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Protesting headscarf ban: a path to becoming more French? A case study of ‘Mamans toutes égales’ and ‘Sorties scolaires avec nous’

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ABSTRACT
Muslim protests of French headscarf policies might be expected to signify and reinforce a desire to remain apart from mainstream society. This case study of a group of Muslim mothers protesting the 2012 ‘Chatel circular’ finds the opposite. The protest reflects a positive attachment to French identity, culture and values and, in many ways, takes the form of a feminist movement. The study is based on semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation with ‘Mamans toutes égales’ and ‘Sorties scolaires avec nous’, the two main protesting groups, and others in their political environment. It describes the history of the movement, the characteristics of the activists, their attitudes towards religion, gender, and French society, and explains how the experience of protest has affected their integration into French society. It suggests policies of exclusion, such as headscarf bans, can affect processes of both inclusion and exclusion.

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Minorities; immigration; political integration; Muslims; France; women

Introduction
This is a French case study of a group of Muslim mothers protesting the 2012 ‘Chatel circular’, a policy banning them from parental participation in school field-trips while wearing a headscarf. This policy, introduced by UMP Education Minister Luc Chatel, extended the 2004 legislated ban on wearing the headscarf in public institutions including schools and has been maintained under the current socialist party government. The purpose of the study is to explore some of the ways Muslim women have responded and to consider how such responses may affect them and their social relations within French society. It is part of a larger study examining the social, economic and political integration of Muslims in France, in a comparative context (see Reitz, Simon, and Laxer 2015).
The protest is interesting because it does not defend either of the stereotypical Muslim traditions which are the targets of the headscarf ban – the submissive woman or public religion. Going in the opposite political direction, it takes the form of a feminist movement. It also reflects and reinforces a distance between the protesters and the ‘Muslim community’, defined as including both mosques and other formal and informal religious and non-religious social formations among persons in France who consider themselves Muslim. By focusing on the lived experiences of the mothers, we question the presumed assimilationist impact of the headscarf policy. We suggest the mothers’ rejection may be indicative of a higher level of integration in society, not a lower one; their protest-related activities may actually foster integration.

This study focuses on the two main groups asking for the repeal of the Chatel circular: ‘Mamans toutes égales’ (MTE, Mothers all equal) and ‘Sorties scolaires avec nous’ (School outings with us). The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation of mobilizations (debates, workshops, protests) and focus groups with activists in the two collectives and others in their political environment; all were conducted between June and December 2014.

We begin with theoretical observations on the potential impact of headscarf controversies and policies on Muslim integration and assimilation in France. We then describe the history of the protest, including the characteristics of the Muslim women involved and their attitudes towards religion, gender and French society. We examine the value perspective from which the protest is launched and ask how it relates to mainstream values of secularism and feminism. The findings provide insights into how the experience of protest has affected the women’s integration into the French political system and French society. Their lived experiences reveal how being ‘French’ and feminist are at the core of both the demands and the identity of their movement and suggest the experience of mobilization constitutes a path to political integration. If, as is reflected in the names of their groups, these mothers are primarily concerned about the well-being of their children and are first and foremost mamans struggling for their children’s rights to have their mothers with them during outings, as do their fellow classmates, their struggle is feminist and takes them closer to mainstream society. The protesters are Muslim but equally French and women, as they put forward repeatedly during their mobilizations; they call for their rights as such.

Headscarf controversies and processes of Muslim political integration

French policies restricting the wearing of headscarves and veils in public places are the most extreme among all western countries. Their
distinctiveness is a matter of agreement in the now-extensive literature on headscarf controversies. The 2004 law mentioned above was followed in 2010 by a law banning full face covering in any public place. The historical roots of these policies, including French republican traditions with an emphasis on laïcité enforcing religious neutrality in the public sphere, are fully explained in John Bowen’s *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves* (2006). Joppke (2009, 27) refers to the French case as ‘the mother of all headscarf controversies’ (see also Scott 2007; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2014). Since the bans are overwhelmingly popular in France (according to public opinion polls[^1]), they likely go hand in hand with informal social pressures militating against the wearing of a headscarf.

An obvious question is the effect of these policies on the social and political integration of Muslims. Some suggest the assimilationist policies are working. Joppke (2009, 52) focuses on the outward compliance of Muslim girls as an indicator of Muslim assimilation in French society. In his view, many Muslims accept the headscarf ban as legitimate public policy, and French laïcité does not unreasonably violate their unique traditional identity. As he puts it, ‘The national allegiance of French Muslims was tested, [and] they passed the test with flying colors.’

Even if this is the case, it may not tell the full story of the effects on social and political integration. Underlying outward compliance is the question of social relations in the community and feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Joly (2012, 39) reveals how French Muslim women view the ostracism they face by wearing a headscarf as a sign they can never be both French and Muslim; consequently, ‘they feel deprived of their right of citizenship’. In other words, a form of ‘reactive ethnicity’ (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) may be reinforcing minority exclusion and group boundaries. The impression of poor integration of Muslims in France is bolstered by expressions of discontent in the banlieues, suburban communities with high unemployment and large Arab populations, as for example, the civil unrest in 2005. Yet many people interpret such events as reflecting the frustration of young French people trying to claim the integration they believe is rightfully theirs.^[2]

The tension in French society over the headscarf issue is not necessarily in itself indicative of the level of integration of Muslim minorities, or even of the effect of the headscarf policies. In the first place, the social meaning of the headscarf within Muslim communities is not necessarily exactly what it is assumed to be in the mainstream discourse, namely, a symbol of the subordinate status of women within a socially isolated sub-culture. For example, public debate before the 2004 headscarf ban in public schools, as reflected in Stasi Commission deliberations, gave little voice to women wearing the headscarf, or to possible meanings other than religious-based female subordination (see Scott 2005, 116–119). Yet many Muslim women see the headscarf as an expression of modern and liberated womanhood based on a
contemporary sense of ethno-religious identity; some even see it as a form of protest, an assertion of the right to be accepted as Muslim (see, e.g. Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Göle 1996; Delphy 2015). In this case, the cultural gap between Muslim women wearing the headscarf and the mainstream may not be as great as some fear, and the degree of Muslim cultural isolation in France may be exaggerated.

Pro-headscarf activism in France appears weak, with little attention given to it. However, the potential for such activism to reflect a positive integrative direction is revealed in survey data, specifically the national French ‘Trajectories and Origins’ survey. While Muslim women who wear the headscarf (a substantial minority) less often state they ‘feel French’ than those who do not, many who have lived a time in France or were born in France wear the headscarf and also ‘feel French’. Further, wearing the headscarf appears to have no impact on the increased sense of feeling French for those with longer experience in France or those born in France.3 More generally, the level of ‘feeling French’ among Muslims, while lower than among non-Muslim minorities, is not particularly related to the strength of attachment to the Muslim religion (see Reitz, Simon, and Laxer 2015; also Maxwell and Bleich 2014).

Another related possibility is that the process of conflict over issues such as the headscarf may actually facilitate the process of social and political integration. To some extent, minority rebellion is a normal and expected part of the process of assimilation. In the iconic formulation of Park (1950), for example, the stages of the ‘race relations cycle’ following contact include competition and accommodation before the final stage of assimilation. Further, as Coser (1956) elaborated in his classic essay based on the work of Georg Simmel, while conflict creates distance, it may have a positive ‘latent’ function by drawing together two parties. Underneath the issues in a conflict, the contesting groups declare an investment in a relationship, following the proposition that ‘the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict’ (Coser 1956, 67; see a useful case study by Packer 2008). In the search for resolution, established institutional frameworks and common values may become tools to improve relations. When ‘conflict calls for allies’ (Coser 1956, 139), new associations and coalitions arise, as well as pressures leading to possible disengagement from segments of one’s own group. In short, group boundaries become realigned.

Finally, the headscarf controversy has a strong symbolic component, and the importance of the distinction between symbolic and social group boundaries is increasingly emphasized (Lamont and Molnár 2002). The vivid public symbolism of the veiled Muslim woman may evoke hostility yet coexist with friendly community encounters, with the relations between the two varying depending on the circumstances. Given the divergent meanings of the headscarf, and the variations in viewpoints in the general public, there
is ample opportunity for relations across group boundaries to evolve quite differently from the way presaged in public discourses.

**The mothers’ headscarf-ban protest**

In its ‘guidelines and instructions in preparation of the 2012 school year’, a Ministry of Education circular

recommended recalling in the school bylaws the application of the principle of *laïcité* and the neutrality of public services, in public schools. These principles prevent parents or any other party from expressing their religious, political or philosophical beliefs by their conduct or words, when they accompany students on school trips (n° 2012–056 – March 27, 2012).4

The circular has been interpreted as prohibiting women wearing the headscarf from offering additional adult supervision on school outings, but its implementation is at the discretion of the school principal. Although there are no data5 on the number of schools following the recommendation, according to the *Le Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France* (CCIF, Collective against Islamophobia in France), exclusions are increasing.

Mobilizations against the ‘Chatel project’ emerged almost immediately. The ‘Mamans toutes égales’ collective was formed based on the call of the mothers of Muslim students and militants from associations such as the CCIF, ‘l’Union Juive Pour la Paix’, ‘Collectif Féministe pour l’Egalité’, ‘les indivisibles’, and ‘les Indigènes de la République’. The MTE movement started in and developed around the eastern Paris suburb of Montreuil. A second group started up in 2012, when a few mothers in a northern suburb, Le Blanc-Mesnil, started to organize during ‘weekly breakfasts’ at *La Maison des Tilleuls*, the community centre, to demand the repeal of the circular. Most had been assisting teachers during the outings but found themselves suddenly prohibited from doing so. They had no previous experience of activism or militancy, but were soon supported by other Muslim mothers not affected by the exclusion themselves. In this way, the ‘Sorties scolaires avec nous’ collective was formed; it continued to grow through word of mouth. The two collectives increasingly joined their efforts to organize events and protests.

Even though the two self-funded collectives remained small – not more than twelve core members in each – and their capacity of mobilization was limited, the movement kept spreading. In 2014, two new groups, one in Meru, ‘Toi plus moi plus ma maman’ (You plus me plus my mom), and another in Argenteuil, ‘Mon enfant, l’école et moi’ (My child the school and me), were formed. Their main actions include the organization of protests and debates to raise awareness and the writing of open letters and petitions to the Ministry of Education. They boycott field trips and stage alternatives, with the mothers separately accompanying their children to the same...
outing, so they can be with their children and their children can be with their
friends.

The main activists are mothers in their mid-thirties; half were either born in
France or arrived at a very early age (at the age of 11 at the latest), while the
other half arrived in their late teens or early twenties from Algeria, Tunis and
Morocco. They have all lived in Montreuil or Le Blanc-Mesnil for at least the
past ten years. The movement is entirely led by the Muslim mothers; the
role of other organizations is minor.

A French political movement

Immediately evident in interviews with protest participants is their strong
expressions of support for France, for French culture and even for the
French principle of laïcité. The protesters are far from demanding a public
space for traditional Muslim or Maghrebian culture in France. Regardless of
whether they were born in France, all indicate strong feelings of being
‘French’ and joined the mobilization to call for their rights and their children’s
rights as French citizens. As well, perhaps surprisingly, they all strongly
endorse the laïcité principle; that said, they consider it is has been diverted
from its original meaning as stated in the 1905 law and the Ferry-Goblet
laws on schools (for supporting legal opinions, see Hunter-Henin 2012). In
this sense, the mothers are not calling for a new cultural right for Muslims
in France but for the respect of their existing rights as equal French citizens.
Equality, freedom and dignity are three key words on their banners and
slogans.

To account for the relatively minimal mobilization of other Muslim mothers
confronted with the same exclusion, the activists explain some ‘keep silent’
and ‘accept their situation’ because unlike them, they do not feel ‘at home
in France’. One activist born in France says, ‘They say, apply the law of the
country! Or, we’re not home let them do whatever they want.’ If she some-
times feels like ‘emigrating to breath more freedom’, she also feels it’s her
duty ‘to change things here’ in France. This protester, when asked about
her country of birth, echoes the feelings of others born and bred in France:

I am born in France and I feel at home here! I always say it out loud, I am French! I
can wear a headscarf or be of whatever religion, I feel home here! I am home
here! It is simple, I grew up here, and I want my kids to be raised here, like me!

Such women insist that despite their double culture, they feel ‘just French’ and
are not at home in what they call their ‘parent’s country of origin’. ‘I know the
language and everything but I don’t feel home there’ (North Africa) explains
one mother who arrived in Montpellier at the age of eight months.

At the same time, many women who emigrated from North Africa insist
that although France is only their ‘second home’, their children are ‘100 per
cent French’. Many express a deep emotional attachment to their country of origin, their ‘childhood country’ as they call it, but they equally emphasize France is the ‘country of their children’ and ‘the place where they made the choice to live’. They maintain close ties with their country of origin, teaching their children the dialect and some traditions for them ‘not to feel as tourists’ during their usually annual visits there. But as explained by one mother of four who arrived from Algeria at the age of 19, for her children, Algeria is the ‘country of their grandparents’. The question of whether they are Algerian or French should no longer be asked: ‘You are born in France, well you’re French, that’s all!’

Feeling French but not perceived as French is a source of tension for these mothers, whether or not they are born in France. They explain how hard it is to be accepted in society because of their physical appearance. They define themselves as ‘French Muslim, but French’. ‘They say “type!” explains a mother of four; ‘There is always something when you’re not blond with blue eyes!’ ‘They say you want to wear your headscarf, go home, but we are at home here, we have our lives here, our kids here, we work, we pay taxes!’ adds a mother who arrived when she was 17. The need to justify their French-ness is frequently expressed by the mothers. ‘When I put [on] my headscarf’, recounts an activist who arrived in France at the age of 6 and wears her headscarf only part time because she works in a public institution, ‘I feel the need to make more smiles, to engage more in the discussion, to tell them don’t worry we are like everyone! We can even speak French!’

The tension between feeling French and not being perceived French is greater for the second generation born in France. Their socialization by virtue of birth, school, friends and residence promotes a strong sense of French identity, but they, nonetheless, feel they are treated as foreigners in their own country. The comments of a mother who came to France when she was only few months old are typical:

[I] was raised here, since I was a little child, I was feeling French, but when we start feeling discriminated against, we start asking questions, and when I go to the country of my origins, I don’t feel at all at home, so we are completely lost, or at least me, personally.

Some even consider emigrating but not to their parents’ country of origin. A mother recalls, ‘I told my husband, let’s apply for immigration, let’s escape! Because I am fed up! But then I have family here and that’s what’s keeping me!’

Those who immigrated to France ask why they were given French nationality in the first place, if they are to be treated as second-class citizens. ‘Why always adding this origin label?’ asks a mother who arrived at age 25 after spending three years in Switzerland:
You either give me the French nationality or not! I am good here in France, I am proud of its flag and origins, but if for every little thing we’re going to say Moroccan-French or of Moroccan origins! I mean, I am proud to carry its flag, but the country is not proud that I am like that!

Relations to the children and public schools

The mothers express their feeling that their children are French and their desire for them to feel French in their strong support for the public school. Many were and are still very active in the schools; many sit on the parents’ council. In one case, a woman managed to find a replacement for her son’s class teacher who was absent for several months; she talks about her efforts, all the paper work she did, all the letters and petitions she prepared. Those born in France see themselves as the ‘children of the public school’ and recount positive experiences. A mother who grew up in a Jewish neighborhood says, ‘We never had a problem, our mother used to accompany us with her headscarf and our dad with his beard, and everything was going very well. Now it is very sad.’ Some mothers emphasize they want their children to be in a public school, not a Muslim school, because it is mixed: ‘There are Christians, Muslims, Jewish, Blacks and White.’ Putting them in a private Muslim school would be the ‘worst case scenario’. The commitment to the school strengthens the view that the children’s interests should be the only school priority and volunteers should be selected for school outings based on their qualifications, not on a ‘piece of fabric’. One activist cites a school which selected a mother who barely spoke French to accompany the children on a visit to the public library, leaving out a French-speaking mother with a headscarf. She comments the school ‘should not choose its public’ but instead be a force for tolerance.

Difficulties with the schools also affect the children. Among the protesting mothers, two report traumatic personal experiences that pushed one to move her child to a private Catholic school and the other to seek the services of a Muslim psychologist. The first talks about her seven-year-old daughter who could not go to the swimming pool because of a severe allergy. Unfortunately, the teacher did not trust the medical report: ‘He tells her to take off her shoes and put her feet in the water! He is convinced that the reason [for her refusal] is religious, though her sister has always attended the swimming classes.’ The issue lasted three years. The mother even filed a complaint with the Ministry of Education ‘academic inspection’ unit, which intervened but without resolving the issue. She says, ‘My daughter was suffering every Thursday [the swimming class day], crying every night.’ In a later incident, the teacher injured the child (closed a door on her fingers) but called it an accident and refused to apologize. In frustration, the mother moved her daughter to a Catholic school.
The second mother speaks of her son Mohammad, a first-grader who started to bang his head against the wall before every school trip:

There was a teacher who could not stand Muslims, he openly spoke to the kids saying things such as it’s all because of your parents or your mother can remove her headscarf [...] and then you know, kids say naughty stuff to each other, ‘your mom can’t come because she wears the headscarf’ For each outing, my son used to tell me, ‘I was the first to raise my hand in class and ask if you can come.’

After repeated tantrums and because he started to be violent in school, the mother decided to seek a psychologist, not the public education one, she explains, though the service is free, but a ‘Muslim psychologist because I did not want to be judged.’

The mothers worry about the impact of the protest on their children, fearing it may cause mixed feelings. One approach is to avoid telling their children all of the truth about their protest. One mother says:

I do not explain what’s happening to my son. Why? Because I think that when he grows up he must not, if confronted to discrimination, fight because he does not feel at home, because he feels more Algerian than French. No, I want him to fight against the discrimination he would be subject to because he feels French and because he has the right, like everyone else.

Another recounts, ‘I used to do many outings with my son, so now he asks me every time “why are you not coming anymore?”’ She enumerates the difficulties:

I never tell him the truth ... I find excuses because I am afraid that he starts hating the school, so I say it’s because I have to stay with your little brother or I have work, but last time when his friend asked him, why your mom doesn’t come with you? He replied that I actually don’t want to, and that’s how I realized that it turned against me! I wanted to protect him and now he thinks that I am not interested in what he does at school!

As this mother has discovered, it is eventually necessary to confront the reality of the situation.

A prime concern of the mothers is that their children may develop a hatred of school, or more problematically, of non-Muslim others; they fear this because the ‘school teaches them intolerance’. The mother of Mohammad, the first-grade student described above, recalls:

During the Mohamet Merah affair [in 2012 a French man of Algerian origin killed several people in Toulouse before being killed by police], I was crying in front of my TV and also wondering what did Mohamet Merah endure as a child to reach this point? I couldn’t stop thinking about that ... at the same time my son was having nervous breakdowns, I couldn’t stop thinking what would happen in few years, would it provoke this hatred in him? A repressed hatred because
they didn’t accept his mother, because she was Muslim … these kind of thing … until today it haunts me.

‘Kids do not differentiate’, is the reaction of one mother. ‘They don’t care about the headscarf, they just want to hold your hand’, contributes another, adding, ‘They are pure and innocent; they are assimilating hatred because of these kinds of treatments!’

The mothers insist the issue is not one of intolerance and discrimination between religious groups but an institutionalized racism, between the state and Islam. Their children’s friends and their own are from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds; their friendships, they say, ‘are not only between Muslim mothers’. Now the state is ‘pushing them to be communautaristes’. Although the need to mobilize against the circular has brought them closer to each other, they also have the support of non-Muslim mothers. The parents’ of their children’s friends are very understanding. ‘The Christians tell me don’t worry, I am cooking fish today!’ says one. ‘The neighborhood is like a family for us’, adds another, ‘when we see the other kids, we tell them when they do something good or not, they trust us! They know us!’ The mother who moved her daughters to a Catholic school is happy with her decision, saying,

They once asked for accompanying parents and I didn’t propose to come, so the teacher came and asked my daughter why; she explained that I had a meeting on that day but that I could cancel it if there was no other volunteers, and the teacher thanked her for that!

Relations with the Muslim community

Perhaps surprisingly, the mothers are not strongly attached to an organized Muslim community, or organized activities of Muslim populations in France. As mentioned above, they want their children to stay in public schools, not Muslim schools. They feel strongly Muslim, but do not have a sense of belonging to a Muslim ‘community’, either symbolically or socially. They are not active in Muslim associations or in cultural associations based on country of origin. Only one volunteers in a charity organization which helps underprivileged schools and students in Morocco.

In any case, the mothers do not define their movement as a struggle for religious rights but as a political struggle for civil rights. For this reason, they neither seek nor receive the support of the mosque or the imams. Many express surprise when this question is raised. One says, ‘I do not see why an imam should support us more than a politician.’ Another adds, ‘I do not see this struggle as a religious one! At the same time, I can understand your question and it is legitimate to think that the community could support us after all.’ ‘We love our God in the mosque and that’s it!’ comments
a third. ‘Politics is outside and we do not mix!’ Clearly, the protest is not seen as a movement to advance Muslim culture in any way.

A certain distancing of the mothers from the religious officials suggests the irrelevance of religion to the protest is not the only issue. Support from imams or other religious officials would likely be accepted if offered; therefore, the fact that it is not offered may cause some resentment. Two of the mothers say they ‘do not beg for support’. One says the Muslim community should support them without having to be told.

There are several possible reasons for this distance. Some protesters say their religion is a ‘private affair’, a spiritual relationship between ‘God and them’. They distinguish between the ‘real’ spiritual dimension of religion whereby ‘religion is private, personal’ and the religious institutions which are political. ‘Imams are not the religion!’ says a mother, ‘an imam never represents the Muslim community’. By distinguishing the religion from the religious institution, the protesters are explaining why some imams consider it illicit for them as women to protest, suggesting this is the reason they do not support their movement. One woman says:

There are some [imams] who make statements that have nothing to do with religion, and that’s what really gave a label for Islam which is a little dirty. If they consider it licit or not [for us to protest] it is their problem! We are not trying to find out, we know that we are being subject to discrimination and for us it is licit. It is our human right that they violated and now I will not wait for a pope or a priest or whoever to tell me if I can fight or not.

They emphasize the universal, ‘human rights’ values of Islam; its ‘real practice’ is not the one depicted in the media but one of tolerance and living together, like the ‘real practices of other religions’. ‘It is the same for the real Christians!’ says one. ‘It is unbelievable how close we are! I have a friend, her father is a priest and her mother is also very invested in the church.’

Some deplore the imams’ ‘personal interests’ and power relations with the state. ‘They try to negotiate between the religion and the state, and they do not want to create conflict, because they know that they could close the mosque’, explains one woman. ‘There are also personal interests, they accept! That’s it!’ comments another. ‘The Paris mosque wants an Islam of France and not an Islam in France! Which means that it is the state that will tell us ok, do this and don’t do that!’ adds a third. The mothers distinguish between an Islam in France (en France) and an Islam of France (de France). This distinction, they say, is between ‘having the principles of Islam, like any other monotheistic religion, practiced in France’ and an ‘Islam chosen by the political people’. The former ‘means being a Muslim at home!’

Nor do the mothers have the support of the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF), which among other things, organizes the Rencontre annuelle des musulmans de France (annual meeting of French Muslims) in Le
Bourjet. The mothers struggled but did not get a stand in the fair for two consecutive years.

Generally the mothers have adopted political views that are independent of religious authority. They define themselves as militants and are becoming more politically active; they vote, but their choice is not guided by religion or country of origin. They do not think it is important to have political representatives who are explicitly Muslim and/or have a migrant background. They give the example of Muslims who vote for the Front National and emphasize the importance of ideas and political agendas. In Le Blanc-Mesnil, they support the communist party, which helped them in their mobilization from the beginning, mainly through La Maison des Tilleuls. They voted for them in the municipal election to renew their mandate; some even helped during the campaign. In Montreuil, the women say they vote ‘for the people and the politics who supported [us]’. ‘We voted for a mayor who is apparently homosexual but we don’t mind’, says one. Yet some question the point of voting and the extent to which it can effect social change; they argue the left and the right are pretty much the same, and when they vote, they opt ‘for those who would harm [us] the least’. All denounce the right’s manipulation of Muslims in the théorie du genre affair, making it an exclusively ‘Muslim problem’ to win votes.

A feminist movement

Even as the mothers call for their equals rights as French citizens, they simultaneously call for their rights as women, insisting they are equally discriminated against as Muslims and as women. They define their struggle as ‘feminist as well’. The mothers argue patriarchy is one of the main reasons for the lack of support from the imams. ‘An imam is a person, a man’, says a mother, ‘so it depends how each imam sees women, the status of women, some consider that we have the right to protest, and there are others who say ….’ At this point, a fellow activist interrupts and finishes the sentence: ‘… put your headscarves but stay home, and let your kids go to school!’ ‘This is what they already told us!’ concludes another.

‘Women are always the target’, one mother complains:

and I, as a woman want my right to dress as I want. So for me it is a feminist struggle, though not all the feminists’ collectives and associations would consider our fight as such. For them, we cannot defend the headscarf, because it is subordination to men, but I do not see it at all like that.

The headscarf is highlighted as a personal decision and defended as a question of personal liberty, a private matter that should be respected ‘even in a secular country’. The mothers explain they equally defend women’s right ‘to wear it and not to wear it’ and insist they were never forced by their husbands
or pressured by their community to do so. One mother admits her husband didn’t even know she decided to wear it: ‘He was waiting for me in the car and then I came with the headscarf’, she says laughing. ‘He looked at me and I was yes, that’s it! This is to tell you that it’s not my husband but me!’ She adds that her family was against her decision. Another laments, ‘The first day I wore it and went to work, I was shocked by their question: is it your husband who forced you to wear it? And they even proposed to give me the double of my salary to take it off! Yes, like that! And it really hurts me.

The mothers explain they are wearing it ‘for God’ and insist they are ‘free women’, ‘free of their bodies’. ‘It doesn’t change my personality, it doesn’t change who I am, it’s just a piece of fabric that I like to put for my own personal beliefs’, says one. It is worth noting that not all the mothers wore the headscarf when they first joined the movement; even after joining it, not all wear it ‘full time’ (they may wish to but must remove it at work).

The mothers advocate going beyond the dichotomy between women rights practices and their Muslim identities, between Islam as oppressive and French secularism as a guarantor of women’s rights. They deplore the image of an oppressed, submissive Muslim women forced to wear the headscarf and unable to defend herself. The comments of a mother asked about the background of the other activists are illustrative:

It is true that the main activists in our collective wear the headscarf but we are always asked the question: why don’t you have non-veiled or non-Muslim women with you? I think that it is legitimate for us to fight for our rights. People are used to think that Muslims women always need someone to defend them, for once that they see that there is a group of moms that are fighting alone, they are surprised, they say how come? Who is behind you? You are alone? You are fighting alone? That’s not normal!

This attitude is reflected in the mothers’ stance on the 2004 law prohibiting school-aged girls from wearing the headscarf. If none of them was mobilized at the time (some say they did not feel particularly concerned by the matter; others note they were not politically active then), and despite their different positions (some defend freedom of choice; others argue it is too early to wear the headscarf, as ‘one needs to be an adult to understand the meaning of religion’), their shared and primary concern is that the law might hinder girls’ emancipation. One mother asks:

What would happen, if they drop out of school? They won’t study, won’t get a job, stay home and be certainly confronted to a forced marriage, they will be dependent women without a job! That’s why we should not exclude them but accept them as they are and give them the choice to study, have a job and emancipate and then if it is really their fathers who forced them, they will certainly take it off.
In addition, the activists break out of their expected traditional housebound roles and challenge the image of the ‘submissive Muslim housewife’. The reaction of one mother illustrates this: ‘We decided to carry the struggle and give them [the fathers] the babysitting task.’ Although not all activists got their husbands’ support at the beginning, things are different now. ‘When we have meetings at night he takes care of the kids!’ explains a mother of four. ‘At the beginning it was a bit hard for him but now on the contrary, he encourages me!’ recounts another. She boasts, ‘Last time when he met a local political representative he even started discussing headscarf issues!’ One of the mobilization’s slogans ‘We do not just bake cakes’ illustrates their position, as explained by one of the activists:

For the stands at the school fair, they tell us, come and get cakes! This does not make sense because on the one hand they say they want women freedom and on the other they send us back to our kitchens!

Although this is a women-led movement advocating women’s rights, some activists were initially reluctant to label it a feminist movement, revealing the extent to which the concept has been associated with a white, western feminism which considers religion as oppressive and secular values as liberating. For these mothers, the headscarf is, in itself, neither liberating nor oppressive. ‘One needs to talk to these women, see how they live, why do they wear it and why they made this choice’ argues one. She says that ‘feminism is inside each woman’. Even if the mothers are practicing Muslims, they do not endorse an Islamic type of feminism. They neither frame their feminist discourse with nor base their arguments on religious principles or Islamic theology, remaining very secular. For them, the two cores and interrelated values of feminism are freedom of choice and equality, as summarized by one protester:

To be a feminist, is to advocate for the right of all women whoever they are, to defend their rights and their choices. Each woman should be free to do whatever she wants even if we do not share her opinion, it is to give women the freedom to do what they want. We are often told what do you think of abortion? I say that each person is free to do whatever she wants, fine at the religious level, it is prohibited by the three monotheistic religions, but if a women can’t or doesn’t want to she is free.

She stresses the concept of equality should refer not only to gender equality but also to equality among the women themselves. The mothers are generally critical of what they consider an ‘exclusive’ type of feminism. ‘These women fight for feminism, for the equality of women, but they themselves exclude other women’, argues one. ‘Once we say we are feminists, we should defend all the injustices against women! Once we say freedom it’s everyone’s freedom!’ says another. ‘There are some radical feminists who do not understand well the cause, they defend part of it and reject another’, she adds.
Discussion

A Muslim protest against French headscarf policies might be expected to signify and reinforce the desire of French Muslims to remain distinct from and not integrate into French society. Yet this study shows the opposite to be the case. The mothers involved in the protest clearly intend that they and their children will integrate into French society. They have strong feelings of being French, endorse the French value of religious neutrality, support French public schools, maintain a distance from the Muslim community and mosques, and desire inclusion in French society, the French political process in particular. Above all, they express a desire for equality as women and their right to dress as they wish.

The experience of participation in the protest appears to strengthen these tendencies. It provides an opportunity to articulate their views and, during the process, to engage with other French people inside and outside the Muslim community. For many of the mothers, it is their first experience of activism and appears to increase their sense of engagement beyond the issue of the headscarf itself. For example, some are now active in municipal elections, participate in other demonstrations, and are involved with French political parties. The fact that their husbands provide support in the form of babysitting may also have shifted family patterns closer to the French norm.

Admittedly, despite its integrative potential, the movement is based in a distinct Muslim community and on Muslim exclusion. Yet it is based in the Muslim community mainly in the sense that Muslim women have existing relationships which have helped them organize. To this extent, the movement may illustrate the ‘integration trade-offs’ discussed by Maxwell (2014). Maxwell argues a degree of social ‘segregation’, while in itself a force limiting integration, also creates the organizational resources which enable a group to mount efforts leading to greater integration. Yet the headscarf policy protest is not rooted in Muslim cultural groups, the mosque or related Muslim organizations. It certainly creates camaraderie among the protesters, but it does not deepen relations to Muslim cultural groups. It is far from promoting traditional Muslim culture; in fact, it represents a significant movement away from that culture. This is reflected in the preference for public schools over Muslim schools, the distance from the mosques and the imams, and the projection of the protest as purely political, not religion-based. It is symptomatic that one of the protesting mothers recently took a job in a public school and accepted without question the no-headscarf policy in that context.

Although the protest has a feminist thrust, mainstream feminist organizations have adopted an ambivalent stance, based on the symbolic implication of the headscarf as signifying the subordinate status of women. That said, individual non-Muslim women support the protest as an expression of equality rights for women (see Delphy 2015). This support is meaningful and
represents another way the protest brings Muslim women closer to mainstream French society.

The protest movement has facilitated integration in another sense, through victories in court. In June 2015 an administrative tribunal of Nice (Alpes-Maritimes) cancelled the decision of a primary school to prohibit a mother wearing a headscarf to accompany students during a school outing. A similar decision was reached for Méru, a town north of Paris. A win in court represents the institutional recognition that the viewpoints of the protesting mothers align with French principles of state religious neutrality.

The experiences of the headscarf protest in France suggest that adverse policies may facilitate integration, not because they ‘succeed’ in forcing assimilation, but because they prompt organized opposition, creating the basis for active social and political engagement. In these ways, perhaps paradoxically, the protest against French headscarf policies provides opportunities for Muslim women to become better integrated into French society. Many of the ideas and feelings expressed by these women would exist without the headscarf policies, of course, but the policies trigger engagement in organized activity to express these views. In the course of their engagement, the women come into contact with many people inside and outside the Muslim community who either share their views or with whom they disagree. In short, these activities become vehicles for further integration into French society.

Notes


2. In the immediate aftermath, a BBC editorial said, “The suburbs are full of people desperate to integrate into the wider society.” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4375910.stm. Also, see academic commentary posted by the Social Science Research Council in 2006. http://riotsfrance.ssrc.org/.

3. Analyses by the authors, in collaboration with Patrick Simon (see Beauchemin, Hamelle, and Simon 2010).


5. Parental neutrality is usually not stated in school bylaws. Each year there are new recommended templates for school bylaws for each department; in 2014, the point of the circular was added in the recommended template but only in Seine Saint Denis (there are no detailed data).


7. All translations from the interviews are by Alexandra Kassir.


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**References**


