

Is France right to ban wearing the burka in public?

Egyptian-born columnist and lecturer Mona Eltahawy argues in favour of the proposed French ban on the burka in public; actor and playwright Stephanie Street takes the opposite view

Mona Eltahawy and Stephanie Street
The Observer, Sunday 21 March 2010



Will President Sarkozy's bid to ban the burka in public succeed? Photograph: AFP
PHOTO/ Getty Images

YES: Mona Eltahawy

Egyptian-born columnist and lecturer on Arab and Muslim issues

As a Muslim woman and as a feminist I support banning the face veil, everywhere and not just in France where they are to vote on a resolution and possibly a ban on wearing the garment in public places [hospitals, schools and public transport, but not in the streets] after regional elections end.

I am appalled to hear the defence of the niqab or burka in Europe. A bizarre political correctness has tied the tongues of those who would normally rally to defend women's rights but who are now instead sacrificing those very rights in the name of fighting an increasingly powerful right wing.

Every time I return to Cairo from New York City, where I now live, I wonder what Hoda Shaarawi, the pioneering Egyptian feminist, would say if she could see how many of her sisters are disappearing behind the face veil. Returning from an international women's conference in Italy in 1923 – yes, we had feminists that early in Egypt – Shaarawi famously removed her face veil at a Cairo train station, declaring it a thing of the past. We might not have burned our bras in Egypt but some have described Shaarawi's gesture as even more incendiary for its time.

And yet here we are, almost a century later, arguing over a woman's "right" to cover her face. What is lost in those arguments is that the ideology that promotes the niqab (the total body covering that leaves just the eyes exposed) and the burka (the garment which

covers the eyes with a mesh) does not believe in the concept of women's rights to begin with.

It is an ideology that describes women alternately as candy, a diamond ring or a precious stone that needs to be hidden to prove her "worth". That is not a message Muslims learn in our holy book, the Qur'an, nor is the face veil prescribed by the majority of Muslim scholars.

It is instead a pillar of the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam known as Salafism. It is associated with Saudi Arabia, where I spent most of my adolescence and where it is clear that women are effectively perpetual children, forbidden as they are from driving, from travelling alone and from even the simplest of surgical procedures without the permission of a male "guardian". I detest the niqab and the burka for their erasure of women and for dangerously equating piety with that disappearance – the less of you I can see, the closer you must be to God. I defend a woman's right to cover her hair if she chooses but the face is central to human interaction and so the ideologues who promote its covering are simply misogynists.

I abhor the rightwing Muslim ideology behind the veils but I equally abhor the political rightwing xenophobes of Europe. The European political right – be it President Nicolas Sarkozy, his ultra-right rival Jean-Marie Le Pen (who did alarmingly well in the first round of those regional elections) or Dutch provocateur Geert Wilders – do not give a rat's ass about Muslim women or their rights: they are merely using the issue in an attempt to win votes.

The racism and discrimination that Muslim minorities face in many countries – such as France, which has the largest Muslim community in Europe, and Britain, where two members of the xenophobic British National party were shamefully elected to the European parliament – are very real. But the silence of the left wing and liberals isn't the way to fight it. The best way to support Muslim women would be to say we oppose both the racist right wing and the niqabs and burkas which are products of what I call the Muslim right wing. Women should not be sacrificed to either.

Mona Eltahawy can be reached at info@monaeltahawy.com

NO: Stephanie Street

British Asian actor and playwright

Over the last five years I interviewed 43 British Muslim women for my play, *Sisters*, a verbatim piece constructed from those interviews. My intention was to dispel the ludicrous notion that there is a single, fixed Muslim female identity. As a non-Muslim who grew up in Singapore surrounded by Muslim women, I was shocked by the mainstream response to 9/11 and 7/7 which was, obliquely, the polarisation of "us" and "them". Probably the most offensive thing about it all was how few commentators and analysts in the media, or people in positions of power, had ever spoken in person to a Muslim woman.

I wonder how many niqab-wearing French citizens Nicolas Sarkozy has sat with and talked to. I imagine not many. Because if he had, he could not with a clear conscience say that "the burka is not a religious sign (but) a sign of subservience, of debasement". He is right to assume that there are significant problems with the status of women in certain Muslim communities. This, however, is not oppression on religious grounds but rather, cultural. And the hypocrisy of what he is doing is surely transparent – he, in condemning what he sees to be a symbol of oppression of women by men, is oppressing women's rights to practise their faith as they choose.

To whatever extent a Muslim woman chooses to practise it, modesty is a central concern within the religion (for men as well, although this is often ignored). Everyone I spoke to who wore Islamic dress did so because this issue of modesty is sacrosanct, and they felt liberated not being judged on their appearance. And those who choose to wear the niqab are doing that to an extreme.

Only one character in my play wears the niqab, but the issue of Islamic dress came up in every interview I did. Azra (not her real name), who wore the full covering, was young, had a job and wore it against her parents' wishes. They felt that she would be discriminated against for wearing it.

She took it off when she went to work because she had to, knowing she was "going to get the reward for the time I was wearing it, making God happy by fulfilling his covenant to me".

She related to me an incident that took place when she had her photo taken for her university ID. They requested she remove her niqab, so she asked for a female photographer. When the male photographer at the adjacent booth asked if she'd like the men to look away, she told them not to worry about it, not wanting to cause a scene. And when he did still turn away, she was touched: "I thought, I just wish people could be kind like that."

France clearly needs to address why immigrant Muslims and French converts are rejecting western identity so demonstratively, but this proposed ban is not the way. There is the not insignificant problem that it might contravene articles 8 and 9 of the European convention on human rights which protect the individual's right to a private life and personal identity and freedom to manifest one's religion.

There is no denying that in certain countries the burqa is a manifestation of the oppression of women, but in the west it is nearly always worn out of choice. It is an issue of how a person chooses to practise their faith, and in a democracy we cannot deny any human being that.

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 Staff

 Contributor



zxcvbnmcom87

21 Mar 2010, 4:36AM

alsalam alyoum

first we as muslims donnot wait the french desicion to judge on

our islam and i wonder why this increasing opposition against niqap... and who said that it is not related to our islam...
.....we do not take our rules of islam from mr sarkozy and i say there is more than 35 evidences from quran and sunna to accept my opinion
by the way i am egyptian and i am one of salafism and i never think that huda sharawey was a pioneer in any reform and she call for her ideas under the shadow and the protection of the english army -when they were in egypt-and i let everyone think if this muslim woman wearin niqap would save europeans communities from the phenomena of-- boys without fathers --and this pheno wouldnt stop without saving the woman from being a toy in the hand of the Voyeurs.... so think clearly without the dizzy media in europe which decieve you in iraq warand may allah -- muslim one god-- guide you all to the truth.....

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Frenchkiss

21 Mar 2010, 8:25AM

As it has always been said, "When in Rome " Otherwise, stay home.

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nuszka

21 Mar 2010, 9:00AM

the levels of literacy shown in the comment by zxcvbnmcom87 pretty much sum up the levels of political and theological understanding of those who argue in favour of the niqab.

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HelenfromCT

21 Mar 2010, 9:24AM

The repression of women in any form is deplorable. But resistance to this measure has nothing to do with political correctness: banning the burka in the name of liberal tolerance is absurd. I find it deeply depressing that the highly educated people of France, England and Switzerland are unable to see this.

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goldennuggets

21 Mar 2010, 9:25AM

What do you do in a situation where you have two irreconcilable views? Try to find a compromise. In the above case, that would mean banning the burka or niqab for Muslim

women who have a job which involves any kind of interaction with other members of the public, but permitting them to wear these items in public if they are just going about their daily business. The face is such a vital part of human communication that covering it can severely harm, or even ruin, an exchange. Personally, I think headscarves preserve modesty in a completely acceptable way, but we have try to find ways of living together even if we strongly disagree with each other.

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HelenfromCT

21 Mar 2010, 9:27AM

p.s. just imagine what John Stuart Mill, one of the great pioneers of western feminism, would have said about a measure that sought to vindicate women's equality by depriving them of a basic personal freedom.

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StoryBud

21 Mar 2010, 10:34AM

I just think that the Burkha is incredibly rude.

Luckily, the Burkha is very rarely seen here in Ireland among our, small and recently arrived by UK standards, Muslim population.

I cannot imagine a more potent symbol of the rejection of a culture you have voluntarily moved to, or any device or measure more certain to provoke an unsympathetic response.

I would not be in favour of banning the Burkha, but I think those who do wear it should understand that it will be regarded as a hostile, insulting and rejectionist act.

Also, I wonder how people would feel if men, as well as women, chose to cover everything except their eyes.

I don't think it would be considered acceptable.

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Poit

21 Mar 2010, 10:36AM

HelenfromCT, hasn't the acceptance of feminist principles hinged on putting legislation in place *before* countless women were prepared to embrace them though?

Understanding and acceptance often comes when people have experience of something outside what for them has been the norm.

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Jackanapes

21 Mar 2010, 10:41AM

I loathe the burqua and the niqab with the same passion I reserve for anything - anything - that is so very clearly derived from sexist, patriarchal oppression, and male objectification and commodification of women. And this creepy, self-flagellating idea put forward by women like Ms Street - that it is merely a woman's sense of "modesty" behind the desire to obscure oneself - is especially reprehensible. It is reprehensible because it fails to recognise that such women experience this perverse and irrational sense only because they are victims of a culture and a religion that vigorously and relentlessly inculcates that feeling within them. And to try the "Islamic men have to be modest too" line is so ridiculous it pains me to even give it brain time. Why don't these Islamic men also have to veil their faces and shroud their bodies in public? Why don't these Islamic men allow Islamic women equal rights to their own? Is Street going to claim that these Islamic men do not enjoy far, far greater powers within their culture than the women do? Come on, let's not be madly disingenuous out of some sort of misguided urge to be endlessly "tolerant" of other cultures. Let us stand up for liberal values and equal rights wherever and whenever we see them abused.

Street's whole line of defence seems to be based on a similar sort of blinkered double standard that women who opposed their own voting rights displayed. She is not standing up for women's freedom, she is delivering an apologetic for the systematic oppression of women and justifying it with the bogus defence of cultural tolerance. It is disappointing and frustrating that she fails to understand this.

I am also extremely uncomfortable about total bans. As a general principle. I think a minimum step - and possibly just a first step - must be to ban the infernal apparel from all state institutions and state-funded organisations , including schools, NHS hospitals etc. This would be a way of saying that our liberal state regards these vile, retrograde items of clothing as being incompatible with its core values. I would wholeheartedly support such a step, but to stop people wearing what they want in the street... I'm still in two minds about that. I can see both sides.

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batmanlover

21 Mar 2010, 11:15AM

I agree with Jackanapes but I think Streeep´s attitude is because she is American. They see wearing a veil/niqab/burqua as a civil right. In the US religious freedom is the right to believe and in Europe it means the right not to believe.

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concrut

21 Mar 2010, 11:45AM

Dearest HelenfromCT, i hope you are not being patronizing or sarcastic when you claim that Europeans are educated. We have specimens here who are so inbred and backward that they walk around on their knuckles and have toenails growing out of their foreheads.

Come to Europe and share some of your 'New South African' acceptance of other peoples cultures with us. Perhaps you have a genuine feeling that we are above you but in reality that is far from the truth.

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concrut

21 Mar 2010, 11:54AM

Sweetest Nuszka, i have to ask you how many languages you can write and read in? Please don't criticize people who are contributing their views on a democratic platform. You talk about 'theological understanding' so i have to take it that you can recite the Koran by heart.

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CJWN

21 Mar 2010, 11:56AM

We all have to accept some limits to our personal freedom. Being identifiable in a public place is a reasonable requirement.

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Cranachan

21 Mar 2010, 12:50PM

The niqaab has always been a matter of choice within Islam. Even certain islamic scholars who have championed it in the past, have done so within a certain context. For example: if wearing a niqaab would mean that your daily livelihood would be at stake (not being able to preform your job properly?), or your safety (crossing busy roads every day?) than other things become more important. When appropriate/acceptable, and a woman chosese to wear one, it should be possible. But when not, it should fall by the wayside.

In essence I believe in 'freedom for anyone', but like Goldennuggets has said a certain status quo has to be reached when living together in a divers society. This by the way does go both ways: what we have now is extreme modesty on one side (niqaab) en extreme vulgarity at the other end (anyone who tried to sit in a cantine without looking into numerous butteracks will know what I mean).

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radius

21 Mar 2010, 1:21PM

Excellent piece by Mona Eltahawy.

Unfortunately there are too many liberal-instinct europeans who seem to be quite incapable of opposing two different things at the same time.

And the great colonial mindset of homogenising the 'other' and respecting the most right-wing, powerful and orthodox men among them as representative, is part of British culture. Hence the ideology of a few Salafis becomes the 'culture' of a whole range of johnny-foreigner types.

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[Annifa](#)

21 Mar 2010, 1:38PM

My main concern about banning the burqa or niqab is that the women who wear them will be forced to stay in their homes, becoming more isolated than they are now.

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[Janiet](#)

21 Mar 2010, 2:01PM

I think there's a question of strategy, as well as principle, here. It is true that there are many muslim societies in which women do not enjoy equal rights to men (as there are non-muslim societies, by the way), and there are many women within those societies that are campaigning for change, including by promoting more progressive interpretations of religious texts. In this context, even if you think that the covering of women is fundamentally discriminatory (which i do), is it helpful for a right wing government in a European country to push for a ban such as this? A ban which is likely to make a minority group feel under attack and to close in on themselves, and which is likely to make them more traditional and closed to change, not less. For muslim women trying to bring about change within their own communities, being seen as on the same side as Sarkozy is hardly going to make their task easier. If Sarkozy was really concerned with promoting the rights of muslim women in France, he would ask them what would make a real difference to them, and i doubt it would be banning the veil. The truth is that he's not interested in promoting muslim women's rights, he's interested in winning cheap political points, at a time when attacks on Islam unfortunately win votes in many countries in Europe.

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[paddyhaha](#)

21 Mar 2010, 2:04PM

Assimilate.

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ajane

21 Mar 2010, 3:44PM

Ban it - forever! How can anyone in the twenty first century ever condone it? It harks back to a medieval concept of women which has no place in this society today. I am sick and tired of hearing about a woman's right to 'choose'. But what choice is there truly? Many may say their religion 'demands' it - therefore, it is NOT a choice. And if they cannot see that this particular element of their religion, or this particular sect, is denigrating to women then they are ignorant fools.

Good for France. Perhaps my niece, who is considering the hijab, may never be tempted by the niqab.

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mel10

21 Mar 2010, 4:30PM

I am amazed that these women, and the men who encourage (or force some of them), are arrogant enough to assume that we in France, Britain and similar countries do not have a culture of our own, and one that we value as much as they value theirs. Covering one's face is a social taboo, and the breaking of a rule that is so strong, and intrinsic in this country that it is unwritten - we do not live that way here. And if people want to live here, then they should observe that fundamental aspect of our culture. Not doing so is insulting, arrogant and rude. Especially when the women doing this go out without men: It seems as if they can pick and choose which of their conventions they break. I suspect some of these women do it s a way of protesting their (righteous) anger at discrimination against muslims - well please find another way, your current path will only aggravate the majority of the British population.

If I were considering a move to another country, I would respect their social and legal values and try to fit in - not flout them without concern. When in Rome... And if you don't think you can do as the Romans, then don't go to Rome.

As another poster has said, allowing women to do this would mean having to allow men to as well, and that would create chaos - can you imagine 'have you seen this person, suspected for...?' and a photo of a niqab or burka, or a balaclava? Facial recognition is fundamental to all human culture, even the ones in which the niqab and burka are the norm: the covered women are always with men who are easily recognisable because they show their faces. These people wouldn't presume to present such a security risk in their home cultures, so why do it here? There has already been a serious bombing incident in which people died, set up by a burka'd man who escaped unquestioned. In the home cutlures of the burka this could not have happened, he would have been with another, unmasked person.

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nuszka

21 Mar 2010, 6:18PM

concrut

I can write in three languages other than my own. I don't need to be able to recite the

koran to understand it, in fact, reciting the koran is possible without understanding it and there lies most of the problem with it and some of the adherents to that particular book.

My arguments about the other poster are justified because the logic is as bad as the use of english, I'm using this weakness to expose the other weakensses in the poster.

Happy now you patronising prat.

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MoElRahhal

22 Mar 2010, 4:01AM

C Contributor

I can only commend Ms. Street on her sensible and sensitive analysis - and the comprehension that we needn't agree on people's life choices to respect them, and that we can, with little effort, accommodate everyone. For if we are to live in a society that pretends to care about human rights and respect freedom of religion, than we have a collective responsibility to stand to our claims.

In effect, Ms. Tahawi not only wishes to take away women's choice to wear what they want - but their choice of thought too?

for every 1 oppressed woman that she, and the french right-wing state wishes to 'save', there'll be 15 women who will be forced to change the way they had freely chosen. That - that is true oppression.

The other scenario which all the anti-niqab folks refuse to acknowledge is that women who feel forced to break religious laws by force of right-wing legislation will simply stay home - further ostracizing them from society.

All because someone in the Elysee - or in New York City - believed they were saving them.

Incidentally, I am no fan of the niqab myself. I do not believe it to be a religious edict of any sort.

And indeed, in some contexts - Afghanistan is an extreme and highly publicized case - the burqa is a means of oppression. But in Europe - and in my social circle in Cairo, where I currently reside - niqabis I have known are intelligent women who make their own choices.

As a French-born Muslim, I will take the street to demonstrate for people's choice of belief, and for their right to dress the way they wish - as I have before.

One a final note - to all people who tell Muslims they should "go home" or "assimilate" - "this" is home! Muslims who have chosen to make their home in a place where they are a minority or, as is the case for most of them, have known no other home, have just as many rights as the majority. I hope you can acknowledge - or at least respect that.

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modramom

22 Mar 2010, 7:37AM

From what I know about Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars, most Muslims aspire to do this at least once in their lives, in order to do that a Muslim woman must expose her face, that means no burkas or face veils, so could someone

please answer my question, if they cannot wear the burka on the Haj, then what has this garment to do with the religion?

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JuliaBtS

22 Mar 2010, 9:02AM

I think equal laws should apply to men and women. The niqab and burka should not be allowed anywhere where men may not cover their faces - just as I may not wear a balaclava in a bank or at the airport. Not so much a ban on them, more a case of not allowing them for women, for whatever reason, where men may not do the same.

Personally I detest both and question the validity of a claim of free choice where that choice is to deny one's identity. How many men feel that it is immodest to show their faces? How many men feel it is their duty to hide themselves so that women may not be tempted at the sight of them? How many men make themselves responsible for the way someone else behaves towards them - when they have done nothing except show their face?

I agree with Sarkozy and others that both coverings are nothing but oppression, however there are many other ways oppression can be achieved as well (like the woman not going out at all) and to ban them is to hand fanatics a 'martyr card'.

The best example is simply to insist that men and women here in Europe, are covered by the same laws and codes of conduct. Then over time it might become true here as well.....

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naepalz

22 Mar 2010, 1:38PM

I realise that banning the wearing of the burka/niqab is being proposed in France and not the UK. However some of the posters who support this stance and would presumably like to see it copied in the UK, do not appear to have considered that this country is currently at war with the Taliban in Afganistan.

That would be the same Taliban who attempted for many years to oppress women by telling them what they could and could not wear and could and could not do. Why does this irony appear to be lost on so many people?

I presume because in the French proposal, the powers that be feel that they are somehow saving these women from themselves, then that makes the oppression fine, because it is so well motivated?

I personally think that there is no place in tolerant Western society for the state to tell women what they can or can't wear, thus denying them their basic human right to choose this for themselves.

I do not understand why women would choose to cover their faces but then I don't have to, no one is making me do it and unless anyone IS making niqab/burka wearers do so then leave them alone to wear what they please.

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CaptainBillyBones

22 Mar 2010, 4:27PM

I dislike the niqab and the burka for the same reasons that Ms Eltahawy does, but what any individual chooses to wear is no business of the law.

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LondonStranger

22 Mar 2010, 8:52PM

Feminism, Freedom, Pluralism, Secularism, Darwinism..ism...ism...ism. The dislike for the niqab is one amongst many issues that people have towards Islam. This is to do with the western hemispheres natural hate for religion. And we can see throughout history, that a warped version of Christianity arrived in to Europe and the true tenets have been lossed. People have never really had the opportunity to experience the true wonders of Islam and most of you will deny it regardless, it?s a dame shame really.

For countries (west) that are seen as intellectual and forwarding thinking. It is very strange that people do not get the idea of god, things just do not create themselves? Its that simple.

Forgive Mona and by no means is this an attack on you but your views do not represent Islam. The only reason that the press let you write is because your views fit the bill. One basic fundamental for a woman is wear hijab and guard her modesty.

@ nuszka literacy is not a gauge for someone intelligence...so your point is pointless.

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Euro442

23 Mar 2010, 10:21AM

@ StoryBud

I cannot imagine a more potent symbol of the rejection of a culture you have voluntarily moved to, or any device or measure more certain to provoke an unsympathetic response.

You are exactly right ~ when visiting one Islamic website some years ago ~ a little note appeared which told Muslim women that although it was not necessary to wear the strict Islamic clothing ~ if they did they can collectively show their rejection of western society.

Muslim women in the UK have now almost completely abandoned their traditional dress. Now these women all look like they could be from Arabia or other Middle Eastern country ~ where black is standard.

And to think this is what we are fussing over ~ they are wearing the burqa to say that they want an Islamic society or state. And this is what bothers those in Egypt so much ~ they know the women who wear the burqa want an Islamic state. They are not in denial like we are ~ with all our sensitivity talk !!

Also, I wonder how people would feel if men, as well as women, chose to cover everything except their eyes.

In the Arabian and Saudi deserts Islamic men do cover their face up to the eyes ~ the fine sand is such that it can grind the teeth down ~ but once these nomads come into

the city ~ it is only the women who are required to continue wearing the desert face covering.

They can wear whatever they want ~ but if there is any attempt to transform the place into an Arabian outpost ~ they should know that wearing a burqa down the street will be a lot easier.

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[mw2010](#)

23 Mar 2010, 6:16PM

Everyone seems to have an opinion on why they don't like the burka. Most say it oppresses women. If that is the case, lets really ban what oppresses women and the causes of crime against women! billboards and adverts of women in their underwear, lads mags, internet pornography, alcohol as it makes people take leave of their senses, mini-skirts and bikinis, close down most of Soho,....the list is endless....Why single out only the burka?

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[PowderHound2](#)

23 Mar 2010, 6:34PM

Mona Eltahawy 1

Stephanie Street 0

No brainer, really.

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[blackskynomad](#)

24 Mar 2010, 3:21AM

Separate Gender and Culture - Focus on Providing Unconditional Non-discriminatory Access to Education and Jobs, the requisites to voluntary decision-making

While I agree with Mona and all those who object to gender-based oppression, including Stephanie, I cringe to see this issue sacrificed to the whim of media-driven public opinion polls. There is a right answer, but we aren't asking the right question. We should be asking whether the women who wear burkas (or conversely are forced into sex trades, porn, or other forms of demeaning objectification) are doing so voluntarily, free from any institutional duress. Are they freely and knowingly choosing to wear a burka. If yes, then the government needs to respect her decision and religious freedom. However, we should not fail to see duress in families or social groups, or in cultural proscriptions, violation of which result in excommunication.

Where this duress exists, we should be asking why government is failing to grant equal rights to education and jobs to such marginalized members. This lack of freedom and access is overshadowed by hyperbole for cultural, rather than economic freedom. A woman in burka is isolated both by her cultural group and by her larger society. She is denied full access to freedom by both groups.

I think there should be more access to education and jobs, welcoming to minorities (even those in burkas). You have to allow the burka-wearer access, so that that burka-wearer can be confident of her in place in society in general to give her the freedom to decide whether she will continue to wear it. You cannot make that decision for her, and you should not value her so little that you deny her the tools for freedom to make that decision. Give her the freedom to find her balance between religious observance, cultural identity, and personal freedom.

I'm sure we'll find that given the freedom to make voluntary personal decisions, she will organically revitalize both Islam and her country, be it a Western or Islamic nation. But we cannot leave her with only conditional freedoms that really only serve other tangentially related agendas. That is enforcing a dual marginalization and isolation for which we all are to blame. Therefore, shunning burka-wearing women from school, jobs, and civic platforms is not the solution.

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toro7ma

24 Mar 2010, 8:32AM

as a muslim burqa and niqab is about religion and belief. and when sarkozy say it is not a religious sign he must be talking to non muslim.every muslim know it. but the people say it about civil right and gender,again i say it is ababout religion.what do you feel when a non-muslim with a straight face banning you from doing your religion practice by ssaying it is not in the religion.what he knows when he is not even muslim. and i think mona is not muslim because she refer the issue as culture no religious matter..

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Welloilbeefhooked

25 Mar 2010, 1:47AM

I think the question of whether a woman wears a burka out of choice is irrelevant. Western women who wear this medieval garment don't do it out of religious piety or even out of immodesty as they claim. They do it because they want you to know unreservedly that they are Muslim and don't give a damn about integration into a non Muslim society. To think otherwise is to miss the point entirely.

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elto6

25 Mar 2010, 11:54AM

I am in total agreement with mel10. When in Rome...

When I'm walking down the street and see a couple with the man uncovered and the woman covered head to toe it makes angry, deposite practical concerns of how uncomfortable she must be whilst he is enjoying the wind on his face, it makes me angry at such a deliberate rejection of the society they have chosen to live in.

The face is one of the primary tools of communication, where you can see someone laugh, a look of distress, hatred, happiness, lips moving a nose scrunching at a bad smell. How you have a conversation i have no idea. You might as well be talking to a black wall with a pair of eye holes cut out. The niqaab is blotting out the essence of the woman underneath it. I don't know enough to comment on religious reasons but I'm arguing against the niqaab from a social point of view. I see it as an invasion of an unwanted aspect of their culture and an absolute arrogance at assuming a place here without wanting anything to do with the history or ideology of the country they are now occupying.

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JayGermany

26 Mar 2010, 1:06AM

@toro7ma

Burka's have nothing to do with religion, when worn in a Western non Muslim country. Its a political statement. Its a way of saying "F&ck You".

A true Muslim would not want to live in the decadent west. In free western democracy's you can be Gay, watch pornography, drink alcohol etc.

A TRUE muslim would want to live in a Muslim society, such as Saudi Arabia, or the Yemen,

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savitaalexander

27 Mar 2010, 6:22AM

While travelling through Egypt during mid-summer with a British male friend., it struck me was how quickly he was to make excuses for how the women covered head to toe in black had 'acclimated' and did not feel the heat while they worked in the fields or sat huddled in the shade as the men swam and relaxed shirtless in one of the crowded public pools. I had my hair covered out of respect to the local culture, but I found it appalling how the men were so quick to relax nearly naked in the cool water while the women sat baking in the heat. Women are 'used to' the heat, but men need to swim in a pool or walk around in shorts?

billboards and adverts of women in their underwear, lads mags, internet pornography, alcohol as it makes people take leave of their senses, mini-skirts and bikinis, close down most of Soho,....the list is endless....Why single out only the burka?

I see your point, but we don't face incredible backlash or ostracism from our family, community and threats of being not suitable for a proper husband if we don't get drunk every weekend and prance around in a bikini and heels. My family would never express religious levels of shame if I was not wearing stilettos.

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hachachacha

27 Mar 2010, 11:10PM

The covering is never worn as a true free choice, is it? The women have had years, possibly a lifetime of indoctrination that its the right thing to do and there will be consequences if they don't wear it.

It it's a truly free choice, how come around 50% of wearers aren't non-muslims?

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[goldenkippers](#)

29 Mar 2010, 10:23AM

I agree with Mona Eltahawy. I believe burka is a symbol of the oppression of women and may fuel Islamophobia. For women who say it's their choice to wear it, what message are you sending to young Muslim girls - that all women should be ashamed of their bodies? By all means dress modestly, but this is going too far.

Why does religion get away with everything? You would expect most people, especially feminists, to be staunchly opposed to men expecting their wives to walk around covered from head to toe in black, but if it's a religious thing, then many people don't dare object.

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[AndrewFyffe](#)

29 Mar 2010, 4:37PM

MoIERahhal

for every 1 oppressed woman that she, and the french right-wing state wishes to 'save', there'll be 15 women who will be forced to change the way they had freely chosen. That - that is true oppression.

Is this a bonafied statistic or an estimate on your behalf?

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[PakistaniAtheist](#)

2 Apr 2010, 5:48AM

The day France manages to ban the burka will be a sad, sad day for Europe. It will be the day when the French republic will effectively equate itself with repressive regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Islamists are going to love it too. So yeh, good luck with this going back in time scenario!

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[razausman](#)

5 Apr 2010, 7:23AM

It is people like Stephanie Street and her misplaced logic that give succour to the Muslim radical.

She needs to understand that not every choice is right for the individual and the community while many simply don't know better, instead relying on "divine" judgement and its interpretation by others to lead them.

Stephanie might as well be defending the right of men to put a collar around "their" women and lead them around.

The Burkha has no place in the 21st century.

We should now know better.

It is the right of every person to live as an individual. Not to live as an object brainwashed into thinking their "honor" is tied to a piece of garment.

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nadah

7 Apr 2010, 6:02AM

Nowhere in the holy Qoran is a stipulation that a woman should cover her face. It is an invention of chauvinistic men who wanted to keep women in their place. In the past, niqab was worn only by women in the Arab Peninsula, with the rest of the arab women wearing less restrictive covers. If arab women in these countries have suddenly discovered that their islamic identities are closely linked to walking around like ninja's, it is their problem. They can do what they want in their countries of origin. But they cannot shove their beliefs down the throats of Europeans who have different cultures and live by different norms. The issue is not an issue of freedom of expression or belief, but more of "when in Rome do as the Romans do" (or get the hell out of the way!)

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nadah

7 Apr 2010, 6:13AM

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