

# After the Ban: The Experiences of 35 Women of the Full-Face Veil in France

SEPTEMBER 2013

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THIS REPORT EXAMINES THE EFFECTS of the French law prohibiting the full-face veil in public on women who previously wore or are wearing one. Women describe their personal religious commitment to continue wearing the full-face veil despite significant challenges, and provide details of the adverse effects on their personal and family lives.

## I. Executive Summary

*After the Ban: The Experiences of 35 Women of the Full-Face Veil in France* examines the effects of France's ban on wearing a full-face veil in public on the daily experiences of women who are subject to the ban.

The report is based on the testimonies of 35 women, 14 of whom participated in research reported in *Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Women Wear the Full-Face in France*. The current report is a follow-up study to *Unveiling the Truth*, and it aims to assess the impact of the French law, *Act No 2010-1192 of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the concealing of the face in public*, on women who wore the full-face veil prior to the ban.

### A. Wearing the Full-Face Veil After the Ban

The implementation of the ban in April 2011 has not stopped women from wearing the full-face veil. Some of the women interviewed for this report even stated that they adopted the niqab after the ban's enforcement.

In total, eight respondents have removed their full-face veil, while 27 continue to wear it despite the ban. Of the 14 interviewees who participated in the first OSF report, nine are still donning the full-face veil. One respondent started wearing the niqab after the adoption of the law in December 2010 and three other interviewees started wearing it after implementation of the law.

Respondents who continue to wear their niqab explained that, to them, not covering their faces would mean disowning their religion or abandoning part of their religious identity. Those who had been wearing a full-face veil for a long time could not understand why the practice had suddenly become illegal. The women who removed their niqab did so to comply with the law, out of fear of being arrested or assaulted, or because relatives pressured them to do so. One interviewee described that a decrease in her faith contributed to her removal of the full-face veil.

### B. Impact of the Law on Respondents

All of the women interviewed described that the law has had significant negative effects on their lives, and that it has neither empowered nor liberated them.

Respondents who are still wearing the full-face veil commented that their movements had been severely curbed by the ban and several women compared their situation to being held in a prison. Out of 32 interviewees questioned, 27 said that they socialized significantly less than before the law, and cut down their outdoors activities to the strictest minimum. The fear of being stopped by the police for an ID check or abused by members of the public prevented many respondents from leaving their house. The ban has also restricted the mobility of some interviewees who have removed their full-face veil in order to comply with the law, but feel uncomfortable in public with their faces

uncovered. Only one woman in the sample who has removed her full-face veil said that she was socializing more often now than before as a result of the ban.

The constraints on their movements and lack of physical exercise have taken a toll on the physical and mental health of many respondents. Several women described bouts of depression, anxiety attacks when leaving their house, and an overall deterioration of their health. A few respondents reported wearing surgical masks, which are not proscribed by the law, to access hospitals and doctors' surgeries but this compromise did not prevent tensions with medical staff from arising and as a result several women said that they now avoid seeing health practitioners.

A majority of respondents in the sample are married and have children. These respondents describe that the ban has significantly transformed their family life, increasing their dependence on close relatives especially their husbands and negatively affecting their relationship with their children. Since many respondents could no longer perform many everyday activities—such as taking the children to school or to play outside, and going to the post office or shopping—the burden of most outdoors activities falls on their partners, relatives and friends. One respondent referred to the “collateral damage” caused to her husband and children by the law. Several interviewees described feeling deprived of their motherhood roles, explaining that the effect the law had on their children's lives was the most damaging consequence of the ban that they had to deal with. Two women stated that the ban has discouraged them from having children.

The respondents reported that verbal abuse and harassment by members of the public is a common experience for women who continue to wear their full-face veil. Twelve respondents also reported physical assaults, including having their veil pulled off, being violently pushed, and being spat on. The ban and related public discourse seems to have emboldened some members of the public to behave abusively, and in some instances to act as if private persons were entitled to enforce the ban. Many respondents described instances in which members of the public abusively confronted them, including occasions when angry groups gathered around them.

Like the predecessor report, *Unveiling the Truth*, this report aims to distinguish myths and misrepresentations surrounding women who wear the full-face veil from the actual experience and testimonies of the women themselves. It is hard to establish how representative this research's sample is; however, a number of experiences are so prevalent among the respondents that they appear to represent definite trends. *After the Ban* shows that many women continue to wear the full-face veil in France after implementation of the ban. It further shows that for women who continue to wear the full-face veil, their personal and family lives are under considerable strain. *After the Ban* assists the reader to understand the experiences of these women by allowing the opportunity to hear their testimonies in their own words.

## II. Introduction and Methodology

This report has been prepared by Naima Bouteldja, who was also the researcher and author of the Open Society Foundations' April 2011 report *Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Muslim Women Wear the Full-Face Veil in France*.

The research described in this report has been designed to assess the impact of the French law, *Act No 2010-1192 of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the concealing of the face in public*, on Muslim women in France who wore the full-face veil<sup>1</sup> prior to the ban and who presently either continue to wear the full-face veil despite the ban or who have removed it.

### A. The Sample of Women Selected for this Report

Between 20 August and 8 September 2013, the author, with funding from the Open Society Foundations, interviewed 35 women who were either wearing the full-face veil, or had been wearing it, when the national debate on the full-face veil in France was launched in April 2009.

Fourteen of the women interviewed in this research participated in research published in *Unveiling the Truth*. A further 21 new respondents, located predominantly in Paris, were also interviewed.

This report summarizes the answers provided by all respondents to a quantitative survey. It also includes the testimonies provided by nine respondents who participated in longer, in-depth qualitative interviews. The interviews conducted have attempted to ascertain the evolving social and family life of these women, and their experiences with members of the public and civil servants. To the author's knowledge, the present research, designed to ascertain the experiences of women subject to the law, and to determine how implementation of the law has affected their lives, is the first of its kind since the implementation of the ban in April 2011. It provides an opportunity to hear the testimonies of the women themselves in their own words.

### B. Data Collection

35 women were interviewed for this report.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the research 24 respondents were based in Paris. Among the Parisian respondents at least ten lived in Trappes, a Parisian suburb where, in July 2013, the ID check of a woman wearing a full-face veil carried out by police officers led to two nights of rioting.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the present report the terms niqab and full-face veil are used interchangeably by the author and respondents.

<sup>2</sup> The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their identity.

<sup>3</sup> The unrest started when on Thursday 18 July 2013 a niqabi was stopped by the police in Trappes for an identity check. The police claimed the woman's husband (a young convert) assaulted a policeman and was taken into custody. This version was challenged by the man's wife and the *Collectif Contre L'Islamophobie* who criticised heavy-handed police tactics. When the demands of

### Demographics of the Women Interviewed

<b>Location</b>	Île-de-France	24
	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	4
	Centre	2
	Rhône-Alpes	2
	Other regions	3
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	25
	Divorced	5
	No Data	5
<b>Children</b>	Women with Children	31
	Women with no Children	3
	No Data	1

The survey sample reveals that the vast majority of women were married (at least 25 out of 35 respondents), and 31 women have children (many of whom were under the age of 10).

## III. Niqab-Wearing After the Ban

The present study suggests that implementation of the ban in France's streets, government buildings, hospitals, public highways and businesses has not stopped many women from wearing the full-face veil. While some respondents from the first OSF report have stopped wearing the full-face veil, a clear majority of those contacted for the new research have kept it on. In addition, the study determined that some women who presently wear the full-face veil began doing so after the ban came into effect. Three women in the present study adopted the niqab after the enactment of the ban.

### Do You Still Wear the Niqab?

<b>Total sample</b>	Yes	27
	No	8

<b>First report sample</b>	Yes	9
	No	4
	Other	1

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locals, who were gathered outside the police station asking for the man's release, were refused. Tensions increased and riot police and some residents clashed.

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In total eight respondents have removed their niqab (either before or after the implementation of the law) while 27 others continue to wear it despite the ban. Of the 14 interviewees who participated in the previous report, nine continue to wear the niqab, and four no longer wear it. One respondent had just ceased wearing the full-face veil at the time she was interviewed for the first report in late 2010 and she has not worn it since, although she expressed an interest in wearing it again.

#### **Time Frame When Women Began Wearing the Niqab**

1994/95 to 2000	8 respondents
2001 to 2005	8 respondents
2006 to 2010	16 respondents
2011 to 2012	3 respondents

#### **Women Who Began Wearing the Niqab Since 2009**

2009	5 respondents
2010	4 respondents
2011	1 respondent
2012	2 respondents

The findings of the report *Unveiling the Truth* indicate that the national debate on the wearing of a full-face veil did not deter some Muslim women from adopting the niqab. In that study, nearly one-third of the respondents (10 out of 32) reporting that they began wearing the full-face veil around the time the controversy started, or afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, passage of the law in October 2010 and its implementation in April 2011 appear not to have stopped the up-take of the niqab by some women. Among the new respondents for the present report, four adopted the full-face veil in 2010. Two of these respondents started wearing the full-face veil prior to the law's adoption (in February and June respectively), and one afterwards (in December 2010).<sup>5</sup> The figures for the period after implementation reveal one interviewee who started wearing the niqab in August 2011 and a further two women adopted it in February and July 2012 respectively.

#### **A. Reasons for Keeping or Adopting the Full-Face Veil**

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<sup>4</sup> In the current research, five out of 35 respondents adopted the niqab in 2009. While we don't know the precise month of adoption for two of the respondents, the remaining three adopted it in August, October and December 2009 respectively, which was after the establishment of the Parliamentary Commission in June 2009, at the height of the national debate.

<sup>5</sup> The interviewer was unable to pinpoint the fourth respondent's adoption date.

Noor, who lives in Hauts de Seine in Paris with her mother and son, adopted the niqab in August 2011, just a few months after her conversion to Islam. She said the full-face veil was the “logical outcome” of her spiritual progression and she didn’t take the law into consideration. Another young Parisian who adopted the full-face veil in February 2012 related that she had wanted to wear the niqab long before she eventually put it on but her work and studies at the time had prevented her from doing so. Only when she felt, “nothing was holding me back anymore”, did she decide to wear it.

Some of the respondents who kept their niqab on explained that it was part of their identity. Djamilia (Paris) who had been wearing the niqab since 2002 considered that removing her veil would be tantamount to renouncing her faith. *“I’m a Muslim and proud to be one and I cannot disown my religion. I am proud to worship God and there is nobody who can deny me from doing so even it means that I must remain in ‘jail’”*.

Martine (Paris) who adopted the niqab in 2007 also couldn’t envisage taking it off arguing that after going through so many ordeals she couldn’t give it up now: *“I put the niqab on because al hamdullilah, Allah made me love it, he made it easy for me al hamdullilah ... My husband always asks me why I don’t take it off ... I tell him bluntly, ‘No! I haven’t gone through all of that to give up now. I’d rather not go outside.”*

When confronted by a police officer who told her that her wearing of the niqab despite the ban, was an act of “provocation”, Samya, who lives in Nice, refuted the accusation questioning why her 17-year long practice had suddenly transformed itself into a “provocation”. She replied to her: *“Listen Madam, I’m not doing anything provocative. I started wearing it about 17 years ago and I never used to encounter any problems before. It’s you who are creating problems out of nothing’... It sounded as if I had spent my entire life provoking the French state. It was not at all the case. For me it was a continuation of my spirituality. But they couldn’t get it.”*

## B. Reasons for Removing the Niqab

Among the eight women in the sample who have ceased wearing the niqab, four of them stopped before the implementation of the law and the other half afterwards. Of the latter four, two respondents removed the niqab in summer 2011, a few months after the law’s implementation, while the two other women carried on wearing it for more than a year after the law took effect, until August or September 2012.

### Date of Removal of the Full-Face Veil

Before the implementation of the law	4
After the implementation of the law	4

The adoption of the law and the ensuing ban resulted (both directly and indirectly) in the removal of the niqab by seven of the eight respondents in our sample who were no longer wearing it. As mentioned earlier, one respondent (Sofia, Marignane) who had also taken part in the first OSF report, stopped wearing it before the ban’s implementation because

she needed to find a job. A single mother, she described her search for a job as a question of survival and would have removed her niqab regardless of the ban.

When asked about the reasons for removing their niqabs the respondents provided more detailed explanations, none of them framing the decision in terms of a positive liberatory release. A few respondents mentioned removing it for fear of being arrested in the street by the police or because they didn't want to be assaulted by members of the public. Zoubida, who lives in Orleans in north-central France, commented that she ended up removing her veil in 2012 out of fear for her children's safety: *"I don't drive and I have to walk a lot. I was not scared for myself but I was scared that someone would hurt my children because of me"*. One Parisian respondent reported that her husband advised her to remove her full-face veil to avoid trouble, while another interviewee who lives near Lyon said that she felt coerced into removing her full-face veil by family members, most notably her husband and two of her siblings. She relented and removed it in September 2012, but was clearly still very unhappy about it. One respondent explained that she had simply removed it to comply with the law, while another interviewee mentioned her waning faith as one of the reasons for taking off her full-face veil.

## IV. Impact of the Law on Respondents Who Wear/Wore the Full-Face Veil

The data and testimonies were also analysed to examine the effect of the ban on women who wear the full-face veil. The evidence indicates that for a clear majority of respondents the ban has had strongly deleterious effects, with no respondents indicating experiencing empowerment or liberation as the law was intended.

### A. Impact of the Law on Respondents' Mobility

Most of the women interviewed declined to stop wearing the niqab. As a result, they describe that the law has profoundly affected their behaviour when it comes to venturing outdoors. The research shows that a clear majority of women substantially reduced their outdoor activities, including taking their children to school, family outings, shopping, and going to the post office. Many respondents described their perception of living "in a jail" since the ban's enforcement. Women who have complied with the law and removed their full-face veil also described the ban as restricting their mobility because they feel uncomfortable in public with their faces uncovered.

#### **Comparative Frequency of Going Outdoors Before vs After Implementation of the Law**

Less	26
Same	3
More	3
No answer	2



Not applicable <sup>6</sup>	1
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### Comparative Level of Socialising Before vs After Implementation of the Law<sup>7</sup>

Less	27
Same	4
More	1

A significant majority of respondents said that they had limited their outdoor activities to the strictest minimum. 26 of 32 women said that they went out less often than before the implementation of the law while 27 of 32 said that they socialized significantly less than before the law.

Martine said that she only ventures outside to go to shopping areas mainly frequented by black and Arab people. Little else punctuates the long hours she spends confined in her home: *“They ban us from going out, so I just don’t go out. I’d rather submit to their law and not get into trouble. I don’t want to make any fuss [...] For me it has really changed my life as I can no longer do anything. I can only travel by car: leave my house to get in the car that takes me to a confined place, and then from this confined place back to the car and from the car back home. I feel as if I was in jail! Sometimes when I’m by myself I cry. Sometimes I ask Allah, ‘What have I done?’ At least in prison they’re allowed a walk, but here they haven’t even granted us a time when we’re allowed to go outside freely. This is really painful”.*

A 20 years old respondent (Zineb) argued that although the ban has deprived her of a normal life, what is even harder to accept is the argument according to which the law was intended to liberate her. *“They haven’t banned the veil, they’ve banned us from going out, from living. This is already difficult to take but for them to look us in the eye and tell us ‘this is for you own good, for your freedom, for your femininity’ really sticks in my throat because it’s false and they know it’s false ... And worse still is that the entire French population believes it, everyone fell for it... For me this is the hardest thing to swallow ... the hypocrisy of being told, ‘It’s for you, it’s so that women can be free’ while I’ve never felt so confined in my life. Today I can only go out accompanied by my husband while I use to be so active...”*

The feelings of fear and anxiety were sensations shared by many interviewees who were still wearing the full-face veil. Zaphora explained that the law, *“has changed everything in my life; my way of being, of communicating with people. I leave home in fear. I fear [the police] more than the public as I’ve gone through three ID checks and have already received two fines. It has completely changed my life.”*

<sup>6</sup> We didn’t ask the question to one interviewee [Interviewee 22] because her decision to remove the niqab occurred well before the implementation of the ban and was independent of it.

<sup>7</sup> This question was also not asked to Interviewee 22 for the same reason given in the previous footnote.

Djamila commented that, “the law deprives me of my freedom, instilling a sense of insecurity. I no longer feel secure when I leave my house because people are too aggressive, too violent and at the same time I feel I’m being held hostage because I am locked in my home and I’m obliged to lock up my kids with me because I can’t take them out”.

A few respondents such as Samya from Nice also reported that they no longer visited museums, cultural and leisure centres. “Before, in our leisure time we would visit museums and cultural centres, or we would go to parks and venture out everywhere, even to the ice-rinks - places where we just wanted to have a good time. Since the law I’ve never dared to go to these places.”

The law is not only affecting the mobility of the respondents who are still wearing the niqab. It has also severely restricted the movements of some of the women who had complied with the ban by removing their full-face veil. Out of eight women who have stopped wearing the niqab, three said that as a direct result of the ban they were socializing less because they didn’t feel comfortable leaving their homes with their faces uncovered.

Fatima who had been wearing the niqab since 2006 and had to remove it in September 2012, explained that family members forced her to remove it. But since she still believed that it was preferable for her to wear the niqab in front of strangers, she decided to confine herself to her home. Another respondent commented that part of her personality had been taken away from her when she eventually removed her veil: *“When I was wearing my niqab, I felt right, and I was going out quite often doing lots of things with my friends. Morally I no longer feel free. They’re obliging me to be like this [uncovered] although I don’t want to. I no longer feel like socialising. The sisters with whom I was going out have kept it on and when we meet we stay indoors instead of going out as we used to. It has played on my nerves, I don’t feel complete, something is missing and it’s preventing me from being myself.”*

Only one woman in the sample said that she was socialising more often since the ban’s implementation.<sup>8</sup> Anene from Paris was the only respondent who recognized that the law might ultimately have had a positive impact on her life by enabling her to socialise more. She removed the niqab in April 2011 to comply with the law. Having bought a small house, she has become the president of a local housing association and said she has done things she would never have contemplated while wearing the niqab, such as dealing with/speaking to men who are not her relatives. She is, however, clearly unhappy at having had to remove her full-face veil and still goes out wearing gloves, a long dress, a headscarf and sun glasses.

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<sup>8</sup> In total, three respondents reported going out more often since the implementation of the ban. In two cases, it concerned women who were still wearing the niqab but were only going out more often due to exceptional circumstances, and when they did it was to particular locations. Interviewee 11 from Rennes has needed to attend her hospital on a regular basis over the last 2 years. And when inside the hospital she generally wears a surgical mask. Interviewee 21 from Macon was regularly taking her son to a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, but said she would never venture elsewhere by herself.

## B. Impact of the Law on Respondents' Health

The drastic restrictions on the mobility of the niqabis and those who have reluctantly removed the veil but who don't want to venture outside uncovered, has taken a toll on the physical and mental health of many respondents. Several women mentioned bouts of depression, anxiety attacks and a wider deterioration of their health.

Martine (Paris) who already suffered from asthma said that she doesn't even walk to the nearby train station, which is 3 minutes away from her flat. Her cardiologist had warned her that if she continues locking herself up in her house, by the time she reaches 30, she will have "the heart of a fifty-year-old." Like many other interviewees she said she regularly experiences depression "*al hamdullilah I haven't thought about suicide, but I have already thought about packing my belongings and clearing off, without saying a word to anyone. I'll take my kids and I'll clear off but I won't tell my husband either ... a man can't understand. He can accept your testimony, understand what you feel but he's not experiencing it ... I even told my husband to send me to another country, to send me money and to stay in France if he wanted to. It's really very, very hard... Once I had an argument with him and I told him I was going out... He didn't believe me because he knows I'm scared. But I went out and ended up at the station. It was dark and I was talking to Allah. I had forgotten what the night looked like... I had forgotten the wind. I lifted up my niqab because there was nobody around, and it was touching my face, my clothes... it was great. And I felt happy because I told myself, they want to make our lives miserable but were only reinforcing our love for Allah. Al hamdullilah.*"

Another respondent (Zaphora, Orléans) who had also severely cut down on outdoor physical activities reported that, "I'm repeatedly gripped by anxiety attacks. I keep having nightmares where I'm being assaulted, or stopped by the police, repeatedly. I used to be relatively calm and composed but these days I'm constantly worked up. As soon as I encounter the police, I completely lose my self-control, I start shaking. I'm scared; I'm in a total panic."

Zineb (Paris) said that she always leaves her house with a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. She said that she was constantly on her guard when she was outside.

Noor (Paris) said that she had got used to people glowering at her but the constant worry about the police was draining: "the feeling of being marginalised ... and to be constantly on the look-out, to check whether the police are around: when a police car is going to pass us by, and if it's going to turn around or not. It has a terrible effect to feel hunted by the police when there is no need for it. We're not hurting anyone, we respect everyone. I don't understand why, just for a little piece of cloth on our face, we are labelled in such a way..."

Like another respondent, Djamila (Paris) reported that she had gained weight since the ban's effect: "I've put on 30 kilos ... Before, I used to go out. I was exercising and walking every day... I had two operations for a slipped disc and putting on weight won't help the healing process. I'm having one bout of depression after another. I'm always anxious when I have to go out. Life has become hell since the ban; it's a nightmare!"

A couple of respondents also reported unpleasant experiences at hospitals and in doctors' surgeries, even when not wearing a full-face veil on the premises. Zaphora said that her most traumatic experience was when she went to a private hospital to give birth. Although she only wore the full-face veil in her room and wore a surgical mask in the common areas, she reported being badly treated by the hospital staff. *"When I was in the delivery room, the midwife's boss came in to tell me, while I was in the middle of labour, 'You cannot wear the niqab on our premises, it's forbidden!' But I wasn't even wearing it at the time. I was in the middle of giving birth ... Later they gave me a time slot to bath my child so that I wouldn't shock other patients. Several times she came to my room to tell me I couldn't wear the surgical mask when I was bathing my child ... She was constantly making derogatory remarks about the niqab even though I wasn't wearing it on their premises. It was deeply upsetting and as I became depressed I signed a discharge form to leave the hospital early. My meals were not served on time. I was allocated specific time slots to wash my child while other people could go when they wanted. It really hurt me"*.

### C. Impact of the Law on Respondents' Families

In addition to the effects on the physical and mental health of the respondents, the study indicates that the ban has further deleteriously affected the lives of the respondents and their families in particular those who have small children.

Djamila from Trappes described the pervasive effect the ban had on her life. She has greatly restricted her outdoor activities because her husband is working hard to support the family and she doesn't want to get fines that he would also have to pay. Because she avoids going out, the burden of administrative matters and most of the shopping also falls on her partner. With spending most of his time at work, her four small children when they're not at school, stay generally locked up at home with their mum. She refers to her husband and kids as "collateral damage" of the law. She refrains from going to hospitals and doctors because she has already been kicked out of her doctor's surgery and doesn't want a repeat experience. Like another respondent, Djamila broke down in tears when discussing the law's impact on her children: *"But it's especially the kids, not me, [sobbing] ... who I feel the most sorry for because I can no longer take them out, I can no longer treat them as I used to... I can no longer motivate them, I can't accompany them to school. Truly, I no longer feel like a mother; it's a role they're taking away from me. I can't even be a mother, a good mother to my children because there are many things I can no longer do. I can't even visit my parents because they don't want to come and pick me up. They tell me, 'you should just pass your driving test, you should just take off your niqab' ... I think my family is doing it on purpose so that I take it off but I will never take it off even if this means staying locked up all day at home. I cannot take off my niqab: that's what people don't understand because I wear it out of conviction. Telling me to take off my niqab is like telling me to renounce who I am: it's impossible!"*

Zaphora (Orléans) who has two small children (under the age of 10) also felt that the worst aspect of the ban was its effects on them. *"I don't go out at all with my son. At two and an half he's at the age when you take him out ... to go to the park ... to play outside. It's not something I can do with him because I'm scared. I'm scared to go through an ID check. I'm scared to be verbally or physical abused so I let my husband do these things*

*with him. It's my husband who looks after him and takes him out. Soon my son will attend nursery and I'll not be able to take him there because I know that the full-face veil is banned. My husband has taken shift work ... so that he can take him there... For me to have to suffer from [the ban] is my choice. But for them [the kids] unfortunately they didn't ask for this."*

Martine (Paris) said that she spiralled into depression when she realised that she was unable to enjoy a normal mother-son relationship. Her oldest son was a few months old when she was first interviewed in 2010 for the first report but with her son now aged three and an half, and with another child she sounded much more pessimistic than ever. She reported that her husband warned her that if things became unbearable he would force her to remove the niqab. *"Quite frankly I don't care about my health, what upsets me most is not going out with the children. You can take everything away from me, but not being able to go out with the kids is the worst. You see, for example, I'm jealous of my husband who always goes out with the kids. I could go with them but I don't want to endure an ID check in front of my kids... I see my kids, Abdallah the oldest, who prefers his father not because he's his father but with his father, he's going out, wandering around and playing football. I can't give that to him. And this is really frustrating. And I swear when my husband told me we were going on holiday to a Muslim country, I was so happy. I started crying and my husband asked me why I was crying? 'Because I'm going to go out with the kids!' You can go and eat a pancake with your kids ... have a walk like a normal person, and you can treat your children ... I feel that it's not something you can catch up with later on in life. Besides my son is very talkative, he's very curious... This is the thing that hurts most ... not being able to make the most of your children, it's really not on"*.

Partners of those who wear the niqab have also been adversely affected. The husband of Martine works an early shift, deals with most of the shopping and administrative affairs and regularly takes his oldest son out to play. The ban has left many of the women interviewed dependent on their relatives and friends to carry out everyday tasks.

Women also describe that the ban has also affected their decision to have a child. A 20 year-old respondent (Zineb, Paris) who is married, told us that she had shelved her plan to start a family because of the law. Djamila mentioned earlier also said she would have wanted to have another baby but blamed the law from stopping her, pointing out that neither hospitals nor doctors will treat women who wear the full-face veil.

When asked to compare the general situation of niqab-wearers before and after the ban, all respondents expressed the view that the situation of niqabis had deteriorated since the law's implementation.

### Situation of Niqab-Wearer After vs Before the Ban

Deteriorated <sup>9</sup>	31
Improved	0
Not applicable <sup>10</sup>	4

#### D. Verbal Abuse and Physical Harassment

Verbal abuse and harassment by members of the public is still a very common experience for the respondents who have chosen to continue wearing their full-face veil. Twelve respondents also reported physical assaults such as having their veil pulled off, being violently pushed or spat on. The ban and public discourse seems to have implicitly legitimized the abusive treatment of veiled women. With a widespread condemnation of the full-face veil, the women's testimonies reveal that some members of the public seem to think that the law allows for or legitimizes private enforcement.

#### Experienced Verbal Abuse Since the Implementation of the Law

Yes	26
No	3
Not Applicable <sup>11</sup>	6

#### Frequency of Verbal Abuse

Every time I leave the house	11
Often	8
Sometimes	2
Other – Not Applicable <sup>12</sup>	5

A majority of respondents said that they experience verbal abuse on a regular basis (answering that they experience abuse either “every time I leave the house” or “often”). Khadija (Paris), who adopted the niqab after it had been banned, said that what had changed most in her life since wearing the veil was the frequency of insults she was receiving when she was outside: “People say ‘it’s forbidden’, or ‘ghost’, ‘Batman’, ‘whore’.” Another respondent (Nadjet, Paris) commented that nobody should have to put

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<sup>9</sup> This figure includes three respondents who ceased wearing the niqab completely after the ban but who offered their opinion based on the experiences of women they knew. They also include the opinions of the 4 respondents who stopped wearing the niqab, but well after the ban's enforcement.

<sup>10</sup> This concerns three respondents who started wearing the niqab after the ban and one who stopped wearing it just before the ban.

<sup>11</sup> Four respondents never wore the niqab after the ban's enforcement and another two women said they barely leave their houses so couldn't experience any verbal abuse.

<sup>12</sup> Five respondents could not quantify the frequency of the abuse because they went out of their house extremely rarely.

up with the level of abuse they were receiving: *“It’s tiring, we are abused all the time ... this is not a life. It’s hard, nobody would accept to be constantly abused in this way.”*

Twelve respondents also reported that they had been assaulted. Djamila reported an incident which left her bare-headed and in tears: *“I’ve been physically assaulted so often that I can’t recall all the incidents. I was in the market once and I was just looking around and someone came up behind me and violently tore off my veil. The person not only grabbed my niqab, he grabbed everything. He tore off my full-face veil and it was really violent.”*

Zineb (Paris) was physically abused on a couple of occasions, after the law had been enacted. Once a man in a shop stamped on her foot, hurting her and making her fall over. But what disturbed her more was being spat at in her face on at least two occasions. *“In my opinion it’s the nastiest and most vicious physical abuse [I’ve experienced]. It’s very shocking when someone spits in your face especially when you’re not expecting it ... For the people who do it, it’s completely natural, they have no remorse, and they don’t even stop. You were in their way, they didn’t like what they saw and they just spat on you, and you are just left there completely frustrated. You have the feeling that you are worthless ... psychologically it’s very hard to put up with. Personally I don’t underestimate myself so I can’t stand absolute strangers taking liberties and harming me physically and mentally.... It’s even more frustrating to know that there is no alternative, you can’t fight back even through words. You can’t go and ask the person for their motive as it might put you in even more danger.”*

Some hysterical and disproportionate reactions from members of the public are strikingly at odds with the fact that despite everything the concealing of one’s face is legally ranked as a minor offence. Many respondents described scenes of members of the public using their mobile phones to report niqabis to the police or angrily gathering around and jostling them.

Djamila recalled an incident at one big supermarket where she was surrounded by a group of around 20 people and was temporarily trapped: *“Last time I went to Auchan, a mob formed around me and people were saying, ‘what are you doing here? It’s forbidden! You have no right to go out entirely veiled. It’s banned, it’s illegal: go back to your country....’ A woman came and started shouting, ‘We see everything in this country; skinheads, gothics, prostitutes. Leave her alone! She’s shopping just like everyone else, leave her alone!’ ... I feel like a monster. Even paedophiles and criminals, are not treated like that. They’d be too scared to speak like this to a criminal. We are seen as less than nothing, not as human beings.”*

Samya (Nice) related a similar story when she was on a bus in Nice: *“I was sitting quietly on a bus with my daughter, when an old lady got on the bus and started telling me, ‘in 1968 we fought for women’s liberation, and now you are coming here with your burqa’. I started telling her that first it was not a burqa but a niqab, when a group of young women got on board. Two groups formed around me; one gang who supported the woman and was against me. The driver had to stop the bus and we did not move for about 2 hours.*

There was another group saying, ‘Leave her alone, she’s done nothing to anyone, she’s just sitting there’”.

Zahra (Paris) said that after the enforcement of the ban she was physically assaulted by a woman, who shouted at her and pushed her violently. When a group of people approached them, she thought they had come to defend her, but was shocked when they sided with her assailant: *“It left me gobsmacked. I was really surprised by the reaction of that group. Since the implementation of the law, people have become virulent”*.

Many women believe that the law has given the green light for people to be abusive and discriminate against them because the state, the police and the media were on their side. When discriminated against or abused the respondents felt there was no legal recourse with which to seek justice. Noor (Paris) said that the law has *“provided ammunition for all sorts of insults and discrimination... [People] saw the law as an outlet against Islam”*. This sense of alienation from the rule of law, which was palpable among many interviewees, was summed up by Zineb, a young Parisian: *“Before wearing the veil, I was a patriot. I was telling myself that this was our country, that we are under the same rule of law, so we are brothers and sisters.... Today I can see it’s not the case. People are pointing their fingers at us unashamedly.... When we are outside we are pushed, we are spat at, insulted, and everyone thinks it’s normal.”*

## V. Conclusion

The law prohibiting the covering of faces in public spaces came into effect in France on 11 April 2011. The law was intended to protect “women’s freedom and dignity”, affirm “gender equality”, ensure “public safety” and deter “the practice of the full-face veil”.

There are no other known studies of the experience of women who wear the full-face veil after the ban came into effect.

While there are no reliable figures detailing how many Muslim women continue to wear the full-face veil in France,<sup>13</sup> the research sample examined in this report makes clear that many actively continue to wear the full-face veil. It also shows that the women interviewed continue to do so despite considerable personal costs.

The research presented in this report shows that since the enforcement of the ban, restrictions on the movement and security of women in the public space, has had significant detrimental consequences on their physical and mental health and on their

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<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Interior’s June 2013 report suggests that as many as half of the women who wore the full-face veil before the ban have stopped wearing it after the ban took effect. The report, however, notes that the data are unreliable, stating “The aforementioned figures should be handled with caution until further consolidations at the end of the year.” Ministry of Interior Report, at p. 125.



relationships with family and friends. The women also describe that the law has had significant adverse effects on their husbands and children, particularly younger children.

Even some of the women who have complied with the law by removing their full-face veil in public report being similarly affected because they do not want to leave their homes with their faces uncovered.

According to figures released by the Ministry of Interior in June 2013 to l'Observatoire de la Laïcité, the official sanctions carried out pursuant to the law have overwhelmingly targeted women. There has been only one conviction under the provision of the law that criminalizes the forcing of a person to conceal their face. In contrast, between April 2011 and April 2013, at least 423 women wearing a full-face veil have been stopped for an ID check.<sup>14</sup> Some have gone through several ID checks.<sup>15</sup> In total, 661 police reports (“verbalisations”) were filed and a further 44 warnings were issued.<sup>16</sup> Respondents observed with frustration that the law targeted the women that it purported to help.

With respect to issues of public safety, the respondents, similar to women interviewed for *Unveiling the Truth*, reported that they willingly unveiled their faces for identification purposes when asked by a government official or employee. The women reported, however, that after the ban they felt considerably less secure because of harassment and violence targeted at them by members of the public who have been emboldened by the ban and related public discourse. All women in the research sample described that the circumstances of women who wear the full-face veil have deteriorated significantly since the ban took effect.

In April 2011 Michel Thooris, the general secretary of the Trade Union France Police, was already highlighting the counterproductive side of some ID checks saying that it “*will create more serious public disorders than if we were letting these women circulating freely.*”<sup>17</sup> The experiences of the respondents in this research sample reinforce Mr Thooris’s prediction. Further, during the summer of 2013, the ID checks of two women who wear the full-face veil led to public disorders and nights of rioting in the Parisian suburbs of Argenteuil and Trappes. Prior to the national debate and adoption of the law, there were no recorded public disturbances caused by the presence of niqab wearers in the streets.

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Interior, Assessment of the law of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the concealing of the face in public (“Bilan de la loi du 11 octobre 2010 interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l’espace public”), 25 June 2013, pp 90-92, available at <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/134000405/0000.pdf> (at p. 85 *et seq.*).

<sup>15</sup> According to the Ministry of Interior, one woman has been stopped by the police for an ID check more than 20 times; 5 of women have been stopped more 10 times. Ministry of Interior, Assessment of the law of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the concealing of the face in public, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Interior, Assessment of the law of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the concealing of the face in public, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> See *Le Monde*, Voile Intégral: les syndicats de police dénoncent une loi “inapplicable”, 11 April 2011, available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/04/11/voile-integral-les-syndicats-de-police-denoncent-une-loi-inapplicable\\_1506044\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/04/11/voile-integral-les-syndicats-de-police-denoncent-une-loi-inapplicable_1506044_3224.html)

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