

French Islamophobia: The Impact of Islamophobia on The Lives of Muslim Women in France

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Abstract

Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. Scholars and authors have been portraying Islam negatively for a long time. Islamophobia was prevalent during the European colonial era and reappeared with a vengeance following the 9/11 attacks, which gave rise to the "war on terror" campaign. The Islamic threat became a broader ideology and even officially entered French dictionaries. The bad stereotypes that are spread about Islam have increased Islamophobia in French society, which has had an impact on the lives of Muslims in France. Pressure and discrimination are familiar things to Muslims in France. The policies implemented by the government also have a discriminatory tendency towards Muslims. This article further analyses the specific impacts experienced by French Muslim women in everyday life, such as discrimination in the world of work, experiences of bullying in public spaces, and conflicts with negative stereotypes that are often attached to their identity. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Islamophobia in France and how this can affect the lives of Muslim communities especially Muslim women in France.

Keywords: Islamophobia, France, Muslim Women

Introduction

Islamophobia is the notion that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and unassimilable, an assumption driven by the belief that the expression of Muslim identity correlates with terrorist tendencies (Vilchis, 2023). Islamophobia is a modern descendant of Orientalism, a worldview that regards Islam as the antithesis of Western civilization built on the core stereotypes and basic distortions of Islam and Muslims embedded in American institutions and the popular imagination of Orientalist theories, narratives, and narratives. Islamophobia is not an entirely new form of bigotry, but rather a system rooted, bound, and influenced by the misrepresentation and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims shaped by Orientalism (Vilchis, 2023).

Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. In essence, prejudice and the false perception of Islam as a threat date back to the eleventh century. Since Muslim conquest of southern Europe, the Christian Crusades, and European colonialism of Muslim countries, there have been tensions between Muslim nations and the West (Ahdad, 2019). Muslim engagement with Europe started during the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth century. The West discriminates against Muslims because it fears that Muslims may endanger its existence. While Christians were the only groups fighting Muslims in the past, Jews and Hindus are now engaged in combat with Muslims all over the world. In addition, they perceived Muslims as the resurgent Ottomans after many centuries (Pervaz & Asad, 2022).

Over the years, intellectuals and writers have presented Islam in an unfavourable light. According to Karen Armstrong, until the 18th century, most western writing on Islam presented Islam as a religion that promoted violence and savagery, while Edward Said's views on Orientalism highlighted how the West stereotyped Islam, Muslims, and the world (Syed, 2019). Such beliefs fuel anti-Islamic racism and Islamophobia. The concept of a savage, uncivilized, and fanatical Muslim was used to capture Muslim territories and justify colonialism against their people. Colonialism is an attempt to civilize the people of distant places (Syed, 2019). During the colonial period, Orientalists were increasingly active, projecting an unfavourable image of Islam and Muslims.

Islamophobia flourished during the European colonial era and returned to full force after 9/11 that began a campaign of the "war on terror". The menace of Islam evolved into a bigger ideology that even made it into French dictionaries, where it was described as a specific sort of hostility against the Muslim minority of North African ancestry (Pervaz & Asad, 2022). Since September 2001, many Muslim communities have seen an increasingly hostile atmosphere marked by ignorance, bigotry, and physical and verbal violence. In many European countries, Muslim communities and persons affiliated with Islam endure discrimination and hatred to varied degrees and dimensions, all of which are types of prejudice against Islam as a faith or practice. Islamophobia, whether expressed as racism, prejudice, or everyday violence, is a violation of human rights and a threat to societal cohesiveness.

According to a report on European Islamophobia published by SETA in 2015, France is one of the countries where Islamophobia thrives in the European region (Bayrakli et al., 2016). The events of 9/11 greatly influenced the views of the public and even the elite of the French government towards the existence of Muslims in their country. The bad stereotypes against Islam that are propagated have increased Islamophobia among French society, which has an impact on the lives of Muslims in France. Pressure and discrimination are familiar to Muslims in France. The policies implemented by the government also have discriminatory tendencies against Muslims. Such as prohibiting the use of attributes that show Islamic identity, prohibiting the call to prayer, as well as regulations that limit the construction of places of worship and so on (Putri & Imaduddin, 2021).

In 2015, there were the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks on January 7 and the Paris and Saint-Denis attacks on November 13 (Bayrakli et al., 2016). These two events have fuelled widespread feelings of Islamophobia in France. Public authorities conduct checks on mosques, Muslim gatherings and deliberately target specific imams. This reinforces the view that Muslims are a security concern in the country. Following this, global human rights organizations have reported widespread abuses against French Muslims, all of which are committed in the name of security. In 2022, the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Europe (CCIE), an institution working in the field of fighting Islamophobia in Europe, has published 501 reports on Islamophobia in France. These include reports on the closure of Muslim or supposedly Muslim organizations and bodies, banning the wearing of the niqab or burqa and banning the use of abayas in schools (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2023).

Islamophobia is also strongly felt in the policy made by the French government, namely *Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public* or Law 2010-1192 of October 11, 2010, which aims to ban the use of clothing intended to cover the face (Ismoyo, 2016). This means that the use of the niqab is banned in France. The niqab is a garment that covers all parts of a woman's body or limbs except the eyes which means that the veil is part of the niqab (Mukhtar, 2023). This policy was introduced by French President Nicholas Sarkozy in 2010 but its implementation took effect in 2011 and France was the first country to impose a ban on the niqab in his country (Ismoyo, 2016).

This policy had a profound impact on Muslim life in France, socially, economically, and politically. One of them is the education of Muslim women where they experience a gap in secondary school attainment with non-Muslim women which has more than doubled after the ban. Their secondary dropout rate increased by 6% compared to their non-Muslim peers (Abdelgadir &

Fouka, 2019). Muslim girls also feel great psychological pressure, resulting in a decrease in their willingness to achieve. This decline in education has had this negative impact on long-term economic and social integration for Muslims in France.

Then, the negative impact felt from this ban is to make religion and national identity not align. Previously, Muslim women could easily identify themselves as an Islamic religious community by wearing the niqab and burqa or hijab. However, after the law they considered their identities incompatible and could not become French citizens without adhering to the principle of secularity as in the law.

Method

This study uses qualitative research to understand social problems by collecting data and information thoroughly (Sugiyono, 2013). In qualitative research, the object of research is seen as something holistic because each aspect has a strong relationship with each other, considered dynamic because it is the result of the construction of interpretation and interpretation of the observed symptoms. In qualitative research, reality is not just visible or visible, but far behind what is seen. Reality is the interpretation of understanding all visible data on the ground.

The study used a qualitative type of data, which means the focus is not only on numbers or statistics, but also on meaning and interpretation. The aim is to gain a deep and thorough understanding of the social problems under study (Sugiyono, 2013). This research uses documentation data collection techniques, where data is collected from various documents, such as reports, books, journals, and articles related to the research topic. The source of data used in this study is secondary data. Secondary data comes from pre-existing documentation sources and is processed through literature research. This secondary data is collected from articles, books, international journals, and publications from print and online media.

This study used qualitative data analysis. Researchers conduct an in-depth analysis of the data and information that has been obtained so that researchers can find themes by constructing the data obtained into something new knowledge, hypothesis or science. The end result of qualitative research is not just to produce data or information that is difficult to find through quantitative methods, but also must be able to produce meaningful information, even hypotheses or new science that can be used to help overcome problems and improve human living standards (Sugiyono, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Impact and Implications of Islamophobia in France on the lives of Muslim women

For most of the twentieth century, France was a colonial power, dominating Muslim-majority countries of Africa and the Middle East. Imperial history and economic exploitation continue to shape contemporary ties between the French state and the Muslim people. Muslims immigrated to France following the French annexation of North Africa. Although the majority of this land was held as colonial territory, Algeria was included into the French state as an integral part of it, allowing Algerian Muslims to freely dwell in France (Syed, 2019). However, Muslim Algerian residents are rarely awarded state citizenship rights. Muslims who are considered religious will be barred from participating in a state that believes in the separation of church and state (Syed, 2019). French conquerors in North Africa demanded the removal of Islamic cultural and religious markers, including forbidding women from wearing headscarves and allowing Arabic to be used in the private sector. This sparked Muslim resistance to colonialism (Pervaz and Asad, 2022).

France has the Western world's largest Muslim population, and Islam is the second most generally practiced religion there. The growth of Islamophobia is not a new trend, but it has profound roots in the history of the French empire. France's colonial past influences how the

country's elite and local population perceive Muslims. Muslims are still perceived as second-class citizens, just as they were in French Algeria (Pervaz & Asad, 2022).

Today, Islamophobia is used as a propaganda tactic in politics and the economy. Islam is France's fastest-growing religion, and politicians have taken advantage of the Muslim population to save their political careers. Similarly, Macron has used Islamophobic measures to salvage his political career. (Pervaz and Asad, 2022)

On October 16, 2020, a French teacher named Samuel Paty was assassinated for his school lessons on free expression, using the example of Charlie Hebdo magazine. that carried a picture of the Prophet Mohammed. Macron proposed a new draft law defending France's secular values against "Islamic radicalism" and said the religion was "in crisis" around the world. President Macron has also intensified the crackdown on Muslims and promised to put more pressure on the Muslim community. Macron has ordered the arrest of more than a dozen Muslims and liquidated many Muslim organizations (Ganley, 2020). Macron also ordered the closure of mosques in northeastern Paris for six months. Macron will monitor international funding coming into mosques in France, restrict homeschooling to prevent Muslim schools from being run by what Macron calls "religious extremists", and create a special certificate program for imams to train in France. Macron's statements and decisions point the current situation towards Islamophobia (Pervaz & Asad, 2022).

The French government's approach toward Muslims has resulted in a rise in Islamophobic acts and racist crimes across the country. Recently, the French government cracked down on Muslim organizations, and vigilante groups attacked mosques. Places of worship in Beziers and Bordeaux have been placed under police protection following threats of violence. (Rosman, 2020). The French government also said it was strengthening its crackdown on suspected "extremists" by carrying out several raids and threatening mass expulsions of more than 200 people. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin proposed banning the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobia en France (CCIF), an organization that tracks anti-Muslim hate crimes (Rosman, 2020). Tensions are developing between the state and Muslims in France, with Muslims already on the defensive following Macron's statements highlighting plans against Islamic separatism and saying Islam was in crisis around the world. Macron used Islamophobia to drive his campaign (Pervaz & Asad, 2022).

French public opinion towards Muslims and particularly towards Muslim women is also very worrying. According to some polls, France's Muslim community is the least tolerable population, with 53% positive responses when compared to 79.5% in the Jewish community and only 26% of the French population having a positive image of Islam (Moya, 2016). From a gender perspective, Muslim women are viewed very negatively with 79% and 93% of the French population considering that wearing Islamic religious symbols, such as headscarves and veils, is a barrier to "coexistence". This means that being a Muslim woman in France means being exposed to Islamophobic violence and discrimination at every stage of life, whether socially, economically, or politically (Moya, 2016).

In the field of employment, the situation of Muslim women in the labour market has a large gap compared to non-Muslim women. The employment rate of immigrant women from Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Sub-Saharan Africa who are mostly Muslim is lower than the employment rate of immigrant women from Southern Europe or other European Union countries (Moya, 2016).

In 2013, 18.6% of Islamophobic acts occurred in the field of employment, 7.35% of discrimination cases occurred in the workplace and 11.25% of them were carried out by private companies, especially in terms of access to employment. According to data from the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobia en France (CCIF), 99 cases of religious discrimination occurred in the field of higher education and vocational training. This number represents 13% of the total acts of discrimination that occurred in 2014. Muslim women are mostly victims of discrimination from reported cases (Moya, 2016).

In addition, the use of hijab by Muslim women is often an obstacle to them getting a job. In the CV testing phase, the use of hijab can be interpreted as the identity of a Muslim woman so that in some ways this proves that candidates who are considered Christian receive 2.5 times more positive responses to their applications than candidates who are considered Muslim. In the interview stage, wearing Islamic religious symbols such as hijab can reduce the chances of getting an interview (Moya, 2016).

There are cases where the use of hijab and veil ends up becoming a problem when Muslim women work. One of them concerns customer advisors who work at banks. She was given a choice between removing her headscarf and retaining her position, or she refused and left the bank. In the end, the victim chose to keep wearing the hijab and was fired for the reason. Another case was of a veiled Muslim woman who worked as an engineer for more than a year. In the end he was fired on the grounds of wearing religious symbols in the company (Moya, 2016)

In the judiciary, officers and legal experts lack training in gender discrimination and, on the other hand, there is a huge gap between sanctions and punishments for perpetrators of discrimination. This huge gap can weaken protections against victims of discrimination. As a result, the judiciary in France appears disinterested and insensitive to issues of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, which contributes to their rejection as victims (Moya, 2016).

In the area of law enforcement, the collection and monitoring of existing complaints is a major obstacle in correctly identifying Islamophobic acts on the basis of religion and gender, especially since it relies solely on the judgment of the agency responsible for the file. Police officers also lack specialized legal and vocational training on this particular discrimination and the issues at stake (Moya, 2016).

In the social sphere, violence and Islamophobic speech are still rife. The CCIF report recorded 103 cases of Islamophobic speech, 28 cases of verbal assault, and 22 cases of physical assault in 2014. Reported cases of Islamophobic violence and speech increased exponentially during the first quarter of 2015. This is due to the Paris attacks in January 2015 that triggered a dramatic impact on Muslim women. CCIF monitoring recorded more violence and Islamophobic speech within six months. Between January and June 2015, cases of physical and verbal assault showed an increase of 500% and 100% respectively compared to the same period in 2014. There were 87 cases of Islamophobic speech, 30 cases of verbal assault and 32 cases of physical assault reported to CCIF. Most of the victims are Muslim women, especially women wearing hijab (Moya, 2016).

France's public policy on countering Islamophobia has also remained limited. Political representatives prefer to be neutral by continuing to support and promote secularism. Feminist and anti-racism organizations also seem reluctant to acknowledge Islamophobia as a particular form of racism. These organizations consider hijab as an oppression of women and therefore incompatible with gender equality. They also assume that the use of hijab will make it difficult to identify Muslim female victims by gender and include them in the fight against discrimination and violence (Moya, 2016).

In the field of education, Muslim women are often ridiculed for their religious clothing i.e. long skirts, loose or dark clothes, etc. Many veiled Muslim students are harassed or expelled from public universities because of their headscarves. Some Muslim students are even required to remove the headscarf on their ID cards, even though this is illegal. Some others are harassed during exams such as unauthorized identity checks, accusations of cheating, etc. (Moya, 2016).

In addition, a 2012 Katel circular prohibits parents from wearing religious symbols i.e. veiled Muslim mothers from participating in school activities with their children. Although this letter does not depend on any legal provisions nor can it be considered a legal document, it can still be considered as a form of discrimination against Muslim women in France (Moya, 2016).

These discriminatory treatments on religious and gender grounds have a severe psychological impact on Muslim women in France. Feelings of injustice always arise, even more so when the law favors them. Muslim women and especially veiled Muslim women are faced with choices that most women do not have to face. They should choose their vocational training and professional field in anticipation of the difficulties that exist. They know that some professional sectors are dead ends for them, both legally and illegally. For example, in the public sector, religious neutrality is the rule. While in the private sector, they know from experience that some companies such as banks are closed to them (Moya, 2016).

Because of the headscarves they wear, these women have limited educational and professional options compared to other women. They also anticipate, consciously or not, their educational or professional training taking into account the realities of the French labour market. Many veiled Muslim women adapt their aspirations to the possible discriminatory situations they will have to face. As a result, they often have to make wrong choices, either because of the realities of the French labour market, their personal perception of the educational and professional sphere, or because they are forced to choose another path after rejection or dismissal (Moya, 2016).

This psychological burden also ultimately makes them consider alternative options. Some of them turn to religious or ethnic communities to find professional satisfaction and acceptance. There are also those who become entrepreneurs and set up their own businesses. Finally, some veiled Muslim women no longer want to be faced with the world of work and choose to focus on marriage and family life in order to have a valuable social status. For them, taking care of the family may be related to personal aspirations as well as ways of self-fulfilment. Gender social roles provide possibilities to women to find other positions that may be enriching and significant. Family life is also a necessary haven to recover from the experience of discrimination during professional training or in the workplace. For example, some testimonies suggest that starting a family can be a way to rebuild oneself and regain self-esteem, but it is also a possible step to rise (Moya, 2016).

In addition to psychological impacts, religious discrimination in the workplace also has material repercussions for Muslim women. First of all, they are increasingly marginalized economically and professionally. At the stage of vocational education or training, student associations such as the French Muslim Students (Etudiant Musulmans de France, EMF), note that many veiled Muslim students drop out of school. They also noted that the situation has been made worse by repeated political efforts to expand religious neutrality into employment. As a result, professional options for Muslim women, especially when they wear the hijab, are becoming or perceived to be increasingly limited (Moya, 2016).

Ultimately, religious discrimination in employment is often anticipated or internalized. The tense context surrounding the hijab issue contributes to trivializing and normalizing religious discrimination.

Factors contributing to Islamophobia in France

A Muslim woman, because of her religion, is paradoxically more vulnerable to discrimination and violence and less protected than the average French woman. Several factors contribute to this problem. First, French secularism. In terms of religious freedom, France distinguishes itself from most EU member states with the concept of secularism or *laïcité*. The 1905 law ratified the separation of Church and State, which implied the neutrality of the State in religious issues and the obligation to guarantee freedom and religious expression in the public sphere. Therefore, in the French public sector, civil servants are prohibited by law from wearing any religious symbol during the performance of their functions (Moya, 2016).

However, the adoption of the March 15, 2004 Law changed the original legal definition of secularism to restrict the fundamental right to practice one's religion in public. The Law of March

15, 2004 provides for the ban on headscarves in French public schools. Several other laws were also adopted, such as the Law of October 11, 2010 on the prohibition of face concealment in public spaces, which only targets veiled Muslim women (Moya, 2016). This law was adopted as an attempt to extend religious neutrality to other areas.

Essentially this questionable definition of secularism aims to exclude Muslim women who wear the hijab from many social spaces. They are victims of legal and illegal injunctions against religious neutrality. By restricting their fundamental right to declare their religion in public, France has created a favourable basis for direct and indirect discrimination, not only on the basis of religion, but also on the basis of gender, as some women, because of their religious beliefs and appearance, are legally considered unlawful or illegally excluded from many areas of French society. Thus, the 2004 law tantamount to Islamophobic discrimination and violence.

Secularism, which in the French context, was once a legal concept, became highly ideological. According to its original definition, secularism can be understood as the separation between religious institutions and the state in order to guarantee pluralism and freedom of practice of religion or belief in French society. However, since the law and political intervention in 2004 redefined the concept, secularism has become an exclusive concept that aims to neutralize the public sphere and remove all manifestations of religiosity in the public, especially those related to Islam (Moya, 2016).

Second, France's anti-discrimination laws make it difficult to provide good recognition and protection for Muslim women. Judicial staff are not trained to discuss double discrimination. Therefore, cases of discrimination involving Muslim women are handled only on the basis of religion. Though Muslim women are also discriminated against because they are women (Moya, 2016). They seem to lose their femininity, and even their humanity, when they choose to profess their faith in public, especially when they wear the hijab. Data from the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobia en France (CCIF, Collective Against Islamophobia in France) shows the gender dimension of Islamophobia in France. In 2014, more than 80% of victims of Islamophobic discrimination, hate speech, and physical violence were women (Moya, 2016). Many Muslim women can be easily identified as Muslim. Hijabs, their style of dress or their origin (skin colour, name, etc.) make them very visible in public spaces. As a result, Islamophobia has also been shown to constitute a form of gender discrimination (i.e. sexism).

Third, media propaganda. Muslim women in the media are portrayed in two ways. Muslim women are presented as obedient and oppressed women who depend on the male figure. Their hijab is a symbol of their oppression (Moya, 2016). Muslim women are considered incapable of thinking or acting independently, which ultimately legitimizes mainstream French feminist discourse that claims their duty to save and liberate veiled Muslim women from patriarchy and religion. This first media image is the prerogative of left-wing discourse, which presents itself as humanist, secular, and feminist, but seems neo-colonial and patriarchal (Moya, 2016).

On the other hand, the media relies on right-wing arguments regarding French security, nationalism and identity to present veiled Muslim women as threats to French society and safety (Moya, 2016). Their headscarves were used as a sign of an Islamic invasion of national territory, part of a wider Muslim plan to conquer Europe. In this situation, the mainstream media stirs up fear of veiled Muslim women being presented as quiet and disciplined frontline soldiers of radical Islam.

Conclusion

Islamophobia is deeply embedded in the psyche of non-Muslims in the West. Islamophobia damages people's peace of mind. Islamophobia and associated behaviours are unacceptable to Muslims, such as portrayals and parodies of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) while claiming free speech. Hate speech and free speech are not the same thing. Hate speech is met with violence.

Muslim supremacists commit acts of anarchy in retaliation for hate speech. As a result of this anarchy, Islamophobia arises, and a cycle begins (Pervaz & Asad, 2022).

Islamophobia has affected the lives of Muslims and particularly Muslim women in every aspect. In France, the policy of banning the wearing of headscarves and niqabs has made life difficult for Muslim women. In the fields of employment, education, social and politics, Muslim women are faced with discrimination based on religion and gender. Cases of job dismissal often occur in Muslim women who wear headscarves and veils. In public spaces, Muslim women are also still often exposed to violence and Islamophobic speech.

As a result, Muslim women in France bear a heavier psychological burden than most women. French Muslim women are often faced with choices that most women do not have to face. For example, they know that some professional sectors are dead ends for them, both legally and not. For example, in the public sector, religious neutrality is the rule. While in the private sector, they learned from experience that some companies such as banks are closed to them. Because of the headscarves and veils, they wear, these women have limited educational and professional options compared to other women.

In addition to psychological repercussions, religious discrimination also has material repercussions for Muslim women. They will be increasingly marginalized economically and professionally. At the stage of vocational education or training, student associations such as the French Muslim Students (Etudiant Musulmans de France, EMF), note that many veiled Muslim students drop out of school (Moya, 2016).

Several factors contribute to this problem. First, the shift in the definition of French secularism due to the adoption of the Law of March 15, 2004. This law provides for the ban on headscarves in French public schools. Several other laws were also adopted, such as the October 11, 2010 Law prohibiting face concealment in public spaces, which only targets Muslim women wearing veils. This law was adopted as an attempt to extend religious neutrality to other areas.

The law aims to exclude Muslim women who wear the hijab from many social spaces. By restricting their fundamental right to declare their religion in public, France has created a favourable basis for direct and indirect discrimination, not only on the basis of religion, but also on the basis of gender, as some women, because of their religious beliefs and appearance, are legally considered unlawful or illegally excluded from many areas of French society.

Second, France's anti-discrimination laws make it difficult to provide good recognition and protection for Muslim women. Judicial staff are not trained to discuss double discrimination. Therefore, cases of discrimination involving Muslim women are handled only on the basis of religion. Muslim women are also discriminated against because they are women. They seem to lose their femininity, and even their humanity, when they choose to profess their faith in public, especially when they wear the hijab.

Third, media propaganda. Muslim women in the media are portrayed in two ways. Muslim women are presented as obedient and oppressed women who depend on the male figure. Their hijab is a symbol of their oppression. On the other hand, the media relies on right-wing arguments about French security, nationalism and identity to present veiled Muslim women as threats to French society and safety.

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