

Muslim Women's Voices in France

Imane, 25, Paris:

[“Seeing naked women in adverts](#), dancing suggestively in music videos or being considered as sexual objects is another form of submission. The hijab is a way to liberate myself from all this. I want people to be interested in my ideas first rather than my physique. As a Muslim feminist, I fight for the right of all women. If a woman wants to go out topless and wearing a miniskirt, it's not my problem; she can do what she wants to. There are some women who want to wear the hijab here, and there are other countries where women fight not to wear it. Each country has a different history. I unfortunately know some girls who feel forced to wear the hijab, but it remains a minority—two or three people out of dozens of women who don't feel pressured. Islam is a part of France today. French Muslims have to stop being presented as some foreign thing. If we are less discriminated and marginalized, things will get better.”

Note: The hijab is a headscarf covering the hair that is worn by some Muslim women.

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Imane is saying?
 - What does she say about what the hijab (Muslim head scarf) means to her?
 - As a Muslim woman, how else does she identify?
 - What does she say about how French Muslims are being presented?
 - How does she say they are treated?
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Leyla, 27, Bordeaux:

[“The previous generation](#) didn't wear the hijab as much as our generation does. Our mothers and grandmothers just wanted to integrate into French society. The fact that the hijab has been under so much scrutiny—called wrong and oppressive for women—made us wonder what was the problem. So many of us started to look into the meaning of the hijab as a result of this ongoing controversy. We came back to our religion and culture, to our religious texts and started to wear it. We Muslim feminists find solace in reaffirming our religious identity. The French assimilationist model doesn't acknowledge the plurality of our identities.”

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Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Leyla is saying?
- What does she say about the previous generations in relation to the hijab?
- According to Leyla, what was the reason for younger Muslim women in France to “start looking into the meaning of the hijab?”
- What was the result?
- As a Muslim woman, how else does she identify?
- What does she say about the French assimilationist model? How do you think Leyla feels about that?

Hawa, 25, Seine-et-Marne:

[“I chose to wear the hijab when I was 20](#), it was a spiritual quest. The aim of the hijab* is to symbolize the relationship between God and I, and to go further in this relationship, I started to wear the hijab. Whether people accept it or not, I will continue to wear it. People tell us that the hijab is a tool of patriarchal oppression. This argument is so tiring. Women should be able to use their bodies in the way they want to, to dress the way they like, without being judged or stigmatized. I recently changed my mind about voting, I hesitated a lot as many [political] candidates don't represent us and make us feel like second-class citizens, but I will vote ... as I don't want the situation for the most vulnerable people in France to get worse.”

Note: The hijab is a headscarf covering the hair that is worn by some Muslim women.

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Hawa is saying?
- What does she say about what the hijab (Muslim head scarf) means to her?
- What does she say about the hijab being considered a tool of oppression?
- What is her take on women's bodies and what women wear and should be allowed to wear?
- What does she say about the political candidates in France?
- Who might Hawa be referring to when she mentions “the most vulnerable people in France?”

Hanane, 37, Strasbourg:

[“Last January I was at the Senate in Paris](#). I found myself in front of heinous feminist groups. I was booed when I said that women who wear the hijab are women. I stayed dignified, and held until [I got back to] Strasbourg to burst into tears. I felt very lonely, and hated to be a feminist that day. What gives me hope is witnessing the dynamism of young Muslim women who feel strong enough to build local solidarities with other minority groups, [like] gay groups. This would have been unthinkable ten to 15 years ago. The current rise of Islamophobia is very dangerous. Terrorism is disrupting our willingness to rethink society as something inclusive. I am not saying that there aren't groups that menace democracy, but conflating everyday Muslims who have an individual and apolitical religious practice with terrorists is sort of a Muslim hunt. Politicians have no desire to understand us. At what point will they be able to think France as non-white, as a diverse country? In France it's bad to speak about race, but it is a social reality. In this country Islam has become synonymous with race, or Arab identity.

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Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Hanane is saying?
- What was her experience in the Senate in France talking to feminist groups? How did that make her feel?
- What gives Hanane hope?
- What does she say about the current rise in Islamophobia? How has Hanane been impacted by it?
- What, according to Hanane is happening in France, as a result of terrorism?
- What does she say about conflating everyday Muslims with terrorists?
- How does she describe France? How do the politicians think about France?
- What does she say about race and racism in France?

Wafa, 23, Paris:

[“I work with tolerant colleagues who value my work.”](#) They don’t stop at the cloth I’m wearing; on the contrary it has disappeared. They have learnt to discover me. It’s not a hindrance communicating with people. Even when the controversy really started [around banning of the various Muslim head and face coverings in France], their reaction surprised me. They were saying it was nonsense! In fact, they had a concrete example [before their eyes] and beyond the cloth they learnt to see the person, to see that there was no difference. I had abilities like them. I could express myself well. I was not somebody who was reclusive, submissive, who could not laugh or think for herself.”

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Wafa is saying?
 - How does she describe her colleagues?
 - What does she say about the “cloth she is wearing?”
 - How did her colleagues deal with the controversy?
 - Why do you think Wafa describes herself as “not being reclusive, submissive,” someone “who could not laugh or think for herself?”
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Yasmina, 31, Paris:

“At first my parents didn’t react badly because they thought that this [wearing a covering] would perhaps be short-lived. I think that’s what they were hoping for. They were telling themselves that I was in the midst of self-discovery, following fashions, and that it would not last. But the years have passed. It’s not that my mother doesn’t accept it, [but] she hates going out with me in the streets. It’s not me who disturbs her but it’s people’s glares, because my mother is someone who can’t keep it to herself. In other words, if she sees a person who is verbally abusing me or who makes a comment, she is going to respond. Nowadays she is even more worried. She tells herself that, ‘I’m alone with my daughter’ [and] that I should take it off, that I’m going to be assaulted and that it’s dangerous.”

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Yasmina is saying?
- How did Yasmina’s parents respond when she first started covering herself?
- How does her mother feel about it now? Why?
- How do people treat Yasmina when she’s out in the street?
- How does Yasmina’s mother respond to people in the street?
- How does she respond to Yasmina herself? Why?

Farah, 19, Paris:

“[I was] summoned [by the school authorities who] asked if I had been forced to wear it [a long dress], given that previously I was supposedly the trendiest girl in the school. Each time, there were several teachers who came to ask me why I was wearing this, that it was strange. I could see that they were giving me dirty looks and pointing their fingers at me. I was respecting [the law] but the problem was that they were never happy, and each time they were going further and further. They were telling me I was dressing like an Arab. One could clearly see that there was hate in them, that they were really unhappy. After a while I left. I gave up. I could no longer stay. It’s impossible to bear constant criticism.”

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Farah is saying?
 - How did the school authorities respond to Farah covering herself more fully?
 - How did the teachers respond?
 - How did that impact Farah? How did she respond?
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Jameelah, 21, Paris:

“For a start, al hamdullilah [praise be to God], my family is practicing [Islam]. But at the beginning I was just like any other youth; I didn’t pray—it was all about music. I used to enjoy having fun. One day, I sat down and I started reflecting. When I looked at all the things around me, many deaths, many youngsters who had died, and many things like that, it made me think. I told myself I wasn’t happy. I was happy [in the sense that] I had food to eat. I had everything I needed, but that wasn’t enough. Then, I started questioning myself. And one morning I awoke, I put on my headscarf and I went out. I was with a friend at secondary school. We had started talking more and more about religion. [Initially] we didn’t wear the headscarf, we didn’t pray, but we were reading a lot, we were researching a lot, and actually we [both started wearing it] at almost the same time in fact.”

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Jameelah is saying?
- What does Jameelah say about her family?
- How does she describe herself when she was younger?
- What caused her to “start reflecting” and “questioning herself?”
- How do you think that resulted in her putting on the headscarf?
- What do you think the impact was of talking with her friend about religion?
- What do you think the impact was of her friend also wearing the headscarf?

Bushra, 24, Paris:

“It was the niqab controversy that put a flea in my ear. Once again, they tried to make it appear negative, through their own mouths, the mouths of disbelievers. I asked myself why? It’s already unfair in relation to my community and my religion. And then I tried to understand what it represented, where it was really coming from. Then I read the Quran and I bought books. And afterwards I told myself, I’m a Muslim, and if I’m a Muslim and one attacks a part of my religion, then as a Muslim I must be part of the struggle. I’m not killing anyone. The minimum that I can do as a Muslim woman is to wear the niqab, given that they are attacking this little bit of my religion. I looked at myself and said: “What? You claim you are a Muslim. I wear jeans. I wear my hair loose. In fact, I’m like them!” No, I have no right. If I want to be a Muslim I must fight for my sisters, for my brothers, for my ummah [community]. That’s how I saw it.”

Note: A Niqab is a covering that covers the body, head and face worn by some Muslim women.

Discuss some or all of the following questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about what Bushra is saying?
- What does Bushra say got her interested in the niqab?
- What does she say about disbelievers?
- How did Bushra come to wear the niqab?
- What does she say about it being part of the struggle?
- Who is she struggling for? Why?