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LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ

UNLESS YOU ARE A MUSLIM WOMAN

The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Women in France



ABOUT POLITICS4HER



Politics4Her is a global intersectional feminist platform and youth-led movement advocating for the inclusive participation of young women and girls in politics, civil society and other decision-making bodies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief analyzes and depicts the impact Islamophobia has on Muslim women in France. Using a multitude of methodologies, the goal of this is to formally illustrate the blatant attempts to force Muslim women living in France to not practice their religion freely. From conducting arrests to banning the hijab, the French government has decided that it is necessary for Muslim women to be policed in what they wear in public. Providing a background, this brief also looks to formally present what it is like to be Muslim in France, and the best way to show this is by interviewing Muslim women themselves.

There is a long history of Islamophobia against Muslim women in France, making this an important feminist issue. Sexism can be heavily influenced by Islamophobia so Muslims feel extremely targeted and unsafe in this bigotry. Along with the sexism, there is an element of hypocrisy in banning head coverings, which is analyzed later in the brief. All of this is not just stated by us, but the women who participated in the case studies conducted. What does it mean to be a veiled Muslim woman in France? What does the future look like for these women? It is beyond time for governments around the world to understand that whether you force or ban the hijab, you are controlling women. There is no liberty in forcing or banning because it takes away the choice. France practices the typical Western ideal that Muslim women are either oppressed or could possibly be connected to terrorism. The need to forcefully view these women without their veils strips them of their agency.

No ban or force.



@Laurent Cipriani/AP

INTRODUCTION

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. That is the official motto of France and has long unified its citizens in being the layout of the most important principles the country prioritizes. To center freedom and brotherhood would allow most to believe that it is a country that is inclusive and equal, yet that is not the case for all living in France.

This brief not only includes a layout of Islamophobic policies the French government has adopted, but also case studies of Muslim women living in France. By providing these lived experiences, may we take greater efforts in eliminating Islamophobia in all its form all over the world.

METHODOLOGY

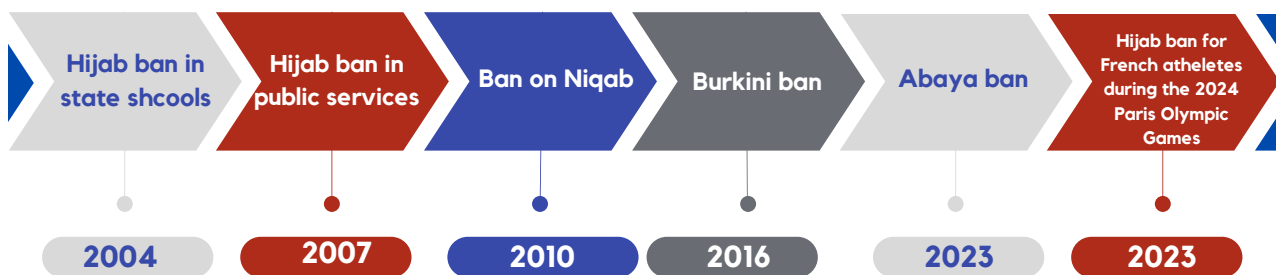
This study employed qualitative data collection methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with two young women, to gather insights into their experiences as Muslim individuals in France. Additionally, online sources such as media articles and reports were consulted to provide context and supplementary information. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were upheld throughout the research process.



CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

France, home to one of the largest Muslim populations in Europe, has paradoxically earned the label of one of the most Islamophobic countries, according to The European Islamophobia Report 2022. Over the past two decades, under the guise of upholding France's cherished principle of secularism, concealed Islamophobia has manifested in targeted measures against Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab. In 2004, hijabs were prohibited in state schools, followed by a ban in public services in 2007. In 2010, Muslim women were prohibited from wearing full-face veils (niqab) in public spaces. The ban on hijab in football by the French Football Federation in 2016 further underscored the discriminatory trend. In the same year, several French municipalities implemented bans on the "burkini".

A Burkini is a modest swimsuit that comes in different styles and designs and with no religious connotations. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, France mandated the wearing of face masks while maintaining the ban on the niqab. In August 2023, the French government expanded its restrictions by banning the abaya, a modest long dress, under the pretext of secularism, despite its Arab cultural significance not being inherently religious. The style of Abaya can be found in other cultures like the Japanese Kimono. Furthermore, in September 2023, the French Sports Minister declared that French athletes would not be allowed to wear hijab during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.



Timeline of Bans on Muslim Women in France

ISLAMOPHOBIA AGAINST WOMEN IN FRANCE



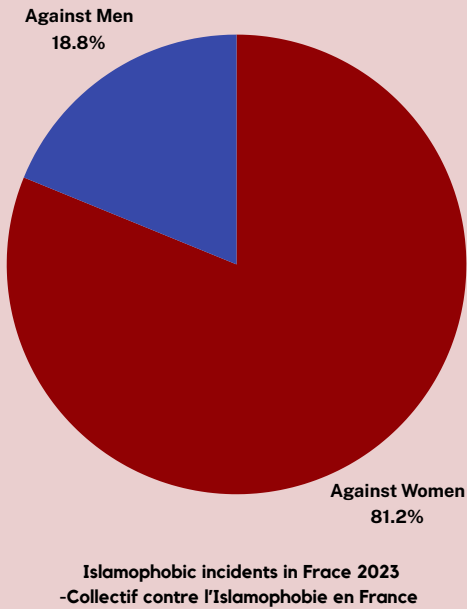
Islamophobia in France disproportionately targets Muslim women, particularly those who choose to wear the veil. Notably, statistics indicate that Muslim job applicants in France are five times more likely to encounter discrimination compared to their non-Muslim counterparts, with veiled women facing a 1% chance of securing employment. These alarming figures were highlighted by human rights activist Yasser Louati in an interview with Anadolu, where he shed light on the myriad challenges faced by Muslims in France, including housing discrimination and increased police brutality.

According to Hebh Jamal, an advocate against Islamophobia, Muslim women in France bear a disproportionate burden of targeted legislation and societal biases aimed at controlling their bodies and choices.

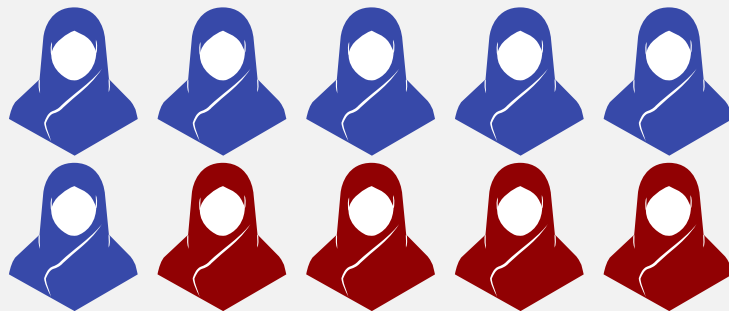
"Islamophobia is a global phenomenon with Muslim women being the biggest target for abuse."

-Zara Mohammed, MCB Secretary-General

This discrimination against Muslim women is deeply rooted in historical contexts, including France's colonial past. Anticolonial thinker Franz Fanon underscored the strategic significance of controlling Muslim women's attire in the colonial project, emphasizing the colonial aim to destroy cultural identities and assert dominance over colonized populations.



Despite legal protections and commitments to human rights, Muslim women in France continue to face systemic discrimination and violence, with Islamophobia taking a gendered dimension. According to the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Europe (CCIE), in 2023, 81% of reported Islamophobic incidents in France were against women. In France, official data fail to adequately represent the experiences of Muslim women. This neglect underscores a systemic failure to recognize and address the specific challenges faced by Muslim women, further perpetuating their marginalization within society.



In France, Muslim women, especially those who wear the veil, are often subjected to two different narratives. The left-wing narrative portrays them as oppressed and submissive, suggesting that only white feminism can rescue them. However, this narrative is flawed, as it perpetuates discriminatory and neo-colonialist values. On the other hand, the right-wing narrative portrays veiled Muslim women as a threat to French society's fabric and values, aiming to fuel fear among non-Muslim citizens and portray Muslim women as potential terrorists.

Both narratives rely on extremist stereotypes, failing to recognize the nuances and value of Muslim women's life.

Emmanuel Macron's remarks on the Abaya ban underscored the right-wing narrative, linking Muslim individuals and extremism to recent terrorist attacks in France. The month following the ban and Macron's comment coincided with the highest peak of Islamophobic attacks in the country, as reported by the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Europe (CCIE).

SEXISM IN FRANCE



Europe - A police officer issuing a woman a ticket for wearing a bikini

"If this is about secularism then shouldn't we all have the basic right to have the freedom to choose what we wear?"

-Amira, a Muslim French Student, *The New Arab*



Armed French police forced a Muslim woman to remove her shirt after the burkini's ban

France's historical and contemporary treatment of women's bodies reflects deep-rooted sexism and an obsession with controlling female autonomy and underscores its colonial mindset and patriarchal agenda. Frantz Fanon's seminal work, "Algeria Unveiled," explains the colonial fantasy wherein possessing Algerian women equated to possessing Algeria itself, with the veil symbolizing Muslim culture and tradition, thus necessitating its abandonment.

This approach is fundamentally sexist, portraying women as easily manipulable pawns and incapable of making their own decisions. Throughout history, France has imposed various dress codes on women, from the bikini ban to the burkini ban. These bans are different chapters of the same narrative: men in power dictating what women should do under the guise of protecting their well-being.

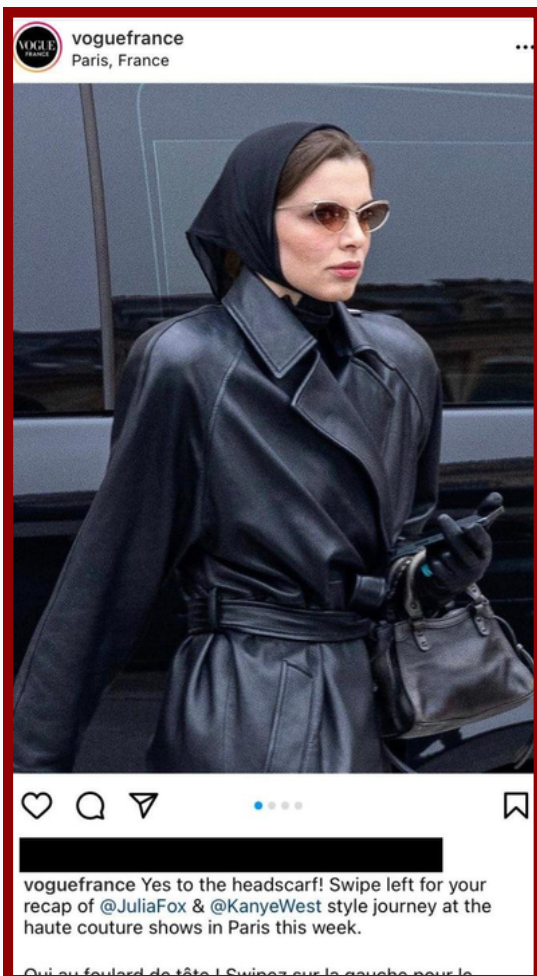
France's insistence on unveiling and undressing Muslim women to "emancipate" them underscores a deeply entrenched 'imperial sexism', as it sexualizes women's bodies and equates their empowerment with their appearance and sexuality. This reduction of women to mere physical objects perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal norms. Women are more than just bodies, and their worth should not be measured by the amount of skin they show. Muslim women's choice to veil or dress modestly is a form of self-privatization, asserting their autonomy over their bodies and sexuality. Reports from CCIE documented stories of two Muslim girls who face harassment and discrimination based on their clothing choices in French schools. One student was forced to remove her long skirt that was linked to "terrorism" and stay in her leggings the whole day. Another girl was interrogated for wearing a slightly low-cut tunic because her clothes were "too loose" and associated with religion. Interrogating a schoolgirl and commenting on her appearance is inherently sexist, as is forcing another student to remove her skirt. In both instances, the victims were subjected to sexualization and discrimination by the French authorities.

FRANCE'S HYPOCRISY

There is a blatant hypocrisy when it comes to the public engagement of veiled women in France. There is an outlook that covering hair and face is acceptable, so long as it is strictly for fashion. Palestinian model, Bella Hadid, posted on her Instagram the common hypocrisy surrounding head coverings and called out the double standard within allowing head coverings in fashion shows on one hand, and repeated hostility towards veiled Muslim women in France. This reiterates the welcoming of veils so long as they are strictly viewed as "exotic" and fashionable. Practicing Muslims cannot wear it; others can.



-Runway look at Paris Fashion Week.



Similar trends are found even within French fashion publication. Vogue France posted a photo of actress Julia Fox with the caption "**Yes to the headscarf!**" Many called out the double standard from the French magazine. In the same country that is working to crackdown on Muslim women's head coverings, a magazine praises a white woman for covering her hair! The caption has been changed but only after all of the pushback. It is apparent within France and much of the world that head coverings and veils are only acceptable when they are a fashion statement. If it is about modesty or religion, it's oppressive. If it's a white woman wearing it for fun, then it is harmless and fashionable.

FRANCE

POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK



France's purported commitment to freedom and equality stands in stark contrast to its implementation of laws targeting Muslim women's attire. These so-called "secular" laws dictate what women should wear and infringe upon their freedom to practice their religious beliefs. Despite France's claims of championing individual rights and secular principles, its policies regarding Muslim women's attire reflect a blatant disregard for fundamental freedoms and perpetuate discrimination against religious minorities.

01. Law no 2004-228 of March 2004:

This law regulates the wearing of religious symbols or garments that manifest religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools. It serves as the basis for the ban on headscarves and Abaya for Muslim girls in schools.

France's restrictions on Muslim women epitomizes the state's intrusion into individuals' religious practices. By dictating what Muslim women can wear, this law directly contradicts the principle of freedom of religion and amounts to state-sanctioned discrimination.

02. Law of 2010-1192:

This law, passed by the Senate of France on 14 September 2010, prohibits the concealment of the face in public spaces. It is commonly known as the face-covering ban or "burqa ban".

This ban, ostensibly enacted in the name of secularism, is a blatant violation of women's autonomy and freedom of expression. This law not only targets Muslim women who choose to wear the niqab or burqa but also reinforces patriarchal norms by dictating what women can or cannot wear in public spaces.

03. Article 1 of the French Constitution of 1958:

This constitutional provision establishes France as a secular Republic and ensures the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of origin, race, or religion. It provides the legal basis for measures such as the burkini ban in public pools.

France's secular Constitution, while purportedly upholding equality for all citizens, is contradicted by the burkini ban, which discriminates against Muslim women based on their modest attire. This constitutional provision loses its meaning when the state infringes upon individuals' rights to practice their religion freely by dressing modestly.



04. Support for the European Convention on Human Rights:

France ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1974. However, despite its formal endorsement of the Convention's principles, France's implementation of laws restricting religious attire raises significant concerns regarding its commitment to upholding fundamental rights. While the Convention guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion under Article 9, France's enforcement of laws targeting Muslim women's attire contradicts these principles, thereby calling into question the sincerity of its support for human rights.

CASE STUDIES



Case Study 1: Sarah, a young Muslim American woman and a student at a French University

Sarah's transition to life in France has been challenging, particularly due to the stark differences in attitudes towards religious expression, especially regarding the hijab. In the United States, wearing the hijab is a fundamental right, and Sarah never faced scrutiny or discrimination for her choice to wear it. However, in France, she was taken aback by the restrictions imposed on religious attire.

The ban on wearing hijab in public schools, governmental buildings, and workplaces left her feeling restricted and deprived of her freedom. Moreover, Sarah encountered direct Islamophobia in France, which she had not experienced to the same degree in the United States. She recalls instances where strangers approached her, questioning her choice to wear the hijab and making derogatory remarks about her religion.

The blatant hostility and refusal to assist her, as exemplified by the encounter where a woman refused to give her directions, were particularly distressing for Sarah. These experiences highlighted the pervasive Islamophobia in French society, which Sarah found deeply troubling.

Sarah reflected on the contrasting attitudes towards Islam in the United States and France. While she acknowledges the prevalence of ignorance and stereotypes about Islam in the United States, she finds that the openness and curiosity of Americans often lead to more positive interactions. In contrast, France, where there is a greater understanding of Islam due to the significant Muslim population, Sarah perceives a more entrenched culture of hostility and rejection towards Islam. She believes that French animosity towards Islam stems from a fear of cultural interference and clashes with their own traditions.

Case Study 2: Fatima, a young Muslim North African student at a French University

Fatima's experience at university has been marred by encounters with individuals who harbor extreme right-wing views and exhibit Islamophobic behavior. One student, in particular, consistently targeted Fatima, openly displaying posters of far-right politician Éric Zemmour and making derogatory remarks directed at her. This behavior created a hostile environment for Fatima, who felt singled out and unfairly blamed for issues within the Muslim community.

Furthermore, Fatima faced Islamophobia from a university professor who, upon her decision to wear the hijab, began to ignore her in class. This treatment was a stark departure from the positive relationship Fatima had previously enjoyed with the professor.

The professor's deliberate disregard for Fatima's presence humiliated her and affected her standing among her peers. Fatima suspects that this discriminatory behavior extended to her academic assessment, as she received an unjustifiably low grade (1/20) in a class, which she believes was influenced by her wearing the hijab. Fatima believes that the goal of constant microaggressions is to marginalize Muslims within the French society.



The two case studies shed light on the discrimination and marginalization faced by Muslim hijabi women in France due to restrictive policies and societal prejudice. Not only do Muslim women lack the right to practice their religion freely, but they are also denied the autonomy to control their own bodies and clothing choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01 — Reverse All Head Covering Bans

France should reverse its ban on head and facial coverings for religious purposes. The right to expression should be enshrined in French law so their motto can be lived by all. Choosing what to wear and how to practice one's religion depicts what liberty truly is.

02 — Combat Islamophobic Gender-Based Discrimination

France must prioritize the protection of women's rights and autonomy, including their right to make decisions about their own bodies and clothing choices and addressing Islamophobic gender-based discrimination and violence.

03 — Monitor and Address Hate Speech

France should implement robust monitoring mechanisms to track hate speech on media platforms and hold accountable those platforms that propagate hate speech or promote racist stereotypes. This includes enforcing existing laws and regulations and implementing new measures to combat online hate speech against Muslim women.

04 — Fairly Represent Muslim Women in Media

France should promote diversity and inclusion in media representation, ensuring that Muslim women are portrayed accurately and positively in the media.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the plight of Muslim women in France reflects a broader issue of systemic oppression rooted in Islamophobic, colonial, and sexist ideologies. The numerous bans and restrictions placed on their clothing choices and religious expression highlight a disturbing trend of control and discrimination. Despite claims of promoting secularism and democracy, France's policies contradict the very principles it purports to uphold, particularly in the context of human rights and freedom of expression. It is crucial to recognize that true secularism should protect the rights and freedoms of all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Furthermore, France's unconditional support of a theocratic regime that is committing genocide against Palestinians in the name of religion raises serious doubts about the sincerity of its commitment to secularism and democracy. It begs the question: is France truly secular, or is it merely opposed to Muslims? This glaring contradiction underscores the need for France to re-evaluate its policies and ensure they align with the principles of equality, freedom, and justice for all, irrespective of religious affiliation.



At Politics4Her, we stand with women to celebrate their individuality, exercise their rights, and have full control and autonomy over their bodies.

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