. One of her main project for this term is to boost Sant Feliu’s Anti-Rumors Network, a platform whose aim is to fight fake news regarding any vulnerable community, including Muslims.

maintaining a stable relationship with their country, which has itself evolved throughout the years. In her opinion, both the Muslim community and the Catalan society as a whole have learned from the mistakes made in terms of integration by other European states, such as Belgium, the UK and France, which started to receive Muslim migrants decades before Spain and Catalonia.

Regarding the impact of the terrorist attacks of 2017, which left 15 casualties in Barcelona and were committed by a group of young Muslims led by a local imam from a small town in Girona, Flavia and Najat believe that they have not caused a significant change in people's mindset towards Muslims. "In the immediate aftermath, we [the Muslim community] had to condemn them more than anyone else, and I was wondering if it would actually have an impact on my daily life, but it has been two years and I haven't noticed anything unusual. I think that the daily stereotypes are more worrying, since they are more deeply rooted and are more difficult to target", Flavia says.

In that sense, they both agree that introducing an elective subject on Islamic religion in public schools would be a good step for enhancing non-discrimination and preventing radicalization. "I wouldn't like to bring my children to a mosque where I don't know what the imam will teach them. I would prefer them to learn what Islam is at school. I think Catalonia and Spain should define what kind of Islam we have and that this should be taught at schools, along with other religions, in order to raise up citizens with the capacity to freely choose which one to follow", Flavia states.

Catalonia is one of the seven regions of Spain that have not introduced Islamic Religion as an elective subject, alternative to Catholicism or Citizenship Education, in public schools, despite being the region with the greatest number of Muslims students (around 85.000).

Even though, both Flavia and Najat agree that Catalonia is a welcoming society, but that there is still a long way to go. "It is our responsibility to normalize the situation so that the future generation – the one of



Najat Driouech Ben Moussa (left) and Flavia Reina i Fajardo (right) in their workplaces. Source: Parliament of Catalonia / Cristina Sala

▪ Republican Left of Catalonia

Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, ERC) is the oldest still active party in Catalonia and has historically been one of the main pro-independence parties in this region.

It was founded in 1931 by some prominent leftist politicians, such as Lluís Companys and Francesc Macià, who led the Catalan regional government during most of the II Spanish Republic (1931-1936) and the subsequent Civil War (1936-1939).

The party is embedded in the European social democratic tradition, so it is prominently Keynesian in its socio-economic proposals and describes itself as secular, feminist and republican when it comes to civic and political rights.

ERC has been an essential element in the Catalan secessionist process that started back in 2012 and was part of the regional government that prompted the referendum on Catalan independence on October 1, 2017. Now it holds 32 out of 135 seats in the regional parliament and more than 350 city halls all over Catalonia, in addition to 15 representatives at the Spanish Congress and 11 seats at the Senate. It also has two representatives at the European Parliament.

Two ERC leaders and former members of the Catalan government have been in jail for almost two years, along with other seven political and civil society pro-independence leaders, while waiting for the sentence on the organization of

the October 2017 referendum, which was declared illegal by the Spanish Government and judiciary. Other two former members of the Catalan government affiliated to ERC, together with the party's Secretary General, went on self-imposed exile to other European countries in the aftermath of the aforementioned referendum.

Thus, Flavia and Najat decided to join ERC in a very sensitive moment for the party and Catalan politics. Flavia states that she chose ERC because the party is making efforts to represent the whole diversity of the Catalan society and because, according to her, "the republican values defended by ERC are fully aligned with the values that I defend within Islam". For Najat, the decision followed similar reasons, taking into account that she had already worked with some members of the party in relation to integration and migration issues.

When it comes to the political situation in Catalonia, Flavia shows full confidence in the party's decision after the likely condemnatory sentence against its leaders, and she states that regional elections should be held in order to know the current climate of opinion regarding Catalan independence. On the other side, Najat condemns international silence about the incidents in Catalonia in the latest years, and she shows confidence in Catalans' reaction to the sentence. "The Catalan society is very persistent and active, and it won't lose hope", she says.

my oldest son, who is 10 years old – could become whatever they want to be and may not suffer half of what we had to. And it is our responsibility to take the first step”, Najat states, recalling why she decided to become involved in politics.

Muslim, diverse, brave women

Najat and Flavia have proved to be brave women who have followed their principles and aspirations despite external pressures. They also account for the diversity of Muslim women, stating very different opinions on topics of interest for both the Muslim community and the Catalan society as a whole. What they have in common is their story of struggle against stereotypes and discrimination and their shared willingness to work for the common good.

When asked about stereotypes regarding Muslims women, they become even more passionate. “It is very funny to hear these what-kind-of-women questions. For example, people think that the youngest ones are more open-minded, but it doesn’t have to be necessarily like that. Sometimes you find women who have been living here for many years and they are the more critical ones regarding the line that the mosque is currently following”, Flavia says.

“Now it is very trendy to talk about Muslim women and the hijab... Listen, I wear whatever I want and that’s enough. Mass media should respect that. Of course, the hijab in Iran doesn’t mean the same than the hijab in Catalonia. And, of course, there are women who wear it because of their families or due to group pressure, but let’s give an opportunity to those who have freely decided it to wear it”, Najat assesses. She considers herself a feminist, although she thinks that the hegemonic feminism is trying to impose a unique kind of women, “but we are many and very diverse”.

Flavia explains that she has just joined an association of Catalan Muslim converted women who are trying to look for the origins of Islam and vindicate the feminism in it. “It is necessary to distinguish between culture and religion and to show that Islam is completely compatible with the European civilization”, she states. As Flavia and Najat stand, there is still a long way to go, but they will not give up and they are fully aware of how important their role as politicians is: “I’m not only Flavia, I am aware that I represent much more than that.” ■

Sources

- Barometer on Religious Diversity and Its Management, 2016 [Baròmetre sobre la religiositat i la gestió de la seva diversitat, 2016] Direcció General d'Afers Religiosos, Departament de Justícia, Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved from: <http://justicia.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/afers-religiosos/estudis/barometre/>
- Demographic Study on Muslim Population in Spain [Estudio demográfico de la población musulmana en España] (December, 2018). Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España. Retrieved from: <http://ucide.org/es/content/estudio-demografico-de-la-poblacion-musulmana-en-espana-2>
- Map on religious minorities in Catalonia [El mapa de les minories religioses a Catalunya] (November, 2014). Direcció General d'Afers Religiosos, Departament de Justícia, Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved from <http://justicia.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/afers-religiosos/estudis/Mapa/>
- Moreras, Jordi (1999). Muslims in Barcelona: spaces and community dynamics [Musulmanes en Barcelona: espacios y dinámicas comunitarias] Fundació CIDOB, Barcelona. Retrieved from: https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion_monografias/monografias/musulmanes_en_barcelona_espacios_y_dinamicas_comunitarias