

## The Wear of “Hijab” Still Sparking Enormous Contradictions in France

By Mirchaye Sahlu

Washington, D.C – On a beautiful and sunny Saturday, Razim Benchick slides out of bed and starts to get ready for the long weekend battle ahead of her. A weekend is usually a time of relaxation for many, but not for Benchick and her fellow Muslim friends. They are determined to have their religion recognized and gain their freedom to express themselves once and for all. The restriction of wearing “Hijab” in France has affected and offended many Muslims, and for that they will fight to have their rights acknowledged.

Once out of bed, Benchick heads to her tiny prayer room, picks up her *Holy Quran* and starts praying. She comes from a very conservative and religious family, where religion plays a crucial role. “In my family, religion always comes first no matter what, my parents have raised me to be a good Muslim girl,” she says.

After prayer, Benchick takes her morning shower and gets dressed. She later heads to wake up her three friends, Nouara, Zara and Rashida, whom will embark on the journey of protest with her.

Once all three are dressed and ready, they gather around a corner in the living room and say their morning prayer, the “Fajr.” Benchick joins them for a second round of prayer. They each put on their colorful *Hijabs* and head for the door, with hopes to make changes with the protest they’re about to have.

Benchick took the initiative to start organizing these weekly protests after she experienced discrimination at her University her freshman year, when she got refused an internship she was more than qualified for. She had received her French Baccalaureate from *Lycee Alexandre Dumas* in Algeria and went to the *University Of Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne*, a well reputed public research university in Paris, to pursue her higher education in International Relations and Political Science. She aspires to become a diplomat like her father one day. “I am and always have been a daddy’s girl and have always aspired to be like him, so I decided to follow in his footsteps,” she explains.

Once in a foreign country to accomplish her dreams, she understood that the *hijab* wasn’t as welcome in France as it was in Algeria, but she didn’t feel very threatened by it until she got refused that internship opportunity. Once enrolled, she found out that the university offers six talented students the opportunity to do an internship each semester, Benchick applied and got accepted. She was told she was going to do the internship until one morning they told her there wasn’t space for her anymore. Four guys and one French girl were chosen for the internship. Benchick was confused, she didn’t know whether it was a feminism issue or if it was because of her religion. She described that uneventful event of her life as “Unfair and discouraging.” She adds “It’s weird, I got accepted, I even got a letter congratulating me for my acceptance, and then

one day they just decided to snatch it from me.” Since then, she was determined to make her voice and those of her fellow Muslim sisters heard.

Islam being the second widely practiced religion in France behind Catholicism has made the banning of *hijab* wearing a very controversial topic in the country with a large number of Muslim citizens. An estimated six million Muslims live in France, which represents about 14% of the entire population, making France home to many Muslims more than any other Western European country.

Any signs of religious affiliation, including wearing crosses or Islamic *hijab* are already banned from schools and other private sectors since the 2004 law. Moreover, full face veils such as the *burka* and *niqab* are completely banned in public places in France since the 2008 law. Protests regarding this issue began about nine years back, however, demands for change and placement for a new law intensified just last month, when a woman was fired from a nursery for wearing *hijab*. On March 28, 2013, President Francois Hollande installed a law restricting the wear of *hijab* in any place run by the government. The question remains, is this issue a feminist or religious issue? Is this problem entirely about religion or is it also to rob the women of France of their right to express their true self?

Not all Muslims wear the *Hijab* and attach great attachment to it; however, for some it means the world. Benchick is one of those people who values the *Hijab* and its meaning, she says “Growing up in a very religious Muslim family has made me realize what an important place anything related to religion should have,” she adds, “For as long as I can remember, I’ve always worn the *hijab* and I will always wear it, possibly till I die.”

Benchick and her friends have been planning this protest among other protests for several weeks now. They have connected with other Muslim women from other cities like Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, Nice and Nantes.

It’s 10:30 am now and many are gathering near the *Musee de Louvre*, warming up to get started. On this beautiful Saturday morning, Muslim women of all shapes and sizes and of different age are standing with their banners in their hand waiting to march forward. Benchick, a leader from the heart, screams in French; “Let’s go! Let’s make our thoughts heard and make changes for us, for every Muslim woman here.”

Not all of the protests came out successful and peaceful. Some of the previous protests ended up rather violently. “We’ve been beaten before. When we had a protest back in 2011, the police came and started attacking us,” Benchick explains. She adds; “They said we were disturbing the peace, luckily I only received a slap that day when my fellow sisters got beaten head to toe.”

With all this issue going on, French Muslim women are asking the government to focus on other matters of the country, such as the economy and job growth instead of wasting so much energy trying to ban them from wearing *hijab*, a piece of fabric that reflects their identity without

harming or affecting others. They believe that the government can be more useful if it focuses on the economic and job opportunity issues of the country, rather than coming up with laws to ban and fight Muslim women. Khadila Hajar, one of the protestors, said; “ I think they’re really wasting their time sitting down and coming up with these different laws to stop us from wearing a piece of clothes. It really doesn’t make sense.” She emphasizes; “On the other hand, you see many homeless and jobless people striving to make a living. Why can’t they just come together and come up with laws that will actually improve the economic situation.”

The protest went on all day, the protestors walked for hours covering many streets. Luckily, that day there wasn’t any violence implemented from the police, making it easier for these Muslim women to have their messages across. At the end of the protest, around 5 pm, Benchick and her friends return to their apartment feeling satisfied with what they have accomplished. Benchick says, “Though it is completely tiresome and time consuming, I think it’s a good way to connect with our Muslim sisters, work together and accomplish our objective, which is to see Muslim women walk free in the streets of France wearing whatever color of Hijab they may choose and not worry of getting in trouble.”

After the court decision, in March 2013, a survey showed that 85% of French people would be in favor of the law banning the *hijab* from private businesses dealing with the public, such as shops, clinics, schools, etc. Debates regarding the *hijab* are far from being over any time soon and France will continue to face a number of protests from the Muslim women, until they have their voices heard loud and clear.