

Being a Muslim Woman in France

Since the time when the Western civilization has regarded the Islamic world as the "other", they attempt to attribute anything that is not in the Muslim culture to the Islamic world. For the West, the worst of everything exists in the Muslim world such as power ambition, erotism, mysticism, and despotism. [\[1\]](#)

Today, behind the Muslim women's problems in Europe lies the negative attitude of the West towards Islam. As a matter of fact, the first thing that comes to mind when you call a Muslim woman in the West is that she is oppressed and needs to be saved. This problematical approach of the West toward Muslim women has intensified with the increase the power of mass media which has become widespread with technological developments, on individuals and societies. It is possible to see the reflections of this artificial perception having been created by Western governments and the media in Muslim terrorist-themed Hollywood films [\[2\]](#) and the attitudes of Western NGOs toward the Muslim women.

France has a location in the Mediterranean basin which is close to the African continent. It has very old relations with Muslim communities throughout the history due to the immigrations from Africa and other parts of the world. However, France's view of Muslim woman is not different from the rest of Europe. All the holy elements belonging to Islam is an under attack. These symbols which have been accepted as sacred for Muslims, are belittled or destroyed under the name of "secularization" and "freedom of thought". In 2004, wearing headscarves has been forbidden on the grounds of being contrary to secularism including the veil of Muslim women. Muslim mothers who bring their children to school or want to accompany their daughter or son during any kind of school activity were asked to remove headscarves during the course of these activities. In the 2000s, headscarf and veil ban were transformed into a problematic issue in every aspect of social life, by both the media and government channels. In 2011, it is completely forbidden to wear burqa in public spaces; this attitude has exacerbated the attacks on Muslim women in France. According to a report published by the CCIF, in the first six months of 2015, anti-Muslim physical attacks increased by 500% and verbally abuse rised by 100%. As might be expected, 75% of the people who are physically and verbally attacked are women and 25% are men. [\[3\]](#) During these attacks, Muslim women are warned to return to their country. The interesting thing is that the vast majority of these people who have been exposed to various insulting stigmas such as "terrorist" and "reactionist" were actually born in France. [\[4\]](#) All Muslims, especially the Muslim women are afraid of a transforming France where "the yellow crescent" stitched on the clothes of Muslims will be next phase, as in the example of Jews having a yellow star on their clothes under Nazi occupation.

The extremist right-wing groups which are rising in Europe are ready to explode. They act in parallel with the manipulations created especially by media against Muslim women, which is not in accordance with any ethics or law. There are also arguments that this systematic discrimination, which is carried out by the French government leading to the isolation of Muslim women from all social spheres of economy, politics, arts and education, is actually the product of the justified reasons of France. The most well-known of these arguments is that Islam is a fundamentalist religion, and the women belonging to it are tormented and therefore, need to be liberated. Muslim women need to be rescued from Islam which is an oppressive and a violent religion that puts the woman in the second plan. Similarly, the veil is a practice that alienates and marginalizes the women. In fact, the purpose of the French government forbidding the veil is to give her freedom she deserves. According to this perspective, Muslim women who struggle to make their voice heard in France just to be able to live in accordance with their beliefs and culture are regarded as a marginal group which does not reflect the attitude of the majority of Muslim women.

Every individual on earth is unique, and this uniqueness intrinsically brings about differences. The differences are also the richness of mankind which must be preserved. The distinctions in the forms of thought are also a part of the subject diversity that must be preserved and respected as well. However, France's view of Muslim woman which consists of stereotypes which are created by France's head in the clouds, is a counter-example of this situation. Nevertheless, France's attitude is open to debate whether there is an aspect to respect. As a matter of fact, Human Rights Watch said that such kind of a practice against Muslim women was contrary to human rights. The UN Human Rights experts have declared that this attitude of France is an expression of intolerance towards Muslims. According to Jean Lambert, a member of the London European Parliament's Committee on Human Rights and Civil Liberties, the ban on the use of religious symbols is a clear violation of human rights. [\[5\]](#)

On the other hand, according to another widely debated argument in this process, the visibility of religious symbols in the public arena contradicts France's essence, which has been struggling for years to form a political understanding which is independent of the church. In this sense, everyone living in France

especially those who belong to another culture must be gallicized and therefore secularized. The liberation of the Muslim women from the headscarves will facilitate the assimilation of them so that the values of the Republic will be preserved. Also, the fact that the elements of the Christian faith such as Christmas, Easter, and etc. publicly perform in many places, including schools, shows that the religious restrictions are only towards the Muslims. In other words, this mechanism has been developed against Islam as the second largest religion after Christianity, is related neither to the attempt to preserve the values of the Republic nor the secularism. This is an obvious outcome of the French intolerance and prejudice against Islam. On the other hand, when we look at the French media's attitude towards the headscarf ban, it is seen that even though Muslim women are the most affected party, they are heavily ignored; while the women who are secular or belong to a different religion are heavily involved in comments on the headscarf ban. Instead of Muslim women's statements, those of men and politicians regarding the headscarf issue have much more space in the newspapers or other platforms.

Indeed, it does not make much sense for Muslim women to say something about themselves or to say that wearing a headscarf is their most natural right. Because almost everybody from the French ruling elite to the members of NGOs advocating women's rights claims that what the Muslim women desire for themselves is actually their humiliation. This is also an indication that France still cannot escape the idea of the "white man's burden", which is a product of the colonial mind of the West. Thus, it won't be wrong to say that this so-called liberation effort, which is practiced in defiance of the Muslim women, is a product of the struggle of the superior white race to civilize and modernize other races.

In short, the situation of Muslim women in France who are exposed to a kind of second-class human treatment is worrisome. The French government's policies play an important role in increasing verbal and physical attacks towards Islam and its members. These treatments are not peculiar to France though, France, as the motherland of the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, should lead the change in these constrictive policies. Since the world needs peace more than anytime now, which can only come through mutual understanding and tolerance.

[1] İbrahim Kalın, "İslamofobinin anatomisi : Fantazma, korku , nefret ", *TimeTurk* , <https://www.timeurk.com/2016/09/03/islamofobi-ve-islam-fantazma/>

[2] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, NYU, 2012, p.71.

[3] See. Olivier Esteves, " Islamofobia in France National Report 2015", (ed.) Enes Bayraklı, Farid Hafez, European Islamofobia Report 2015, 2016, *SETA*, pp.161-162.

[4] Lillie Dremeaux, "The Way People Look at Us Has Changed: Muslim Women on Life in Europe", *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/03/world/europe/burkini-ban-muslim-women.html>.

[5] Adrien K. Wing, Monica N. Smith, "Critical Race Feminism Lifts the Veil? Muslim Women, France, and the Headscarf Ban", *U Iowa Legal Studies Research Paper* No. 08-23; *UC Davis Law Review*, Vol. 39:743, No. 3, 2005, p.757.