

# Are French Feminisms Prepared for Muslim Feminists?

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## Abstract.

Feminism is a growing movement worldwide. However, it is essential to question its apparent universality of demands and its real scope of power. This study seeks to understand how French policies, mainly from the progressive sector, in favor of women's rights, impact women who face more than just sexism but also racism and religious intolerance. Women oppressed on more than one front of oppression require policies designed from an intersectional perspective, and this study precisely analyzed how advances in policies for French women serve only as progressive political propaganda. What was observed, in fact, was the false promise of improvements in the quality of life of women, but which systematically renders marginalized women invisible. Through the analysis of how France behaves towards women and how it behaves towards followers of the Islamic faith, it was possible to arrive at a critical analysis of the existence of human beings intersected by both characteristics. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that it is not possible to separate human beings into single blocks, as if they were solely women or solely Muslims, for example. Despite being seemingly obvious, it is necessary to reaffirm this in times when multiple differences in a single individual are not considered by the government and often not even by the liberation movements themselves. It is essential to understand that when thinking about feminist policies, one cannot assume that all women face the same battles and fight for the same rights. This is exactly the mission of intersectional feminist thought and also the mission of this research.

**Keywords.** Muslim Feminism, France, Women, Intersectionality, Public Policy.

## 1. Introduction

With the growth of feminist agendas around the world, naturally, there is also a need to expand studies and questions. In the context of this study, the absence of attention from white Western mainstream feminism regarding the demands of intersectional feminisms, such as black feminism, trans feminism, and Islamic feminism, for example, becomes evident. By trying to fit diverse women into a single box of Western solutions, Western feminism ends up contributing to the silencing of important issues related to race, religion, and ethnicity of other women. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian-American anthropologist, the starting point for claiming women's rights lies in Islam, and therefore, contrary to what Western feminists preach, liberation is not in breaking away from religion but within the religion itself. [1] This point will be explored throughout the study, through the analysis of French policies that present themselves as feminist and universal, meaning directed at all women.

In addition to the lack of support from Western feminists regarding their demands, Islamic feminist women encounter another barrier to their liberation, which is the religious intolerance of institutions and governments. After the terrorist attack on September 11 in the United States, the existing prejudice against Muslims expanded and generated a wave of repression against the demonstration of Islamic faith, as if fundamentalist groups were representative of an entire religion, with thousands of faithful spread across the world. From this, mainly, Muslim women began to face daily attacks on their faith and their freedom of expression. As will be addressed throughout the text, the public power that should ensure their rights often did not fulfill its liberating role, but instead suppressed their possibilities of liberation. It is needed, then, to analyze public policies properly to be able to create critical analysis about the lives of muslim women in France, and also to help thinking about better solutions to liberate them from these oppressions.

## 2. Research Methods

The present study analyzed public policies on gender equality and policies of segregation against Muslims within France. By examining efforts that seemingly contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of French women, the study also seeks to question whether the same rights promised to French women are extended to and provided for women who are affected by other forms of oppression, beyond sexism and misogyny. The material used for the research mainly included the French Constitution of 1958, legislative measures adopted concerning women and religious freedom, the Women, Peace, and Security Index research from Georgetown University, and pronouncements from French political representatives. The data presented represent an in-depth investigation into initiatives that tend to perpetuate or break social stigmas. On one hand, the growing and increasingly powerful feminism in France occupies a place of apparent prestige among progressive sectors, while the discussion about overcoming stereotypes regarding Muslims remains stagnant, with less progress or space on the political agenda. Therefore, it was with the presented data that a critical analysis was reached regarding the protection or vulnerability, inclusion or exclusion, of Muslim women in French society.

## 3. French Feminism Through History

When delving into the history of female protagonism worldwide, it is unthinkable not to turn to thinkers and icons such as Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Curie, Saint Jeanne d'Arc, and Olympe de Gouges, for example. The French contribution to the formation of feminist thought in the Western world remains a reference of extreme relevance for social liberation movements and can be perceived in the significant influence of French women who carried with them ideas of freedom, equality, and respect between genders throughout their lives.

In this sense, in 19th-century France, amidst the infamous French Revolution, the drafting of the inspiring document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights occurred, a pillar of paramount importance for international relations, which was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. In parallel to this, Olympe de Gouges emerged as an activist and author of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, a document that represented a feminist attempt to institutionalize rights for bodies systematically segregated by the Ancient Régime and also by the revolutionary movement; a proposal with the central radical idea of equality between genders.

In Article 7 of the Declaration drafted by Gouges, it is expressed: "no woman is an exception," considering the proposal to legally equalize themselves with men. Furthermore, in Article 6, she emphasizes:

"It must be the same for all: male and female citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, must be equally

admitted to all honors, positions, and public employment according to their capacity and without other distinctions besides those of their virtues and talents." (Cokely, 2018)

Nearly two centuries later, in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote the work "The Second Sex," indispensable for the analysis of modern feminist thought and which presented important foundations for contemporary feminist currents. Beauvoir brought to light the apparently "simple" assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This thought upheaves the deconstruction of the core of oppression against trans women, for example, who struggle for the redefinition of being a woman beyond genital organs. Simultaneously, it also redefines the concept of being a woman in relation to its social construction, linking to the critique that being a woman is systematically defined - by men - as the other, the subjugated and inferior, the body without value and without rights.

## 4. Women Rights in France

Currently, France, along with other European countries, leads research on ensuring rights for women, security indices, freedom, and gender equality. One of these research initiatives is conducted by the Georgetown Institute at Georgetown University, called Women, Peace, and Security, or WPS Index. It ranks and scores, in its fourth edition of 2023/2024, 177 countries on women's status. Their results show that "countries where women are doing well are also more peaceful, democratic, prosperous, and better prepared to adapt to the impacts of climate change". Also,

"the WPS Index distills performance across 13 indicators into a single comparable measure across countries. It stands alone in considering diverse pillars of women's status - ranging from economic participation, to health, to risks of violence. For example, it brings together education and perceptions of safety, parliamentary representation and maternal mortality, and legal protection and proximity to armed conflict." (GIWPS, 2023)

As demonstrated by the ranking, France ranks among the 30 safest, inclusive, and fair countries for women, occupying the 24th position. This is reflected, for example, in the right to abortion, a controversial and extremely relevant issue for feminism, which has been legal in French territory since 1975. Furthermore, to further ensure this protective resource for women, the French parliament voted 780 to 72 in favor of a measure that enshrines the right to abortion as a constitutional right.

On International Women's Day, March 8, 2023, in addition to announcing the constitutionalizing of the right to abortion, President Emmanuel Macron also took advantage of the symbolism of the date to proclaim, through Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, the creation of specialized groups in domestic violence within French courts, in order to improve

the treatment of cases of violence against women.

Another announcement made by Borne concerns menstrual precarity and envisages that as of 2024, the French social security system will reimburse the purchase of menstrual protection to young people up to 25 years old. Such measures demonstrate the French government's concern to direct its efforts towards the evolution of public policies related to women.

However, as pointed out by the WPS study itself,

“Subnational index analysis offers a valuable tool for assessing and responding to disparities in women’s status within national borders. Indeed, results from Colombia and Ethiopia show that the challenges facing women vary by geography and are often concealed by national averages. Data disaggregated by both sex and geography are required for subnational analysis and for guiding effective policy and programming—but are also extremely rare. Better, high-quality data disaggregated along these lines—as well as along others, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—are essential to identifying gaps and ensuring that no woman is left behind.” (GIWPS, 2023)

Therefore, as predicted by the research, going beyond gender is essential to understanding the reality of all women, as there are women who are affected by more forms of oppression than solely gender-based oppression. This will be further explored in the following chapters.

## 5. Islamophobia Behind Public Policies

In analyzing the case of France, the Islamophobic practices place Muslim women as bodies in a constant state of insecurity. The safe space promised to French women does not reach women of other ethnicities, religions, races, or classes the same way. If, indeed, the feminism presupposed in public policies and in the discourse of feminist movements encompassed all diverse ways of being a woman, Islamophobia and racism would be, at least, just as urgent an issue as feminism, which unfortunately is not the case in reality.

An example of this is the increasingly popular measures to ban Islamic clothing in French territory. In September 2023, the government of Emmanuel Macron decided to ban the wearing of abayas in French schools, which naturally infringes on the religious freedom of young Muslim women who can and should express their faith as they wish. The argument used in many of these measures is that the wearing of Islamic clothing would be a threat to the secular nature of the country.

But this kind of measure is not new under French governments. In 1989, three young Muslim women were prohibited from entering Gabriel Havez College in Creil, a suburb of Paris, because they were wearing veils. At the time, Education Minister Lionel Jospin

decided that persuasion would be necessary to convince the girls to remove their veils in class. As reported by The New York Times, both allied and opposition politicians agreed that “wearing a veil creates a religious distinction among pupils,” which is actually essential for maintaining plurality within schools, fundamental for creating a sense of community and understanding that there are diverse and rich cultures around the world. Living with differences does not mean imposition, but rather an opportunity for learning, by seeing that others may not have the same idea of what exactly freedom means in practice as the majority.

Some French politicians also denounced the veil as a humiliating form of dress for women, which once again demonstrates the West's ignorance of Islamic feminist demands. While Muslim women denounce the lack of access to education and the job market, Western politicians and activists remain obsessed with the veil, without considering what Muslim voices themselves say about its use. Forcing the removal of a religious accessory from a woman with the justification that it oppresses her without listening to her own view of freedom only demonstrates the coloniality present in feminism, which does not see Muslim women as thinking individuals capable of analyzing their reality and charting their own path to liberation.

In another demonstration of intolerance, in 2009, then-President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed that veils and burqas were a sign of female degradation and were not welcome on French soil. A government representative then suggested a law to decide on the banning of full coverings in public. Sarkozy further reinforced the idea that Muslim women need to be saved from their submission expressed by the burqa and that the use of such clothing was not part of the French idea of freedom. By speaking on behalf of Muslim women about what he personally judges to be best for them, he does not participate in their liberation, but rather in a new front of oppression marked by Orientalism and religious intolerance.

## 6. Interseccional Feminism

Amidst the growing feminist movement worldwide, fundamental aspects guiding mainstream feminism become apparent. Similar to other identity-based agendas within capitalism, feminism emerges within a reality of diverse oppressions, questioning only a single oppressive relationship (man-woman). Thus, white, Western, heterosexual, cisgender women, primarily from Europe and the United States, continue to fight for rights that do not concern all women, despite claiming to be part of a universal feminism.

It is worth asking, then, for whom is this feminist France, for whom are the policies of women's security, independence, and empowerment. It is precisely to correct the errors of white European feminism that the need for an intersectional study of feminism arises. Intersectionality serves to dissect

identity studies, considering individuals who are intersected by more than one form of oppression and, at the same time, assuming that these individuals have specific demands that cannot be addressed by a simple analysis stemming from only one liberation movement.

An example of this is the classic case of the first wave of feminism in the United States in the 1960s. During this time, white women took to the streets protesting for voting rights, job opportunities, and education. Meanwhile, Black American women still suffered from intense racial, social, and class segregation stemming from colonial slavery, aspects that threatened their very existence and survival. Thus, from an individualistic perspective, white feminist women enjoy a position of privilege within the feminist movement, often without recognizing this privilege and contributing to the erasure of agendas and demands of Black, Indigenous, Muslim, trans, lesbian, and disabled women.

In the case of Muslim women, who are the subject of this study, they fight on two fronts: against sexism, like all women; and against Islamophobia, often linked to their ethnicity. According to Indian professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who is also a feminist activist, in her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, "Western feminism represents an essentialist feminism that tries to pass itself off as universal within a colonial instance." (Mohanty, 1984). Therefore, this Western colonial feminism not only excludes the true demands of marginalized groups but also, in an Orientalist practice, often points to the Islamic religion itself as a source of female oppression. One of the most famous examples is the demonization of the hijab, burqa, and other garments that Western women tend to perceive as mechanisms of repression, serving to restrict the individual freedoms of Muslim women. In doing so, Western feminists paradoxically ignore the freedom of choice and belief of Muslim women, who do not see the veil as oppression but as an expression of their faith.

## 7. Conclusion

Being a woman in a relatively progressive country in terms of feminism, but at the same time, being Muslim in a country that constantly represses religious freedoms - especially those linked to Islam - places the Muslim woman in a state of erasure, silencing, and oppression. This is exacerbated when the Muslim woman seeking refuge in feminism encounters a movement that does not listen to her demands, does not understand her experiences, and often becomes the very source of religious intolerance against her.

As demonstrated by this research, the mere fact of being Muslim forces the French woman with apparent free will to refrain from expressing her faith publicly. The use of abayas, hijabs, and burqas continues to be considered an "attack" against the

secularism of France, without considering important Islamic feminist thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod, and the RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), for example. These thinkers and groups analyze Islam and Feminism together, based on their experiences, beliefs, and studies, which, even if they do not follow the molds of Western critical thinking, should also be valid and subject to debate.

From the speeches and attitudes of leaders who endorse the idea that Western thought is the only exemplary and correct one, it is possible to identify the idea of Orientalism, as described by Edward Said, which pointed out that Orientalism is the idea of the East conceived by the West. In this sense, the West creates racist stereotypes, narratives of debasement, animalization, and demonization of everything that is opposed to it, everything that represents the "other". In colonial practices, this discourse served as justification for interventions and dominations of peoples who, according to colonizers, "needed to be saved". Today, the colonial discourse of belittling Muslim women hides behind an apparent attempt to save them from a religion linked to terrorism, oppression, and submission. In addition to forgetting that sexism and extremism are possibilities in any religion or society, the West also neglects Freud's maxim that argues that freedom is not a value that is given or taught to someone; each individual or people must seek their own way to be saved. The opposite of this is the imposition that the West so criticizes in the East and practices so much on its own soil.

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