

France in the Midst of Contradictions

By Mirchaye Sahlu

The wearing of “Hijab” has been sparking enormous confutation in France for the past decade .

Washington D.C—
The banning of wearing “hijab” has become a very controversial issue in France, a country where Islam is the second largest practiced religion next to Catholicism. An estimated six million Muslims live in France. This figure represents about 11% of the entire population, making France home of the largest



Muslim Women during a protest in Paris

Muslim population in Western Europe.

Any signs of religious affiliation, including wearing crosses or Islamic *hi-*

jab are already banned from schools and other private institutions since the 2004 law. Moreover, full-face veils,

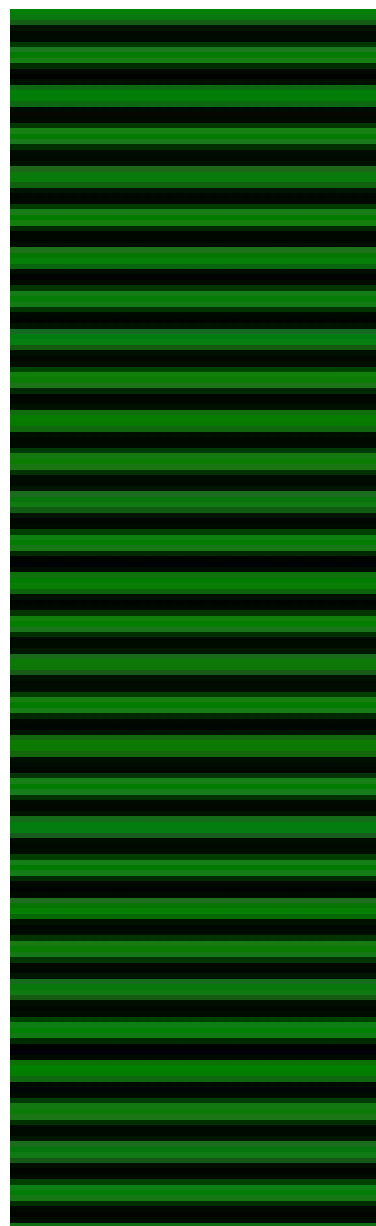
such as the *burka* and *niqab* are completely banned from any public places in France since 2008. Protests regarding this issue began some

nine years ago, however demands for change and introduction of a new law intensified just last month when an employee was fired

from a nursery for wearing *hijab*.

On March 28, 2013, President Francois Hollande installed a law restricting the

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wearing of *hijab* in any government institution. The question remains: “Is this issue directly related to gender or religion issue?” It is a fact that the difference in wages between male and female workers is still 28% and that a large number of women are unhappy about it. Is this problem directly related to reli-

gion or does it aim to deprive women in France their right to express their true self?

Imene Benchick, a native of Algeria faced this problem when she first went to Paris to study. She received her Baccalaureat from Lycee Alexandre Dumas in Algeria and joined the University of

Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne to pursue her higher education. She observed right away that the *hijab* wasn't as welcome in France as it is in Algeria, though she didn't feel threatened by it until she was de-

Despite being accepted, she was told one morning that there was no space for her anymore. Four male students, along with one French female student were chosen for the internship. This, of course,

left *Imene* disappointed and confused, not exactly knowing whether the reason for her denial was a gender or a religious (*hijab*) issue. She described that unpleasant inci-



Street Art of women wearing *hijab*

nied an internship opportunity for wearing it. The university offered the internship opportunity to six talented students, *Imene* being among the applicants who were accepted.

dent of her life as “unfair and discouraging”.

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 time and energy trying to ban them from wearing *hijab*, which according to their description is “a piece

of fabric that reflects their identity without harming or affecting anyone”.



Muslim women protesting for their rights in Toulouse

After the March 2013 court decision, a survey showed that 85% of France's population would vote in favor of a law banning the *hijab* from private businesses, such as department stores, shops,

grocery stores, hospitals, schools, etc. Debates regarding the *hijab* are far from being over and France will, undoubtedly, continue to face a number of protests from Muslim women, who don't seem to refrain until they have their voices heard.

