
Voices

Dear white people of France: being forced to undress wasn't exactly the liberation I was longing for

It seems that oppression is only when brown men tell you how to dress; when white men do it it's called liberation. But even French feminism has its roots in colonialism and imperialism

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Women in France face fines for wearing burkinis AFP/Getty

I've been putting off writing this post. I was hoping I wouldn't need to, hoping I wouldn't bother. Hoping that I'd see outrage fill people's timelines and all the usual feminist social media spaces so I wouldn't feel forced to write something, anything, explaining my outrage.

But here I am. Here I am writing about feminism and Muslim women again and namely responding to the deafening, choking, claustrophobic silence from White Feminists.



French police undressing a burkini-clad woman will fuel Isis' support

What we are seeing in France is part of the continued criminalisation of being Muslim. Particularly the criminalisation of visibly Muslim people – particularly Muslim women. What we are seeing is a vulgar display of White Feminism codified and legislated by the state. We're seeing women being forced to conform to something held up as 'liberty' with no irony at all. Women are coerced – with the threat of force – to take off their burkinis at the beach. A Muslim woman was ordered off the beach in Cannes and fined for simply wearing her headscarf. We know already, of course, that the French implemented the 'burqa ban', we know that headscarves 'and other religious symbols' are banned in state schools and there have been multiple incidents of school-girls being forbidden from wearing 'long skirts' to school – not when they're worn as a fashion statement, but when they're worn by Muslim girls because then it suddenly becomes a 'religious symbol'.

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Cannes, in France, has banned the burkini because it "could risk disrupting public order while France was the target of terrorist attacks" and because burkinis are "not respectful of [the] good morals and secularism" of France.

We're going to need some space to unpack this one, bear with me.

So, first of all, correct me if I'm wrong but I thought this was a pretty black and white thing we feminist were agreed on. An article of faith if you will: Thou Shalt Leave Women to Do as They Will with Their Own Bodies. France, often posturing itself as the beacon of feminism because apparently, feminism was born of the French Revolution (don't know if all the working-class women and women in the colonies heard about that liberation, sorry guys!) should surely know this article more than most. And yet, here it is – the French state itself – forcing women to wear or not wear certain clothes! Incredible!

Recently I saw a spate of articles about the hijab in Iran. In Iran women are forced to wear the hijab by law and can be publicly admonished, fined or even arrested for 'inadequate' covering. Now, I'm sure many more feminists – and I'm guessing particularly those in Europe – would be quick to agree this is Not Okay. Surely the best thing is for women to be free to choose to dress however they want – be it wearing a headscarf or a miniskirt. Yet, it seems that oppression is only when brown men tell you how to dress; when white men do it it's called liberation.

Now, if you're about to comment saying, "Dear me TBH I'm afraid it's just not that simple", you're bang-on-the-money absolutely spot on correct it's not. And that brings me to my second point.

The bans in France are specifically targeted at Muslim women. The idea that the burkini could be linked to terrorism somehow and therefore a ban on it justified seems ludicrous, and yet this is the stage we've reached. The extreme policing of Muslim women's dress is somehow an acceptable 'anti-extremism' measure. More than that, Muslim women are posited always as victims of their dress who require liberation from the French authorities. And here's the catch: this French desire to liberate Muslim women and the positing of Muslimness as 'oppositional' to Frenchness has a long and bloody history.

Oh yes, here I go again.

French colonies in North Africa were the ones with large Muslim populations, but also the ones with some of the longest and bloodiest battles for independence – see Algeria. That sort of history and that sort of war is not a good start for making you the experts on legislating on Muslim dress. In fact, you might argue that it gives you a slightly biased picture of history and one that's full of images of you battling your unruly Muslim subjects who for years you have depicted as the very opposite 'sorts of people' as you are and therefore as savage, animalistic, backwards, ignorant, male despots and female victims. So, when, from the 1960s and 70s and 80s those same colonies, now independent, saw people begin to migrate to France – because oh, I don't know maybe there'd been a long history of war and repression which kind of made opportunities not so great over there – this long background of antagonism and racism can't have disappeared.

And here's another thing. That French feminism we were just talking about – that is also born of that history. That type of feminism is one steeped in imperialism and hardcore racism. Muslim women are not women in that feminism. Muslim women's bodies are different, they are racialized, they are dehumanized and, as ever, they remain the central posturing points in ideological battles between an imaginary 'East' and West' conjured up by the latter to deal with its self-destructive modernity wherein colonialism's long-term consequences – namely immigration and war – are hard to deal with and need a scapegoat. Because, let's be honest, when we ask, "I wonder what it is that drives Muslims in the West to be extremists?" it's easier to blame Isis than it is to consider the deeply ingrained segregatory and racist policies and rhetoric we practice in our own backyards.

And that brings me to my final point. If you're thinking, "Ah, but TBH you've missed the central part of the question here, France is not being racist or Islamophobic or informed by its long history of colonialism, it's just pursuing good ol' secularism!" – stop right there. French secularism is not half that. A secular state is usually one which believes in separation of state and religion, of public and religious affairs. But in France, secularism, *laïcité*, means something more. It is itself a form of ideology and is often linked to the French revolution and therefore also a bastion of French identity.

But what it has grown to mean in recent years is not something which nineteenth-century French statesmen would recognize. 'Freedom of conscience' and 'free exercise of religious faiths' have lost ground to a political passion which makes secularism the defining French value. As such, it has been weaponized in xenophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric turning 'secularism' specifically and deliberately against French Muslims and often – though Muslims are also confusingly, often condemned on grounds of not accepting France's 'Christian' culture.

So, we have to ask, how does what Muslim women wear on their heads and bodies challenge secularism which requires only a separation of power? The answer is, it doesn't.

What's happening in France is not even thinly-veiled (haha) racism. It is out and out "What are you gonna do about it?" racism. If you're reading this, ask yourself what you're going to do about it. If you count yourself as a feminist, ask yourself, "Where the heck have I been and why have I not cared about the policing and criminalisation of Muslim women's bodies the same way as I care about the policing and criminalisation of white women's bodies?" If you're worried about the world and war and extremism ask yourself, "Am I just sitting by and letting my society be segregated by the powers that be?"

If you really want Muslim women to not be oppressed, ask yourself what you're doing about the Islamophobia slowly becoming legitimate ideology in the West, because that Islamaphobia disproportionately hurts visibly Muslim women.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/burkini-ban-muslim-women-france-nice-beach-forced-undress-liberation-burkha-islam-dear-white-people-a7207811.html>