

# Unveiling the Truth

## Why 32 Muslim Women Wear the Full-face Veil in France

The At Home in Europe project of the Open Society Foundations examines the position of minority and marginalised groups in a changing Europe, with the overall aim of contributing to better informed policies and debate on diversity and equality in Europe. Through research and advocacy with policymakers, civil society, and local communities, the project explores issues that affect participation of Muslims and other groups at the local, national, and European levels.

*Unveiling the Truth* looks at the experiences of 32 women who wear the full-face veil in France.

*Why should I remove my niqab? I am not an outlaw, I am not a terrorist, I am not a criminal, I am not a thief. I, who today respect all the laws, the laws of God and the laws of the Republic, will tomorrow become an outlaw.*

Camile, Paris

### Definitions

- *Niqab* is a veil that covers a woman's hair and face, leaving only the eyes clearly visible.
- *Hijab* is the Arabic word for curtain or cover. It is a piece of cloth worn by observant Muslim women to cover the hair, ears, and neck, leaving the face uncovered.
- *Seetar/sitar*, a similar garment to the *burqa/burkha*, includes a *niqab* with a second tier screening the eyes with mesh. It covers the woman's whole body and is usually black in colour.

### I. Context

- After months of fierce debate, on 13 July 2010 the French National Assembly overwhelmingly voted in favour of a bill prohibiting clothing concealing the face in public places with 335 votes for the bill, one against, and most of the opposition boycotting the vote. On 14 September 2010 the bill also sailed through the Senate, and the Council of State ratified the law in October despite its previous warnings to the government. The French government believes that this legislation is necessary in order to protect gender equality and maintain public order.
- From 11 April 2011 it will be illegal to wear any face covering in public spaces, except in places of worship and travel as a passenger in private cars. Not abiding by this law could lead to fines of up to €150, which can be accompanied or replaced by compulsory citizenship classes. A clause in the law also states that any person forcing a woman to wear the full veil faces a year's imprisonment and a fine of €30,000. If the woman concerned is under 18, the punishment is €60,000 and up to two years' imprisonment.

### II. Why does this report matter?

- *Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Women Wear the Veil in France* examines Islam's compatibility with European values. It offers the views of 32 women across France who wear the full-face veil, their reasons for doing so, and their experiences in public before and after the debate over banning the veil. It is an attempt to distinguish the real-life experiences and perspectives of the women who wear the veil from the popular myths and misperceptions promulgated by the media and national figures.
- The study is based on the testimonies of 32 women who live in Paris and its environs (Région Île-de-France), Marseille, Lyon, Avignon, Rennes, and smaller provincial towns.

### III. Who are the 32 Women?

- Twenty-nine of the respondents were born in France and 30 are French citizens.
- Twenty respondents (more than 60 percent) have an Arab (predominantly North-African) background and 4 women (12.5 percent) are of West African descent. Eight women who wear the veil (a quarter of the total) are converts to Islam.
- Twenty-one of the respondents are under 30 years of age, and 27 (nearly 85 percent) are under 40, close to the official figure of 90 percent.
- Fourteen of the women interviewed hold at least the equivalent of A-levels or a baccalauréat (secondary school diploma) while eight respondents do not hold a degree. A significant number of interviewees left, or said they had to leave, school after they started wearing the headscarf.

- Ten of the respondents were working full-time or part-time. Only two respondents said that they were not willing to work, preferring instead to stay at home. By contrast, the great majority of those unemployed stated their desire to find a job in the future as long as it would not prevent them from practising their religion.

#### **IV. Why do some women choose to wear the full-face veil? Is it their choice?**

- Testimonies from the women clearly indicate that none of the respondents were forced into wearing the full-face veil.
- The adoption of a full-face veil in the great majority of cases is the result of personal choice, without any pressure from family members. The decision to wear the niqab/seetar was not supported by many family members, in particular mothers, often resulting in conflict. Many parents considered the full-face veil as a practise unrelated to Islam and were worried about their daughter's safety and security.
- The choice to wear the full face veil was made independently by the women, in spite of reservations by some of their husbands. Among all the married women only one woman had been directly encouraged by her husband to wear it—she wore it four years after getting married.
- In most cases, the women interviewed said they adopted the full-face veil as part of a spiritual journey. Many desired to deepen their relationship with God and draw on the actions of the Prophet Mohammed's wives for guidance.
- The media attention itself encouraged a number of interviewees, especially younger ones, to adopt the full-face veil: ten of the 32 women started wearing the niqab after the controversy broke out in April 2009.
- None of the women started wearing the full-face veil as a result of direct or indirect persuasion from orthodox preachers in a mosque or in a Muslim group. Wearing the niqab/seetar was not symptomatic of the activities of a particular radical group operating on French soil as often claimed by politicians and commentators.

#### **V. What impact does wearing the full-face veil have on their daily life? Do they feel "less French?"**

- Thirty women stated that they had suffered some form of verbal abuse from members of the public. Those who had been wearing the full face veil for a long time believed that hostility towards them had increased significantly since the debate from 2009. A minority of women have also been physically assaulted, including attempts to tear off their face veils. The typical profile of these individuals is between the ages of 30 and 50, mostly female and white French. At the same time, a significant proportion of the respondents

had also been verbally abused by other Muslims including people of Arab descent and accused of giving Muslims a bad reputation in France and shaming the Muslim community and Islam.

- All the interviewees were happy to unveil their faces for identification purposes whether asked by an official or employee. Only three women said that this needed to be done by another woman.
- Some women perceived no difficulty in defining themselves as French, thinking it perfectly natural, while others clearly showed that their feelings of belonging had recently been overtaken by those of alienation.

#### **VI. What will be long-term the impact of this law?**

- Many of the respondents are adamant that they will refuse to take off the full face veil when the law comes into effect from 11 April. Most stated that they would avoid, as much as possible, leaving their homes, whilst some believe that they will have to leave France and move to other countries.
- The law encapsulates the growing anxiety and tensions in France, and indeed other European countries, over national identity and values and the reality and acceptance of increasingly diverse populations, in which Muslims play a large part.
- The integration of Muslim communities across western Europe is a legitimate concern for policymakers, but in many countries the tone of the discussion and accompanying institutional responses have been counterproductive and contradict the principles of liberty, democracy, and a respect for human rights and equality. Notwithstanding the apparent neutrality of the law, the controversy over its adoption has further deepened the perceptions of Muslims living in France that state interference is targeted specifically at them.

#### **For more information**

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