

France: Why are women of migrant Muslim descent at the forefront of the struggle for secularism?

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A South-North Transfer of Political Competence: Women of migrant Muslim descent champion secularism in France.

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This article first gives an overview of migration in France – specifically from Muslim countries – and discusses the social and political context in which Muslim fundamentalists operate within the population of migrant Muslim descent. The second part discusses the attacks led by Muslim fundamentalists against the French state, democracy, secularism, human rights and women's rights, and the similarities with the steps they took in Algeria, and examines the responses – or lack of responses – from progressive social forces. The third part describes the strategies of women of migrant Muslim descent to counter fundamentalism and their leading and vital role in educating feminist and progressive forces in France.

Questions of terminology

By 'fundamentalism', I mean political forces, ranging from conservative to extreme right, using religion to gain political power. In Catholic as well as in Muslim contexts, these forces may aim at replacing the laws of the country – voted by the people, therefore changeable by the will of the people – by a-historical, unchangeable 'divine' laws, defined and interpreted by fundamentalists. It amounts to turning a democracy into a theocracy. This is by no means a religious issue, it is a political one.

These supposedly religious laws should, in fundamentalists' views, apply to all people regardless of

their creed and personal faith. It is true of Catholics who, for instance, want to impose bans on contraception and abortion in the laws of countries, regardless of the fact that Catholic women will not have to abort even if the law allowed it. It is true of Muslims who, for instance, want to impose separate and specific family laws that curtail women's rights, while Muslim women who do not wish to oppose, for instance, unilateral divorce (repudiation) by their husband may still abide by his wish and accept his decision before the court. In other words, a permissive law does not force anyone to use it. A repressive law restrains everyone's freedom.

The term 'Muslim' is commonly used everywhere in Europe to refer to ethnic origin – in France, mostly to North Africans and Turks. It is turning a faith into a 'race'. The historical precedent is that of 'Jews' – a scary prospect of racism for us all. In this article, the term 'Muslim women' applies strictly and exclusively to women whose declared faith is Islam.

The qualification 'Muslim' is abusively applied to women who migrated from Muslim countries, and even to those whose parents or grandparents migrated from Muslim countries. Presuming faith on geographical origin, considering that anybody born in a Muslim family or Muslim country is a Muslim believer, partakes to essentialist thinking.

Moreover, it is an insult to both believers and non-believers alike; it denies believers the authenticity of their personal faith by subsuming it to the fate of being born 'here' rather than 'there'; it denies unbelievers freedom of conscience and freedom of thought.

As we will see later in the 'Background' section, recent surveys show that the vast majority of so-called Muslims is largely indifferent to religion and that a notable proportion declares itself with no religious affiliation. I will therefore use terms such as 'of migrant descent' and 'of Muslim descent' to characterize the women whose important contribution to social movements in France that I analyze here.

Introduction

France, as well as the rest of Europe, witnesses the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. It happens in a general context of rising political forces on the right and far right, including various religious rights. In the past two decades Muslim fundamentalist movements opened a new front in Europe and North America, where they apply exactly the same tactics they did in our countries of origin. They use people's legitimate discontent with governments, occupy the political and social vacuum left by failing states and do away with the concept of citizenship in favor of that of communities. They promote – and often impose – religious and ethnic identities, redefine socio-political problems in communal terms, and finally they take steps towards ending secularism.

Migrant women as well as citizens whose parents migrated from Muslim countries to France experienced this phenomenon long before it started in Europe. They have either seen with their very eyes the various steps taken by fundamentalists in their own countries, or have heard about it from their parents or extended families. They know that women are fundamentalists' first targets and that attacking them constitutes a test in the strategy to promote fundamentalist political agenda: will fundamentalists be stopped when they target women, and by whom – or can they advance another pawn, after this one...?

This places people and especially women of migrant Muslim descent in a very privileged situation: for historical reasons, they own a knowledge that other people in France, let alone other women, lack totally. As migrants and their descent are confronted not just with fundamentalism but with discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and racism in European countries, women have to walk a

fine line between solidarity with their 'community' and building on French secular laws to protect themselves from fundamentalist attacks.

It is precisely because they are aware of the economic and social difficulties that immigrants and citizens of migrant descent face daily in France, that the very political forces that should be women's natural allies against fundamentalism, such as feminists, human rights organizations, the left at large and the anti-globalization movement, shiver when it comes to opposing Muslim fundamentalism. They wrongly assume that fundamentalism is a religious movement they should respect, and that they represent oppressed people. They are afraid of being labelled 'Islamophobic'. Hence most of them fail, out of cowardice, to support women's rights against Muslim fundamentalists' attacks.

For lack of external support, gradually, women of migrant Muslim descent rely on their own forces: they are more and more vocal, they demand their legal rights, they analyze the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in France in political terms rather than in religious terms, devise new strategies ranging from within to outside religion, and take the lead in important aspects of the struggle as well as in specific battles.

In doing so, they teach progressive forces in France, including feminists, how to address the brand new phenomenon of Muslim fundamentalism in Europe, and to de-link religious issues from social and political ones. This is a vital political contribution to French politics.

Moreover they contribute to drawing attention to the concomitant rise of other religious fundamentalisms in Europe and to the collusion of interests between those. For demands made by one brand of fundamentalists usually benefit from support from the others, across religions, across national boundaries.

Remarkably, they also contribute to the struggle against fundamentalism in Muslim countries: no doubt that if Muslim fundamentalists were to succeed in imposing supposedly religious rules for presumed Muslims in European democracies, it will fire a backlash in our countries of origin. [1]

In this essay, I will first give an overview of migration in France - specifically from Muslim countries - and discuss the social and political context in which Muslim fundamentalists operate within the population of migrant Muslim descent. In a second part, I will discuss the attacks led by Muslim fundamentalists against the French state, democracy, secularism [2], human rights and women's rights, and the similarities with the steps they took in Algeria. I will discuss the responses - or lack of responses - from progressive social forces. In a third part I will describe the strategies of women of migrant Muslim descent to counter fundamentalism and their leading and vital role in educating feminist and progressive forces in France.

Background

A brief overview of migration to France:

During the 1920s and 1930s, France had a very high migration rate. France had been most affected by the First World War; it had lost 1.4 million young men out of a population of 40 million, while it had the lowest fertility rate in Europe. Migrants mostly came from Europe (Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, Portugal, Spain, Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Belgium); a minority also came from French colonies in Africa and Asia. [3]

After the Second World War, both fertility rate and economic growth were on the rise in France.

There was massive industrialization and need for additional workers. Subsequently during the 1950s, 1960s and up to the 1970s, there was a big wave of immigration, mostly male workers. The majority of migrants came from Portugal and North Africa: one million migrants from North Africa alone, mostly from Algeria.

By the end of the 1970s the end of economic growth resulted in tighter immigration policies. However, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, family reunion was facilitated. It brought in women (the workers' wives) and their children with the aim of settling workers in France. As for the children born of these marriages, all those born on French soil were automatically French citizens at birth; acquisition of French nationality was facilitated for parents of a French child.

As from 1990, the legal definition of 'migrant' is 'a person born foreign in a foreign country'. Census only allows to record legal nationality and country of birth, therefore there is no official record on their descent. In 1999, 36 per cent of immigrants had become French citizens. Estimates give about 10 per cent of French citizens born of a foreign parent. [4]

The law on nationality changed in the 1990s: now children of foreigners born in France remain foreigners until they are of adult age, at which time they can reclaim French nationality with relatively simple procedures, but they no longer acquire it automatically by virtue of being born on French soil.

The 1999 national census shows 10 per cent of French citizens of foreign origin; this percentage is on par with other European countries. It does not account for the children of foreign-born parents, in other words for French citizens of migrant descent, but only for those actually born abroad.

Since the 1990s, there is a fertility upturn (6 per cent growth rate), thanks to women of foreign nationality who account for one third of the total fertility rate (TFR). Bi-national couples are on the rise (between 18 per cent and 20 per cent). [5]

With the policy of family reunion of the 1980s, the characteristics of migrant populations changed: from nearly exclusively male and massively working class, it is now aging, feminized and with much higher education. Subsequently the new generations moved to intermediate professions.

To these waves of economic migration, one should add recent political migration: many Algerians saved their lives by migrating to European countries in the 1990s, at the peak of fundamentalists' terror. This political emigration was instrumental in the resistance to Muslim fundamentalism in France.

Unlike other European countries, France allows no official record regarding ethnicity or religion. The reason for this ban is to protect potentially targeted groups. France keeps the vivid memory of the terrible use that Nazis and their allies in France made of such statistics: it allowed the location, arrest and deportation of Jews during the German occupation of France in the Second World War.

It is therefore difficult to collect data on 'Muslims', but also on 'blacks', 'Arabs', etc. France's official statistics only know two categories: citizens and foreigners. However, sample surveys indicate a high percentage of citizens of Algerian descent, as well as of foreigners from Algeria.

The population of foreign descent was estimated in 1999 at 13.5 million, including 5.5 million migrants' children, 3.6 million migrants' grandchildren and 4.3 million migrants. This means that 23 per cent of the population of France (mainland plus Corsica) is of foreign origin, out of which 21 per cent are from the Maghreb and 2 per cent from Turkey. [6]

The majority of French people had identified as Catholics since the Middle Ages. However, a 2004

survey shows a very important decrease in Church attendance for those who declare themselves believers, while 44 per cent people state not to believe in God (as opposed to 20 per cent in 1947), and 27 per cent state atheism.

Judaism had been the second religion for centuries. But estimations regarding religions in France in 2000 indicate 5-6 million Muslims, one million Protestants, 600-700,000 Jews, 600,000 Buddhists, 180,000 Hindus and 150,000 Orthodox Christians. However none of these surveys inquire about actual personal belief and practice.

A recent study [7] is looking into this question: it shows that out of the French population whose origins are in Maghreb and Turkey, 20 per cent declare themselves with no religion (compared to 28 per cent in the whole French population) and this percentage reaches 25 per cent among French citizens of Algerian descent. Among those from African and Turkish descent who declare themselves to have a religion, 21 per cent rarely attend religious ceremonies (compared to 15 per cent of the whole population). As for those who declare themselves Muslim believers, 21 per cent practice and 79 per cent do not or rarely. These figures match those for Catholics.

The study also shows the level of privatization of religion among Muslim believers, which is more and more understood as personal faith and not as a social marker of their identity – a trend which facilitates their integration into French society. Only 15 per cent of them would be unhappy if their sons married a non-Muslim, and 32 per cent if their daughter married a non-Muslim (compared to 18 per cent for both sexes in the whole population).

As for secularism, many (54 per cent of the population, 56 per cent of French citizens from African or Turkish origin, and 57 per cent of declared Muslims) see it as a guarantee for Muslims to be able to practice their religion. The word ‘secularism’ has a positive or very positive connotation for 82 per cent of French citizens from African and Turkish origin; 82 per cent of them and 83 per cent of declared Muslims see secularism as the best way to allow people of different opinions to live together.

Only 3 per cent of French citizens of African or Turkish origin and 5 per cent of declared Muslims would like to send their children to Qur’anic school while 67 per cent want to send their children to a secular state school with no religious teaching. A large majority, 60 per cent of French citizens of African and Turkish origin and 60 per cent of declared Muslims, wish for the headscarf to remain banned in French secular state schools for the following reasons: in secular schools there should be no religious signs; school is for studying only; and the scarf is a sign of women’s oppression. However 53 per cent of Turkish origin and 59 per cent of African origin would like to find a solution through dialogue with the veiled girls and their families. [8]

What is clear from these figures is that the population we are concerned with here is quite similar to the rest of the population. Nevertheless all is not so rosy: 79 per cent of French citizens of African and Turkish descent (compared to 62 per cent of the total French population) state that economic differences exist between them and the rest of the population. [9]

Despite a trend towards upward mobility in terms of education and job qualifications, the majority of those employed remains among the lower classes. They are more unemployed: in the population aged 25–59, the rate of unemployment is 16 per cent for all migrants, out of which 26 per cent for migrants from Algeria and 25 per cent of migrants from Morocco, compared to 7.3 per cent in the whole population; this percentage is much higher if one looks only at the youth living in the outskirts of big cities. They are more likely to have difficulties in school: one out of three children repeat a class or more when at least one of their parents is of foreign origin, compared to one out of five for the whole population; [10] 36 per cent of high school dropouts come from the suburbs.

Housing problems remain high and, together with other marginalized sections of the French population (unemployed, lumpen proletariat, gypsies, etc.), French citizens of foreign descent are pushed out of cities into the 'suburbs' (which, unlike in the US, do not house the elite).

In 2005, Tokia Saifi, State Secretary on Sustainable Development, reflecting on the riots led by the youth, including many youth of migrant descent, and calling for "a real policy of integration", took a strong stand: she stated that "by not taking into account the problem of discrimination regarding housing and employment, especially as it affects specifically populations of migrant descent and among them particularly the youth, a communal withdrawal has been facilitated and conflicts have been exacerbated".

While the national rate of unemployment is 10 per cent – to which one should add the numerous part-time and temporary jobs that maintain people in very precarious economic situations – she added: "The percentage of unemployment is above 50 per cent in suburbs where families of foreign origin are parked. Fundamentalist movements used the failure of our integration policy to extend their reach". [11]

Why all these preliminary statistics? Because this data challenges many of the preconceptions one has on 'Muslims' in France. It shows that the population of Muslim migrant descent is fairly adjusted to the mores of the whole French population, and as little religious as the others. It should – one hopes – put an end to labeling this whole population as 'Muslim', while today no one would dare to label all French as 'Christians', even if most of them are of Christian descent. It sets the problem in the socio-economic context where it should be, rather than in religious terms. Fundamentalists' strategy is precisely to blur boundaries between these conceptual categories.

Strategies of Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria

This is the set-up in which Muslim fundamentalists started operating in France, building on the discontent of the people, on their relative poverty in a context of growing general economic crisis and unemployment, on their housing problems, etc. In the French context where citizenship is the only legal criterion, Muslim fundamentalists slowly attempt to build 'communities', i.e. the fragmentation of the people along the lines of ethnicity or religion, thus weakening social movements.

In a country where religious practice, although entirely free, is generally low, including among those of migrant Muslim descent, they attempt to fabricate 'born-again' Muslims and to make them feel discriminated against not just in social and economic terms – which they are – but in religious terms. In the name of religion, they put forward demands that question the secular foundation of the French Republic and cannot be met. Each of these demands is a test, a step on which the next step can be built. Much like in our countries of origin, most of their test cases target women.

In Algeria, Muslim fundamentalists' attacks against women started right after independence in 1962. It is worth giving some details about the steps that fundamentalists took in Algeria because it will allow us to point at the similarities of their strategies in both countries, and to better understand how the numerous women of Algerian descent living in France could immediately identify the fundamentalist project and react to it.

Harassment of women outside their homes and curtailing their legal rights

In the 1960s, fundamentalists started harassing women in the streets and telling them to go back home. They physically attacked women workers on their way to a factory in Sidi Bel Abbès (west of

Algeria); they succeeded in keeping the factory closed for three weeks and it took the army to reopen it and protect the women who worked in it.

They drafted and promoted a reform of the family law, supposedly abiding by divine law, which deprived Algerian women of many rights that they already enjoyed. According to this project, a woman was to lose the right to marry: she had to be given in marriage by her matrimonial tutor; she was to lose the right to divorce: only husbands can initiate divorce; she was to lose the right to full guardianship of children upon divorce, although she may have temporary custody under the supervision of her ex-husband; she was to lose the right to equal share to inheritance; she was to lose the right to work without the permission of her male guardian (*wali*): father, uncle, husband, son or judge, etc; repudiation (i.e. unilateral divorce by the husband outside court regulation) was made legal, as well as polygyny.

Fortunately, under the pressure of progressive forces, the project was stopped before it could be presented to the National Assembly. However, two similarly inspired versions of the same project were drafted and promoted in the 1970s, albeit also not reaching the stage of being voted by the National Assembly; but a fourth one, quite similar to previous ones (minus the permission of the guardian to work), was finally passed in 1984, more than 20 years after independence.

This shows how fundamentalists persist in their project and lobby until they win. It also shows how the reform of republican laws to match their version of 'the' divine law is at the heart of their project. Wisely enough, they first target family laws that affect directly and mostly women, knowing far too well that most governments will trade women's rights for social peace. This is exactly what is happening now in Europe.

Physical attacks on women, morality squads and the introduction of 'Islamic' dress; the political role of charities

In the 1970s, Muslim fundamentalists burnt down the house of a woman living on her own with her children in Ouargla (South of Algeria), accusing her of immorality for living without a male guardian; her youngest child who was handicapped could not escape and died in fire.

They controlled women students going in and out of student hostels, closed the gates at sunset, in total impunity. They threw acid on the legs of girls that were wearing skirts too short for their taste, but also cut long skirts considered too fashionable and painted the legs of women who wore them.

They introduced 'Islamic dress', a new form of veiling for women, Iranian style, unknown in any part of the country. One should say here that the vast majority of peasant Berber women are traditionally unveiled in Algeria and that veiling is rather urban and class-bound. This 'Islamic dress' was distributed for free to female students, together with other forms of support to poor families.

Fundamentalists' charity organizations were wealthy and used food distribution and financial help to request women to cover, men to go to mosques and both sexes to be observant of religious obligations.

Curtailling of civil rights, the role of preachers and teachers in public denunciation, indoctrination of the youth: emergence of the first Islamic party as leading youth upsurge

In the 1980s, their fourth project of family code was adopted, despite the outcry from women's organizations and massive demonstrations. To this day, we still suffer under it, despite recent mild amendments.

Thanks to 'democratization' of the system, i.e. the end of the one-party system and the adoption of

multi-party, fundamentalists founded the first religious party: Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, 'Islamic Salvation Front'). After its election at local level, they imposed gender segregation in schools, buses and most public places.

Attacks on individual women regarded as dissidents in their behavior were numerous. Control of women outside the home grew tight. Preachers denounced them publicly. Under their rule, a man could vote for all the women in his family, by just bringing their electoral card with him.

In schools, fundamentalist teachers, despite official national education programs, taught creationism rather than Darwinism in biology, as well as other fundamentalist dogma: inferiority of women, hatred of Jews and non-believers. They interrogated pupils about the mores of their families and neighbors, ordering them to spy and denounce them if they drank, did not fast or did not pray, in other words were 'bad Muslims', a branding that, in the next decade, would lead to a death sentence.

In wake of the failure of the state to find any solution to growing housing problems, poverty and unemployment, fundamentalist groups organized relief; they were the first ones on the spot of natural disasters, such as inundations and earthquakes that struck Algeria several times, while the state would take a week before sending the army for relief action. They organized youth camps, martial arts clubs, financial relief for the poorest families, distribution of food, educational support for pupils and students. It seemed their financial means had no limit. [\[12\]](#)

In 1988, due to high unemployment of youth and growing general poverty of ordinary people, there were youth riots in most Algerian cities. Those riots were heavily repressed by the army. Organized troops of what was not yet legalized as the FIS party came out in the open to supervise and guide the youth, and to manipulate the riots to their political benefit. After the riots ended, they occupied huge squares in Algiers, turning them into prayer places and political platforms, holding up normal traffic for weeks. Streets and places at the entrance of mosques were occupied for similar use.

War against civilians, enslaving women, terror

In the 1990s, various fundamentalist armed forces grew out of the FIS: AIS (the armed wing of the FIS, directly affiliated to it), GIA (Islamic Armed Groups), FIDA (which specialised in urban guerrillas), etc. In a context of terrible violence on people (instead of 'civil war', people called it 'a war against the people': it made 200,000 victims during the 2000s), attacks multiplied on women who refused to veil or to obey their orders not to go out of home, not to send children to state school, or to receive treatment in state hospitals.

The reasons for this is that fundamentalists branded the Algerian state '*kofr*' (unbeliever, apostate, a crime liable of death sentence), hence all the state institutions were sort of infected with '*kofrness*' (if one can forgive such a neologism) and whoever used state facilities were allies of *kofr*, hence also punishable by the death sentence!

They also executed women who had occupations they considered immoral such as working as a hairdresser or in beauty salons, and finally women at random, including veiled ones, and practicing Muslims. One can actually speak of femicide. In armed fundamentalists' raids on villages, women were slaughtered, burnt, mutilated, tortured, raped, gang-raped and abducted to their military camps to become domestic and sexual slaves.

In the same line as the introduction of a non-customary 'Islamic dress', in these camps, they instituted 'temporary marriage' (*muta'a* marriage) which allows Shiites (while Algeria is a Sunni Maliki country) to marry for a short time, from a few hours to several months or years - a way to

'Islamize' and legitimize in their eyes their numerous rapes on abducted women.

At the beginning of 2000, they inspired and led a pogrom against women workers in Hassi Messaoud (and neighboring cities), an oil city of Southern Algeria which employed single women migrating for economic reasons from the Northern coast; these women were the only breadwinners for their extended families that remained in the North: following an incendiary preach by the local imam that ordered his troops to "chase the devil out of the town", they were killed, burnt, mutilated, raped... [13]

From these non-exhaustive examples, one can see some similar trends, in nature if not in scale, with what is attempted in Europe: division of people along religious lines, deliberate attempts to pressure the state in order to obtain separate laws for separate categories of citizens, entryist policies in schools, co-opting people through charitable work, pressure on individuals to abide by religious rules regardless of their personal faith, targeting women first and specifically.

Strategies of Muslim fundamentalists in France

Although my focus is on France, I will make occasional references to other European countries where similar actions are being taken and similar trends are developing.

Law of the land vs divine law

In the name of religious rights and cultural rights, fundamentalists try to induce European states to adapt their laws to specific communities: they demand 'religious laws' for 'Muslims'. It amounts to renouncing the idea of one law for all citizens and adopting separate un-voted laws for different pre-selected categories of citizens; citizens would therefore become unequal before the law, some enjoying rights that others will not have, by virtue of their ethnic or geographical origin. [14]

The UK, under Muslim fundamentalists pressure, is in the process of having a parallel court system for family matters. [15], [16], [17] Why family matters? Why focus on women and not on other aspects of 'shari'a law', such as the Islamic penal code with *hud* punishment (i.e. amputating the hands of thieves, or stoning adulterers and adulteresses to death)? Because family laws primarily affect women through rights in marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance, etc. To keep communities at peace, the British government is trading women's rights to choose by their vote the laws under which their family disputes should be settled.

In Canada, they nearly succeeded in obtaining religious arbitration courts in family matters [18], and it is only thanks to a formidable front of women from Muslim countries [19] in support of women from Muslim migrant descent within Canada [20], [21], [22], [23], that this legal provision did not pass.

Step by step, targeting women's rights first, invoking their version of religion, and their selection among the customs and traditions of their countries of origin, the fundamentalist movement uses human rights language and concepts to advance legal changes that are against women's human rights.

Gender segregation and physical attacks on women who do not abide by it

For instance, slowly but surely, they started to impose gender segregation in public spaces or institutions in France. [24] They have already obtained in most French cities the segregation of Muslim women in swimming pools by having separate days or hours reserved for them. They

presently make the same demand for sports equipment and stadiums. One is witnessing the first demands for the abolition of coeducation in schools. [25]

Physical attacks on women are more and more visible. Gangs of young males patrol the suburbs to send girls back home and 'punish' them for supposedly 'un-Islamic behavior', i.e. if they do not abide by boys' rules: breaking these rules includes wearing fashionable clothes, speaking to boys that are not members of the family and stepping out 'after hours' since boys impose a real curfew on girls.

Incidents of stoning to death, acid-throwing or burning alive took place in several cities and made the headlines in the media. For instance, in Marseille, Gofrane Haddaoui, aged 23, was stoned to death; and in Vitry-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, Sohane Benziane, a girl aged 17, was burnt to death in the garbage cell of a housing building. [26], [27] Her ordeal was instrumental in the birth of Ni Putes Ni Soumises (NPNS, 'Neither Whores Nor Submissive').

'Punishment' also includes rape and gang rape. A famous case is that of Samira Bellil, gang-raped from age 13, who became a prominent figure of the NPNS [28], [29] (which will be discussed later).

Lawyers and judges generally agree to say that there is a growing trend among young perpetrators to fail to understand why they are being prosecuted, as they feel culturally and religiously justified committing these acts.

Preachers and social workers

As mentioned in the 'Background' section, the economic situation of people of migrant descent from North Africa is globally more difficult than the situation of the rest of the population. In the suburbs, Muslim fundamentalists are doing the social work that the French state fails to do: they organize classes to help students with difficulties in school, they open sports clubs, they organize relief for poor families and men in jail. With the package comes the veil for women, and backwards religious teaching. Not only have I witnessed this strategy in Algeria, but also in European countries ranging from Finland to Bosnia.

There have been a number of cases in which the media reported on preachers inducing the youth to challenging French laws on violence against women. The Imam of Venissieux (near Lyon), in 2004, publicly preached for wife-beating as an Islamic prescription; after formal warnings and an endless legal procedure for repeatedly breaking French law, he was finally expelled from France. [30], [31], [32] The difficulties encountered in the course of the legal process point to the ambiguities of the political leadership of the French Republic vis-à-vis Muslim preachers.

The Swiss preacher Tariq Ramadan, on prime time television, was cornered by the then Minister of Internal Affairs Nicolas Sarkozy: he refused to condemn the principle of stoning to death for sex outside marriage, barely supporting the idea of a moratorium that would give time to Muslim clerics to discuss the matter. [33] It was a rare occasion, as Ramadan's usual double discourse (one for the audience of youth of Muslim descent in suburbs: clearly fundamentalist, and one for the French media: more moderate) was not easy to pin down. [34], [35]

Under the influence of preachers, claiming cultural and religious rights as their human rights, a small but very vocal minority has undertaken to put into question some basic mores of the French Republic. Men refuse for their wives to be examined by male doctors or taken care of by male nurses in state hospitals. [36] In an already tricky situation where state hospitals are chronically understaffed and do not have enough doctors and nurses, regardless of gender, this is a demand that simply cannot be met. However, men create havoc in hospitals, punching male doctors or nurses who insist on doing their job for the sake of the patient; [37] there have been several incidents when

women in parturition [childbirth] risked their lives, or lost their child for lack of adequate, timely treatment. [38]

Parents refuse that girls attend art, gym and biology classes. They demand the teaching of creationism in state schools. [39], [40] Teaching on religions was recently introduced into the curriculum; but while history teachers teach classes on Christianity and Judaism, fundamentalists demand that imams teach classes on Islam in secular state schools.

As in the US or the UK, they demand entirely halal meals in school, which sparks reactions from non-Muslims. [41], [42], [43]

And of course – this made the news internationally – they demand the right to veil girls under age in state schools. [44], [45] Because it has been so widely – and so wrongly – publicized, I will have to devote some time to straightening the record on this issue.

The veil controversy

Under fundamentalist guidance, over the past two decades (the first case took place in 1989), a growing number of school girls attempted to wear a veil within the premises of their schools, but usually did not persist. However vocal and however growing in number, in actuality they were never numerous. [46] Considering that this made headlines the world over, one can question the political role of the media's reporting.

Girls – whose mothers and grandmothers were either never veiled (be it in France or in their country of origin), or who happily took off their head-covering when settling in France, or who fought against the fundamentalists' veiling diktat in Algeria in the 1990s at the risk of their lives – accepted this symbol for their 'community' identity under preacher' guidance.

Documentary films by Yasmina Benguigui, a French citizen of North African descent, on the history of migrants from North Africa in France retrieved archives that show how women migrating after the Second World War promptly changed their traditional outfit for working class dresses and made use of French laws to step out of their houses and traditional roles; they entered into the labor force and sent their daughters to school, thus allowing a whole generation of young women of migrant descent to climb the social ladder.

Moreover, the veil that girls wear now in France, as well as in the rest of Europe, has nothing to do with any of the traditional forms of head-covering or veiling worn by their fore-mothers in their countries of origin; it is entirely un-traditional, reinvented and alien. [47]

This phenomenon is clearly a political one, as wearing 'the' veil is neither going back to traditions, nor a straightforward religious prescription. The then Great Mufti of Marseille, Soheib Bencheikh, now President of the Institute of High Islamic Studies in Marseille and a strong advocate of French secularism, argues that:

"It is for Muslims to tell their brothers in religion that one should avoid making the Prophet ridiculous when interpreting His words. When the Qur'an recommended the veil, its goal was only to guarantee the dignity and the personality of women, with the means that were available at the time of the Revelation. If, today, this very means does not achieve the same goal, then one should not focus on this means but look for a more appropriate one. Paradoxically, today it is schooling that preserves the personality of the young girl and insures her future. It is through education that a woman can defend herself against any attack on her femininity and her dignity. Today, the veil of the

French Muslim woman, it is the school, and its secular, free and compulsory education". [48]

This demand, detached from all their other demands, has been singled out and highlighted. The refusal of the French state to allow head-covering has been described the world over as a proof of discrimination against 'Muslims'.

It is worth explaining here that, unlike other European countries which define secularism as equal tolerance of the state vis-à-vis all religions (states collect taxes for the Church in Germany, one swears on the Bible in court in the US, while the UK's Head of Church is also Head of State), French secularism refuses any involvement of the state in religious affairs. The state is simply unconcerned with religions. Management of religions is beyond the state's mandate and competence, as per the laws on secularism passed in 1905 and 1906. It is to believers alone to deal with religions. [49]

Accordingly, the French secular school's mission is therefore to raise children as equal citizens, living on par with others – and not as representatives of their 'community', be it ethnic, religious or political; this is why children and their teachers are required not to wear any sign of political or religious affiliation in primary and secondary state schools. This provision is extended to civil servants who, in their function, represent the secular Republic which treats all its citizens with impartiality regardless of their creeds and opinions.

These are the only two cases in which religious affiliation should not be displayed. At no point is the veil or any other sign of religious affiliation forbidden in France. Beyond these limits, restrictions do not fall within the definition of French secularism; they are considered a violation of rights that courts condemn. [50] Due to growing fundamentalist pressure in schools, the laws of 1905–06 were updated in 2005 to reaffirm that no 'obvious signs' of religious affiliation would be accepted in secular schools in France.

One of the successes of fundamentalists' efficient propaganda is that this law, which equally limits signs of religious affiliation for any religion (whether it is crosses for Catholics, kippa for Jewish boys, head-covering for Muslim girls, etc.) and do so for reasons that are highly protective of the human rights of children under age 16, [51] is now known the world over as 'the law against the veil', and interpreted as proof of 'Islamophobia'!

Political representation of so-called 'Muslims' in France

Throughout this essay, I deliberately used the term 'fundamentalists' without explaining who they were in France. It is difficult to account for the numerous groups of 'tabligh' and preachers that exist, or for the charitable organizations officially dealing with cults or services, which one occasionally experience as propagating fundamentalist views; those are often branded 'moderate Muslims' or 'moderate Islamists' (as if the two were to be equated) by the media. It is equally difficult to know where their funding comes from: there is a lack of reliable scholarly research on this issue.

The fact is that 'they' exist and that they prove the cake by eating it: in 2008 alone, Muslim fundamentalists in France made the following steps forward, which could hardly happen by chance and without a concerted effort:

- They obtained in court the annulment of a civil marriage for non-virginity of the bride (that of the groom was not questioned, of course). The lawyer of the husband argued that a contract could be annulled if one of the parties lied about "an essential quality". It was argued that the virginity of the bride was "an essential quality" to the marriage. The state itself appealed the judgment, which was finally reversed on appeal. [52], [53], [54], [55], [56], [57]

- They obtained for a court hearing to be postponed until the end of the Ramadan fast. [58] Needless to say that courts continue to function during Ramadan in Muslim countries themselves and that no lawyer there would dream to ask a judge to postpone a trial on similar grounds.
- They are presently launching a battle around the right of women to wear total covering from head to toe, including while sitting for exams, or contracting a marriage – without possible verification of the identity of the person. [59]

Taken separately, these incidents may not seem so important; but, placed in the context of similar steps taken in Muslim countries and elsewhere in Europe, and seen as a global strategy for deeply changing European democracies, [60] incidents became test cases in the advancement of Muslim fundamentalist ideology.

For instance, the claim for veiling schoolgirls grew in 2005 in France (prior to it were individual cases only), the claim for alternative religious courts in family matters in Canada in 2006, the (alas successful) claim for parallel 'traditional courts' in 2007 in the UK, not to speak of the response of a (female) judge in April 2007 in Germany to a migrant woman seeking a divorce: she refused to register the woman's demand on the ground that 'Muslim women' in her country of origin could not initiate a divorce on the grounds of wife-beating. [61]

Responses to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in France

Before examining the various strategies women use to oppose to fundamentalists in France, we will first look into the context in which they find themselves, with virtually no support from the state or social movements and no means to access media to express their views. We will therefore look into the reactions of the state, of various political and politico-religious groups, of human rights organizations, and of feminists.

The state

As in Algeria, Muslim fundamentalists build on the discontent of the people. The state's failure to fulfill its social obligations, and the lack of adequate social movements capable of canalizing and organizing economic and social protest of the youth of migrant descent, gave space to fundamentalists to do the social work the French state did not do in terms of relief to poor citizens, support to school children and students, extra-curriculum activities for the youth, etc., i.e. to occupy physically the space of suburbs and to organize their troops. They used, supervised and manipulated the 2005 youth riots in the suburbs of Paris.

For years afterwards, the French state disengaged itself from its responsibilities and abandoned its duties vis-à-vis poor, marginalized and jobless citizens of the suburbs: it left a vacancy and allowed Muslim fundamentalist groups to run suburbs as a state within the state, and to actually make law there, to the point that basic services were lacking: police patrols but also postmen, garbage collectors, fire brigades or emergency doctors did not dare step into those areas, especially at night, for fear of being physically attacked. Incidents of stoning, or emergency vehicles being set on fire when these services came to the rescue of people, have been numerous. As in Algeria, fundamentalists identified civil servants with representatives of the 'kofr' state, and, as such, they were 'punished' for collusion with the state.

Teachers could hardly control pupils and were barely supported when pupils refused to attend some classes or let teachers discuss specific subjects (for instance evolution in biology or women's rights), or when violence erupted and crimes were committed within the premises of the school.

Inhabitants and especially women were abandoned to the rule of various sorts of 'Mafiosi', be they drug dealers, gangs or fundamentalist preacher groups. Girls were not protected when controlled, bullied and attacked by male groups for 'un-Islamic' behavior or dress.

Successive governments, both from the right and from the left, showed lack of political clarity and courage; socialist governments started giving in to demands of fundamentalists in schools, and were lax on the question of the veil: instead of seeing it for what it is, i.e. a political flag for Muslim fundamentalists, they moved back on the application of the 1906 law on secularism, calling on heads of school to dialogue and negotiate with the girls and their families. Heads of school were left alone to decide, single-handle, whether or not to apply the law. But when dialogue did not bring a solution, they were blamed for not handling the situation well.

It is interesting to contrast the destructive communal 2005 riots with the 1983 March for Equality, [62] a secular citizens' political movement, led by a handful of progressive young men of migrant descent, that focused on equal rights for all citizens and that aimed at forcing the state to address social and economic discrimination against citizens of North African descent. [63]

The March for Equality met with great popular success, both from people of migrant descent and indigenous French. But the state did not fulfil the promises it made at the time of the march. For lack of an adequate response from the state, in 10 years' time, social struggles against discrimination fell into the hands of extreme right fundamentalist political groups.

The present French government (right) is now faced with a situation in which it chooses, just like other European countries do, to negotiate with 'religious leaders' as legitimate representatives of a 'community', and to give way to their demands in the name of minority rights. In other words, the policy of French governments for several years has been to disengage themselves and delegate to NGOs, including fundamentalists' ones, tasks that pertain to state obligations. In doing so, they only follow the path Europe is forcing them into: the adoption of a policy of multiculturalism – quickly followed by cultural relativism at the cost of women's rights – and the abandonment of French secularism in favor of a state policy of equal tolerance to all religions. The consequence is the eroding of the concept of citizenship and the creation of the concept of communities, which did not exist in France previously. This is an attack on the founding notion of French secularism that all citizens are equal before the law.

The right and the far right

As with all previous migrations into France, migrants and citizens of migrant descent are seen as competing for jobs. But in times of economic crisis, the conservative right pulls this string with even more success.

On the other hand, the very visible fundamentalist activities of lobbying and mobilizing spark a reaction from extreme right and nationalist racist forces in France. They demand the end of emigration, even that acquisition of citizenship be made reversible, i.e. that citizenship could be taken away from those who acquired it recently. [64] It seems that extreme right forces of both fundamentalists and racists work hand in hand, each giving a new impulse to the other: it is particularly clear from their strategic choices that fundamentalists are pushing for more confrontation – as more victimization of more 'Muslims' by French racists will help draw more people into fundamentalist ranks.

If there is Islamophobia in France (a concept one should use with much care, as racism is wrongly but often labelled 'Islamophobia'; this concept should be used only when Islam as a religion – and not people – is being seen as intrinsically evil), it is in these circles of the political extreme right that

it can be found, sometimes.

I will not expand on traditional rightist and xenophobic political forces as their position is well known. However I will point at a new political phenomenon: new secularist organizations were formed in the past few years; they raise their voices against the demands and provocations of Muslim fundamentalists; but they do so in ways that do not distinguish any more between Islam, Muslims, citizens of Muslim heritage and fundamentalists. On many occasions their discourses cannot be distinguished from that of the far right. [65] There is an attempt by the far right to co-opt and corrupt the secular struggle in France.

Other religious fundamentalists

Christian and Jewish fundamentalists generally support Muslim fundamentalists' political demands by way of the media – and vice versa – in the name of freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution. Like Muslim fundamentalists, they seek political representation. Catholics see an opportunity to reverse, even if partly, the 1906 laws on secularism that deprived the Catholic Church of its great influence over the state and in education and health services. This law was in fact designed to curtail the political power of the Church within the French state – at a time when 'the Muslim problem' did not exist. But now that Muslim fundamentalists have taken the lead in combating secularism, other religious forces use their combativeness to regain privileges too.

'Religious leaders' are more and more often called by the state to participate in official consultations. Non-elected, self-appointed representatives 'dialogue' with the state on political affairs. What the Catholic Church could not achieve by itself under French secularism is in the process of being achieved by Muslim fundamentalists, thanks to the communalization of society undertaken by the French state.

President Sarkozy has been giving various signs of a going back on secularism and Church privileges. In a famous discourse in Latran, [66] he stated the "religious roots of France", introduced the concept of 'laïcité positive' that aims at adopting the point of view of equal tolerance of the state vis-à-vis religions, and finally he declared that morality mostly came from religious institutions and that secular school teachers, for lack of access to transcendence and spirituality, will never match priests in the moral education of citizens. Quite recently one of his ministers signed an agreement with the Vatican that gives up on state monopoly over delivering diploma. [67] On both these occasions and many others there was an outcry from French secularists. [68]

The left

The French left at large (socialists, far left parties and the anti-globalization movement) fails to defend secularism. For fear of being seen as racists or anti-Islam, they accept the premises of fundamentalist movements, i.e. that social problems should be analyzed and dealt with as religious discrimination.

Traditionally anti-state, the left and the far left treated Muslim fundamentalism as a social movement of the oppressed and the legitimate representative of 'Muslims'. To a political analysis of social problems, the left substituted a religious and community approach and fell into the trap of multiculturalism; they implicitly accepted to essentialize 'Muslim culture', to see it as a-historical and homogeneous, and without consideration for who defines culture and whether it is young progressive women or old male conservative self-appointed religious leaders.

The left failed to see how multiculturalism induced further fragmentation of the people and a weakening of social struggles. The left media followed them, with the notable exception of the daily

l'Humanité (communist, now representing a numerically very small political force) and the weekly *Marianne* (not affiliated to the socialist party or to the communist party).

The socialist party was the first one to weaken the application of the 1906 law in schools, by making the veiling of girls in state schools a matter of private negotiations between girls, families and heads of schools. [69] It has also been involved in funding of the construction of mosques, while secular laws explicitly forbid the involvement of the state in funding or subsidizing any place of worship. It turned a blind eye to the actual theocratic political program of fundamentalists. Each of their demands was analyzed separately, in the light of tolerance, of religious rights or cultural rights.

As for the anti-globalization movement, both at global level (Porto Alegre 2005, Bombay 2004) and at national levels (France, the UK) it invited Muslim religious preachers. [70]

Human rights organizations

Human right organisations followed the same line: in the name of human rights, the right to difference, religious rights, cultural rights, community rights, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, they end up placing women's rights last. They subsume women's rights to other rights, thus creating for us a highly unfavorable hierarchy of rights. [71]

Both the left and human rights organizations implicitly accepted the fundamentalists' claim that anyone from Muslim countries or born and raised in Muslim families is Muslim. This was even denounced by progressive Muslim clerics. In Soheib Bencheikh's words:

"It is difficult and even impossible to say precisely the number of Muslims living in France, whether foreigners or French citizens. Estimations by some journalists are approximate and impossible to verify... These estimations only take into account the geographical origin of the person: anyone coming from Maghreb or West Africa is considered Muslim. Thus is declared Muslim any Turk or anyone from a country where Islam is the religion of the majority". [72]

Human rights organizations are thus denying women of migrant origin one of the major human rights: freedom of conscience, freedom of belief, freedom of thought. They are denying the mere existence of secular people, agnostics, atheists or even believers who do not choose religion as the main marker of their identity or those who want their faith to remain a private affair - i.e. they are denying basic human rights to the vast majority of presumed 'Muslims', as we have seen that those do represent the vast majority of the population of migrant descent.

Feminists

Very much along the same lines, French feminists remained divided as to the analysis of Muslim fundamentalism in France; to the extreme disappointment of anti-fundamentalist women from migrant descent, whether secular or believers, only some feminists put women's rights first in the hierarchy of human rights, while others seemed not only petrified by the fear of being seen as anti-Islam, but also cornered by the longstanding support of the feminist movement for diversity. Focusing on French colonial guilt in France, [73] but on diversity in other places, [74] they make women from migrant descent, their analysis and their demands for their women's rights, further invisible.

Strategies of women of migrant Muslim descent

Having been abandoned by the organizations, parties and movements that should have been their

natural allies, with limited access to the media, and facing an attempt to be used politically by the far right, [75] women of migrant Muslim descent were put in a situation where they had to take the lead in combating the fundamentalist agenda in France. Based on their prior direct or indirect (i.e. family-based) knowledge of the political agenda and the strategies of Muslim fundamentalists, they not only acted upon the situation in multiple ways, but also produced and still produce numerous analyses, statements, artwork, etc. that actually transfer their competence to a French audience far too easily abused by fundamentalists.

Numerous organizations blossomed. They share a common struggle against Muslim fundamentalists. However, each of them may focus on countering one or several specific aspects of fundamentalists' attacks. Collectively, these different organizations tackle and cover the whole range of areas where Muslim fundamentalists advance their pawns: from defending women's rights on the ground to lobbying the state, as well as European and international institutions, from supporting secularism in schools to actively promoting alternative versions of Islam, from doing ground work with the youth to addressing the ideological uncertainties and the cowardice of the left, the anti-globalization movement and human rights organizations - while all the time being active against racism and discrimination. Active networking facilitates an informal sharing of tasks, and mutual support in emergency cases.

Women's organizations of migrant Muslim descent operate at three levels: political, conceptual and social movement:

- At political level, they work nationally and internationally; nationally, they lobby the state and defend secularism, internationally they work within the UN system, especially with the CEDAW Commission and the Commission on the Status of Women, and with the various special rapporteurs.
- At conceptual level, they produce knowledge, in the form of political, sociological, historical and philosophical analysis, but also artwork. They challenge the dominant ideology and its subsequent use of terminology.
- At movement level, they disseminate this knowledge with various audiences, from government officials to grassroots. They set up support systems for individual women threatened by or victims of fundamentalist violations, by making their cases public, going to court on their behalf, setting up women's refuges, running awareness campaigns.

Each organization usually develops several strategies. However, one organization usually takes the lead nationally by specifically developing expertise in one strategy: I will therefore introduce some of the major women's organizations, focusing on their main strategy or strategies.

Forcing the state to fulfill its obligations - the case of NPNS

As fundamentalists grow in the political and social vacuum left by the French state, an organization took the lead in developing a strategy to force the French state to fulfill its obligations vis-à-vis French citizens of migrant descent.

At national level, this has been the main strategy, in suburbs especially, of a group that developed into a nationwide, then European-wide, organization: Ni Putes Ni Soumises. [76] Their provocative name typically speaks to the inhabitants of the suburbs: it refers to the alternative left to girls in the suburbs to be either considered as prostitutes - and 'punished' as such - if they lead the normal life of a French girl their age, or to bend to fundamentalist rules of behavior, dress code, etc. Although NPNS is a gender-mixed organization, it is predominantly female, it has been set up by a group of women and it has always been led by women. Its very well-known and very vocal first president was

Fadela Amara who later became State Secretary under Sarkozy: she was especially appointed to draw a policy for solving social problems in the suburbs.

NPNS firmly locates the problems faced by women of migrant descent into the realm of politics. Initiated in 2003, immediately after the horrible murder of Sohane burnt alive in a garbage cell, NPNS repeatedly challenged the state and forced it to bring the institutions of the Republic back into the suburbs, i.e. to send police patrols, fire brigades and urgent medical help, as well as postmen or garbage collectors. For NGOs to call on the state law and order is not a strategy which is often used in France. NPNS women claim from the state the rights and services they are entitled to as citizens. They do not tolerate any parallel system of justice or policing in the suburbs. Forcing the state's services back there actually cuts the grass under fundamentalists' feet who use the vacuum left by the state to create their own rules and codes of conduct. Thanks to their action, more law and order came back into the affected areas.

NPNS works with several ministries: Foreign Affairs; Justice; National Education, Health, Youth and Sports; Women's Rights and Equality; the Agency for National Cohesion and Equality (ACSE). NPNS also organises debates and makes statements to the press. NPNS published an educational guide on 'respect' and distributed more than 10,000 copies in schools. It also gives conferences and provides trainings on this theme.

At grassroots level, NPNS has a support system for female victims of violence: it runs hiding places for emergency cases, with counseling and orientation; since 2006, there is a temporary housing place for victims of forced marriages that catered to the needs of 16 women, out of whom 12 left the house having acquired personal housing and employment.

NPNS also runs four major ongoing campaigns and actions, with the help of its 40 Committees [77] located in various parts of the country. One campaign is devoted to supporting the 'mothers' in the suburbs, as opposed to the 'brothers' setting the rules and controlling women and girls. This campaign produced two educative visuals showing mother and son interacting. [78]

A second campaign is called Secularism, Equality, Co-education. It links the three concepts as interdependent from one another. In this campaign NPNS states that secularism promotes gender equality and that it is the cornerstone that guarantees the "republican pact" [79] of equality between all citizens. As for coeducation, NPNS supports the laws that promoted the mixing of girls and boys in schools in France. The organization points to the threat to women's rights by fundamentalists who challenge the very principle of these laws in the name of cultural and religious rights.

A third campaign is the struggle against violence against women. NPNS has been very active in denouncing crimes committed against women that were inspired by fundamentalist ideology. A main achievement of NPNS was to propose a law that was passed by the National Assembly on 13 December 2005: according to this law, when violence is committed against a girl or a woman by a member of her family, this close family tie will be considered by the court as aggravating circumstances; NPNS also fought legally against forced marriages and marriage under age. A fourth campaign is the struggle against discrimination, sexism and homophobia. [80]

After the murder of Chaharazade in Neuilly-sur-Marne, NPNS organised what they called a "republican Tour de France" against racism and anti-Semitism, pretty much on the model of the Marche des Beurs. Like the Marche des Beurs, they met with huge success and numerous people joined them on the way. Starting 1 February 2003, this Women's March Against Ghettos and for Equality ended up with 30,000 followers on 8 March. Marchers stopped in 23 towns and villages, to discuss the following themes with the inhabitants: sexuality, rape and collective rapes, discrimination, sexist violations, the republic, ghettos, the weight of traditions, religion and

secularism, forced marriages, organized youth gangs, women's NGOs, femininity in the suburbs, and fundamentalism.

Although none of these violations is specific to fundamentalist groups, all are perpetrated by fundamentalists too. But when NPNS states that it struggles against all forms of discrimination against women, listing specifically: racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, discrimination, physical and psychological violence, oppressive traditions, as well as pressures to enforce veiling, to quit school, to marry early, to be deprived of choosing one's husband, to prevent girls from attending biology classes, to enjoy coeducation, to separate women from men in swimming pools and public spaces, to be prevented from living one's sexual and emotional life, to own one's body and one's life, one can see that this long list points at many types of violations that are specific to Muslim fundamentalists in France. NPNS adds that they combat communalism, obscurantism and cultural relativism, which they define as "transforming the right to difference into difference in rights".

At international level, [81] NPNS opposes cultural relativism and fights for universal rights. NPNS produced a shadow report in 2008 on the situation of women's rights in France and testified at CSW. NPNS has consultative status with the UN.

Challenging forced religious identities - the case of secular Muslims in France and ex-Muslims in Germany and the UK

These groups developed a strategy that consists in untying faith from ethnic origin and challenging the automatic labeling of 'Muslim' for all those born or raised in Muslim countries or Muslim families, or whose ancestors came from Muslim communities. Khedidja Bourcart, Deputy-Major of the City of Paris, points to what she calls a "semantic drift". [82] Something that would be so obvious if we were talking, say, of European women, who, regardless of the fact that they are living under laws that historically derive from the mores of Christians, would be appalled if they were all labelled Christians, is hardly accepted when it comes to people of migrant Muslim descent. Both believers and unbelievers fight this battle over religious identities.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) has done groundbreaking work in this matter. Since 1984, it has been one of the main conceptual battles of this international solidarity network (whose international coordination office was based in France for 18 years, and is now in the UK). WLUML defines itself as a non-faith-based organization and works with women whose lives are shaped and governed by laws said to be derived from Islam - whether they themselves are believing Muslims or not. [83] Twenty-five years later, despite taking stands on numerous occasions, the WLUML network is still frequently described by outsiders as 'a Muslim women's network', and by Muslim fundamentalists as 'an anti-Islam organization'... Such is the resistance to de-link religion from cultural or ethnic origin.

The first French group to develop specifically this strategy in 2003 was the gender-mixed group, *Musulmans Laïques de France* ('Secular Muslims of France'), [84] which later changed its name to *Maghrebins Laïques de France* ('Secular Maghrebians of France'). It is predominantly composed of Muslim believers, men and women, including the Great Mufti of Marseille, Soheib Bencheikh, himself a fierce defender of secularism which he sees as the guarantee for Muslims to believe and practice in France, who nevertheless refuse to be branded Muslims without being asked about their personal faith. [85] Their manifesto clearly challenged the misuse of the concept of Muslim:

"We denounce the culture of hatred and violence in the name of Islam which shows a reactionary thinking. The ongoing surrealistic debate over the Islamic scarf, a true flag of political Islam, the challenging of French secularism, should not blur the fact that the issue is for France and for the French people to refuse and resist the grounding on our soil of an ideology which is dangerous,

perverse and moreover lethal for the republic. This ideology is propagated by supposedly representative movements which in fact hijack all Muslims in France. As secular Muslims deeply attached to France, we are the first victims of these manipulations. We should therefore be the avant garde and the first ones to react and engage without failing into the defense of the ". [86]

In wake of the "pressures and manipulations" they suffer from fundamentalists, stating that their "freedom of conscience and their freedom of expression" is called into question, the secular Muslims call on mobilizing for "the defense of a modern conception of Islam in agreement with the times, the laws and the values of the republic, in particular secularism and total equality between citizens of both sexes, for the defense of free thinking and individual freedom, against fundamentalism and obscurantism".

Despite their straightforward stand for secularism, I will not present the defense of secularism as their main strategy: their main conceptual contribution is the challenge of the term 'Muslim' applied to non-believers of migrant descent. This initiative was followed by the more radical group d'Ailleurs ou d'Ici Mais Ensemble (AIME). [87] Led by a woman, it regroups secularists, agnostics, apostates, atheists, free thinkers and ex-Muslims. It is the first time in France that people define themselves as ex-Muslims.

But it is only after the 'Danish cartoons controversy', with the setting up of the radical gender-mixed organization in Germany, the Council of Ex-Muslims [88] on 28 February 2007 in Berlin, that the term will become popular. Within months, in June of the same year, a Council of ex-Muslims emerged in the UK. The organization is expanding to other parts of Europe: it is presently in the making in France. Although the French Council of ex-Muslims is not yet formalized, it inherits and benefits from its predecessors' groundbreaking epistemological work.

If one thinks for one minute that apostasy deserves the death penalty in the eyes of fundamentalists, one can evaluate the risks these people are taking, for the sake of clarifying concepts and standing for their right not to have a faith label imposed on them on the ground of origins. Not only does it breach the taboo of apostasy in Islam, but paradoxically, by its very name, it forces European people not to brand them 'Muslims'.

It is certainly not by accident that both the Councils of ex-Muslims in Germany and in the UK are led by women, both of Iranian descent. Both received death threats after setting up the organizations.

Mina Ahadi, the founder of the Council in Germany, says that she wants to "highlight the difficulty of renouncing the Islamic faith"; she wants the Council to "help women renounce the Islamic faith if they feel oppressed by its laws". Like the Secular Muslims of France before her, she points at the need to "form a counter weight to Muslim organizations that do not adequately represent Germany's secular minded 'Muslim' immigrants". In an interview conducted on the eve of the launching of the Council of ex-Muslims, on 27 February 2007, she clearly points at the responsibility of German authorities:

"The associations pretend they represent everyone and to some extent are acknowledged as such by the German side... I am critical of Islam in Germany and of the way the German government deals with the issue of Islam. Many Muslim organizations, like the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) or Milli Görüs, engage in politics or interfere in people's everyday lives... Their aims are hostile to women and to people in general... They want to force women to wear the headscarf, they promote a climate in which girls are not allowed to have boyfriends or go to discos and in which homosexuality is demonized". [89]

In their manifesto entitled 'Together facing the new totalitarianism', the ex-Muslims state that they

do not desire to be represented by regressive Islamic organizations and “Muslim community leaders”; they demand freedom to criticize religion, separation of religion from the state and “protection of children from manipulation and abuse by religious institutions”.

Maryam Namazie, founder of the Council of ex-Muslims in Britain, said on BBC News on 21 June 2007 that “we are quite certain we represent a majority in Europe and a vast secular and humanist protest movement in countries like Iran.” The new organization would be a branch of a growing network of secular ‘ex-Muslims’ who oppose the interference of religion in public life. The new group will be an alternative voice to bodies like the Muslim Council of Britain, she told the BBC, saying that many people who disagree with the opinions of religious leaders are scared of speaking out: “We do not think that people should be pigeonholed as Muslims or deemed to be represented by regressive organizations like the MCB.” She urged governments to stop dealing with Islamic organizations that were pushing their values on other people and limiting free speech. [\[90\]](#)

Opposing the application in France of foreign anti women legislation - The case of 20 Ans Barakat and A Women’s Initiative for Citizenship and Universal Rights (WICUR)

Fundamentalist claims for Islamic laws on the grounds of religious and community rights reached France. Many are already demanding what their counterparts in the UK already obtained: so-called shari’a courts as a parallel justice system for presumed Muslims. Each community, they say, should be governed by their own laws according to their culture and their religion. Fighting this claim requires dismantling the myth of a uniform Muslim world and of a unique divine Islamic law. It also requires scrutiny of family laws with the filter of women’s human rights and universal rights.

As fundamentalists pretend that there is one unique divine law for all Muslims, there was some preliminary work to be done regarding the myth and realities of Muslim laws in various Muslim countries and communities throughout the world. This work was undertaken by WLUMI which provided analysis and scholarly articles that help dismantle fundamentalist propaganda regarding the homogeneity of the Muslim world and the myth of one divine law. It ran a 10-year study in 40 Muslim countries – looking at laws affecting women specifically (marriage, divorce, custody and guardianship of children upon divorce, inheritance, freedom of movement, etc.), how different they were from one another from one country to the other, how they are applied specifically to women, what is their origin (whether they come from religious interpretations, customary laws and practices, colonial laws), the coexistence of different systems of law (state, customary, religious) and how and when one legal system supersedes the other. [\[91\]](#) This exercise demonstrated that ‘Muslim laws’ were extremely diverse from one country to the other, that they grant very different rights to women: from being secluded and given in marriage as a child, to living a fairly autonomous life, working, voting, becoming head of state...

The claim by Muslim fundamentalists in France (and in Europe) that they are entitled to ‘the’ Islamic law (singular) as part of their religious human rights can now immediately be challenged: which of these diverse existing Muslim laws is ‘the’ divine law and who is entitled to decide upon it?

We already saw with the case of annulment of marriage for non-virginity of the bride that judges in France are prepared to bend to fundamentalists.

France, alas, does not have the monopoly of diplomatic cowardice. WLUMI’s scholarly work and active international networking helped, for instance, to prevent a British judge in the late 1980s in London [\[92\]](#) to grant a ‘Muslim divorce’ to a man, that would have deprived his wife of property and guardianship of their children.

The husband, originally from Nigeria, and the wife, originally from Pakistan, were students in the

UK. They met there and married under British law. When the man sought a divorce he claimed he was a Muslim and requested the judge to grant him his 'Islamic rights': the wife, herself a Muslim too, would have been deprived of the guardianship of their daughter and of an equal share to the couple's property. When WLUMI wrote to the judge requesting him to refuse and to dissolve the marriage under the very rules under which it had been contracted, he ignored us and gave guarantees to the husband that he would be granted his 'Islamic rights'. But when, thanks to this research, we submerged him with cases of Muslim divorce settlements from many Muslim countries which all granted different rights to the women concerned, when we asked him how he, a British judge, could decide which of all those were an actual Islamic judgment, he understood the complexity of the situation he was going to step into and divorced them under British law. The wife got her share of their common house and guardianship of their daughter.

In France not only do judges take into account what they think is 'Muslim law' (for instance in the above mentioned annulment of marriage), but France - through bilateral agreements and procedures of exequatur - introduced the family laws of the Maghreb on its soil, for some of its citizens.

It would be bad enough if it were applied to foreigners, since these laws violate CEDAW to which France is a signatory; but it is also applied to French citizens of migrant North African descent, on the ground that their countries of origin claim them as citizens, even against their will. To give a concrete example, it means that, for instance, if the French-born daughter of a man who migrated to France before she was born marries a man from Algerian origin in France, under French laws, she can be repudiated in Algeria without being informed of it, and that France will officially confirm this 'divorce', its terms and conditions. It is enough for the man to go to Algeria - for instance on summer vacations to visit his parents - and register repudiation there, using his double (French/Algerian) citizenship. His wife will not be informed as she does not live in Algeria. He will get the material benefits of laws that discriminate against women: she will not get alimony, nor a fair share of the couple's properties, nor guardianship of the children, which she would be entitled to had the divorce taken place in France. The legal decision in Algeria is then automatically transcribed onto French registrars, thanks to exequatur of judgments between France and Algeria. She will, one day, much to her surprise, receive an official letter from a French judge, stating that France acknowledges the divorce, its terms and conditions.

Hence, a French woman of migrant descent can be informed by mail and by a French judge that she has been unilaterally divorced by her husband in Algeria and that this judgment is legal and applicable in France. Thus French citizens can be deprived of their legal rights, in France.

As a consequence, Algerian women have taken the lead in linking up the struggle against the Algerian Family Code and the struggle against its direct or indirect application in France. The organization 20 Ans Barakat took the lead in this struggle, both in France and in Algeria. Established in 2004, 20 Ans Barakat ('20 Years is Enough') [93], [94] - a name that refers to the fact that 20 years passed since the adoption of this infamous family code in 1984 - has members and chapters on both sides of the Mediterranean; they persistently denounce cases when women are discriminated through family laws. They have been extremely inventive in their methods of awareness-raising: they were particularly successful with using art. For instance they produced a range of posters that were made by the most prominent Algerian painters (men and one woman) in Algeria, and organized a competition of posters made by women in France. Their biggest success is a song and a video clip against the family code which has been used throughout Algeria and France when there are rallies and demos. [95] Beautifully produced and sung in Arabic, Berber and French - the three languages spoken in Algeria - it is a very moving and forceful work.

France is reluctant to denounce bilateral agreements with North African countries, as it pretends

that it protects French citizens living abroad who are entitled to be judged by the laws of their home country. This seems to be a clear discrimination between 'indigenous' French citizens who are entitled to the protection of the state when they live abroad, and French citizens of migrant descent living on French soil who are legally sent back to their 'origins'.

Legal discrimination on French soil using foreign legislation sparked the birth of another organization that focuses on universal rights: born in 2009, out of both WLUML and 20 Ans Barakat, A Women's Initiative for Citizenship and Universal Rights (WICUR) is now taking the lead in confronting cultural relativism and demanding one law for all in France. It aims at helping:

"...these French women born into migrant families and those migrant women [who] are confronted to dramatic situations because of the 'implicit' recognition of culture (repudiation, polygamy, forced marriage, FGM, honor crimes)... Instead of egalitarian civil laws, personal status laws justify the inferiorisation of women. In France and in other European countries, we witness a denial of justice towards them and a denial of citizenship". [96]

These examples allow better understanding of the range of possible actions to be taken while fighting against the introduction and application in France of foreign legislation to women of migrant descent in the name of religious rights and cultural rights. Women have to be self-reliant in the wake of European authorities' lack of eagerness to apply their own laws to defend women of migrant Muslim descent. It also underlines the importance of the work done by NPNS, when it forces the French government to take its responsibilities vis-à-vis citizens of migrant descent.

Production of knowledge, herstory vs myth: documentary and fiction films on and by women of migrant descent - the case of Yasmina Benguigui

I already mentioned several types of production of knowledge by women of migrant descent: scholarly work; political, sociological, historical analysis; publication of books and articles – such as the WLUML Handbook on Family Laws in Muslim countries, Knowing Our Rights, or Women's Against Fundamentalisms' information guide on women's rights in France. They help fight misconceptions about Islam, Muslims, religious law(s), culture and universal rights, and can be used in lobbying and in the media. Moreover, this production needs to be made accessible to activists. Most organizations described here are engaged in some form of production of knowledge from women's perspective. There is a crying need for acknowledging and widely circulating this work. However, media and publishers do not give it sufficient visibility.

I would like here to give prominence to a different type of production of knowledge that reaches out to large audiences: films and telefilms. Artists play a very important awareness-raising role. The song and clip produced by 20 Ans Barakat did more to popularize the struggle of Algerian women against the family code, whether inside Algeria, in France or in Europe, than any written production.

It would not be possible here to name all the artists, film-makers, political humorists and cartoonists, writers and singers of North African descent that contribute individually to enlighten French opinion regarding fundamentalists, among whom are important female figures. Due to colonization, French is still the main language for most educated people, even if they migrated recently. This indeed facilitates artists' work being circulated between France and Algeria.

Yasmina Benguigui was born in Lille, France in 1957 to Algerian parents. She is the councillor of Paris's mayor on human rights and on struggle against discrimination. She has also been a member of the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration ('High Council for Integration') since 2006. [97] Documentary films by Yasmina Benguigui retracing the history of the first North African women migrants through film archives are a living testimony of the behavioral shift that women had to make over the last

decades to bend to Muslim fundamentalists' rules in France. From unveiled working class foremothers running their household, making sure their daughters went to school and climbed the social ladder, their grand-daughters are hunted down by young males in suburbs for 'un-Islamic' behavior and to cover themselves.

Yasmina Benguigui's films had a big impact in France and were seen by many people, both on television and in cinema theaters. Her documentary work on the history of immigration, identity quest and racism through personal testimonies, entitled *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1998 on TV; 2004 in cinema halls), her documentary work in the television series *Women of Islam* (1994) for the France 2 channel and short films such as *12 Ways to Look at Everyday Racism* (2001) received numerous awards. Her 2008 fiction film, *Aisha*, shows a girl from the suburbs of Paris facing male violence, forced marriage and discrimination in employment. It was shown on the France 2 channel. [98]

Fighting for secularism: the case of Secularism Is A Women's Issue (SIAWI)

Established in 2007, Secularism Is A Women's Issue (SIAWI) is a network that was set up in response to the shrinking space for secularism in France, as well as in the rest of Europe under the pressure of fundamentalist religious forces. [99] While in France it is Muslim fundamentalism that is the most visible and active in demanding that the state abandons secularism and adopts separate religiously or culturally inspired legislations for different categories of citizens, in Eastern Europe, the Orthodox and Catholic Churches have a prominent role.

SIAWI started in France, on the initiative of Algerian women who witnessed Muslim fundamentalism successes and felt they were going to experience in France the same attacks they had fled from in Algeria. It rapidly expanded in Europe to Serbia, Italy, the UK, as well as in India and now Central and Latin America. It monitors secular space, the rise of fundamentalism and its consequences on women's rights and democratic freedom, by publishing news items, mostly in English and French, but occasionally also in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Serbo-Croatian.

SIAWI's work concentrates on a website that makes visible the resistance of women against the abandonment of secular laws. While many organizations do speak for secularism in their manifestos, it did not coalesce into a movement devoted to its defense. SIAWI pointed to the urgency of setting up a network that would draw attention to the growing threat of religious fundamentalism, and the cowardice of the state, human rights organizations and progressive parties on this issue, and pull together these diverse but occasional efforts made by people and mostly women from migrant descent.

SIAWI launches campaigns in defense of threatened secularists. [100]

It initiated a video program, *Women Speak on Secularism*, where leading feminists from around the world are interviewed on the state of the art regarding secularism in their countries, on the recent rise of religious fundamentalism and identifying the political forces behind it, and on the backlash against women's rights. This program aims at raising awareness among women activists on the need to associate secularism and the defense of women's rights, and on the crucial role they can play.

SIAWI took the lead in drawing public attention to the adverse consequences of the first UN resolution 61/164 on 'Defamation of religions and their prophets', and the subsequent resolution of the Human Rights Council A/HRC/4/2 [101] : these resolutions resulted from an intense lobbying of the UN by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), after the Danish cartoons controversy. The recent controversy around Durban II made clear to the world that the OIC is pursuing its intense lobbying of international institutions. [102]

I will discuss in the 'Backlash' section the fact that it is very important to make the voices of women of migrant Muslim descent heard in the worldwide secular movement, for extreme right racist elements in disguise started an entryist policy on apparently secular websites; some of them are advocating that veiled women should be firmly asked to leave or unveil, even in public spaces... This is a far cry from the spirit of French secularism: it is an attempt to hide and justify racist xenophobic reactions.

Working on the ground: the case of Africa 93 and of Women Against Fundamentalisms

Africa 93 is an energizing example of what numerous women's groups do at grassroots level in France. It would be wrong to assume that migrant women's organizations work at national or international levels only: hundreds of local groups are working with people, linking the struggle against racism, the struggle for economic and social rights, and the struggle against fundamentalism and for secularism. Africa 93 organises social and political work inside a poor suburb of Paris, to challenge the hegemony of fundamentalist groups over the population as sole providers of services that the state fails to provide. Led by Mimouna Hadjam, a woman very deeply rooted in the North African migrant working class, Africa 93, through activities and various forms of teaching, enhances political analysis that will facilitate resistance to fundamentalists' propaganda, and develops the initiatives and self-reliance of the youth and women. [\[103\]](#)

Located in a popular suburb of Paris that hosts 80 nationalities, which is, in Mimouna's terms, a "zone of ghettoization" and "economic violence", Africa 93 is a gender-mixed organization with 90 per cent women. It works with grass roots at the lowest level, locally, in a mix of educational activities and relief programs: it organizes outings for the youth – boys and girls together – and meetings with other youth outside the suburb, movie shows, conferences, debates, concerts, etc. It has a 'cultural café' that attracts lots of young people and women. Africa 93 also lobbies local parliamentarians to solve housing problems and employment of the local population.

Africa 93 fights for women's rights against husband and family violence, and against the family code in Algeria and its repercussions on women in France. It has a very strong anti-fundamentalist stand: Mimouna herself has been physically attacked and the offices of Africa 93 ransacked. There is a lack of state protection for anti-fundamentalist women in France. She is "worried about the return of moral order, and of this religiosity in political discourses".

Numerous organizations monitor and campaign against fundamentalists' activities against women and defend the rights of individual women when they are attacked. It ranges from campaigning against forced marriages or hate speech in mosques to fighting individual cases of women's human rights violations: forced marriages, abduction of children, FGM, etc.

WLUML was the first organization, since 1984, to initiate campaigns for individual girls married off 'back home' during holidays against their will, children abducted to the country of origin of the father upon divorce, etc. Its wide network in Muslim countries made it possible to track disappeared girls or children, to find free legal aid in the countries of origin, to find hiding places in France, etc. It gave visibility to problems that were not talked of before. Usually relying on the sole will of our networkers, we were often confronted by the diplomatic cowardice of the French state which refused to intervene and rescue their own citizens. On one occasion [\[104\]](#) in the late 1980s, a girl aged 16 (therefore under age), was abducted from a women's refuge, drugged and transported illegally across borders from France to Algeria to be forcibly married there. Her brothers were the ones who abducted her from the shelter; they lived in Toulouse, France; the abduction and drugging crimes were committed on French soil. They were responsible for the illegal border crossing. Only the forced marriage was performed in Algeria.

However, the minister of family affairs (at that time a woman, Yvette Roudy) whom we called upon, responded in writing that "France could not interfere in Algerian internal affairs." This is the response that French authorities gave to a crime committed in France. Diplomatic cowardice has no limit when it comes to protecting the basic rights of female citizens from migrant Muslim descent. It so happened that the girl was sought for and finally located, freed and given an Algerian lawyer who obtained the annulment of her forced marriage; the Algerian authorities gave her a plane ticket to go back to Toulouse - where she was born and raised - as she wished. This was done exclusively thanks to a chain of committed women activists in France and Algeria, when it should have been legally fought by France. This story illustrates the double standards of France, and the fact that women had to rely on their own forces. We have umpteen experiences of this type.

While WLUML was for a long time the only organization large enough to be able to mobilize internationally on cases of individual women in France or Europe, many other organizations did important work at local level: Femmes Contre les Intégrismes (FCI, 'Women Against Fundamentalisms'), a women's organization based in Lyon, monitors attacks on women's rights by all religious fundamentalisms and mobilizes against them to defend women's rights. FCI produced an excellent information guide for women who are foreigners or from foreign origin living in France, entitled *Madame, vous avez des droits!* ('Madam, you have rights!'). First published in 1999, 15,000 copies of this guide were reprinted for the fourth time in 2008. It states that:

"The principle of equal treatment between citizens and foreigners and the principle of equality between men and women are guaranteed by the French state. But reality and practices often contradict these principles. In practical terms, women of foreign origin are discriminated against. This discrimination is not to be tolerated on French soil."

It urges Europe to use human rights to put limits to religion, and specifically to refuse to apply on their soil foreign family laws that discriminate against women and to denounce bilateral agreements; to take a stand in various international bodies, such as the UN, against violations of women's rights justified by cultural and religious relativism, specifically to protect women's "physical integrity, freedom of movement, right to choose their partners, against honor crimes, forced marriages, FGM, wherever these crimes are committed and whatever justification for it". [\[105\]](#)

Fighting the veil for girls under age in primary and secondary state schools - the case of RAFD

The main contribution of all the organizations of migrant women and women of migrant descent united together on this issue was to prevent the veiling of girls under age 16 in French state schools when Muslim fundamentalists challenged this legal provision of the 1906 law on secularism.

At the time of the veil controversy in French schools, women of migrant Muslim descent went all-out in defense of secular laws. It is thanks to their sustained efforts that the then socialist government did not give in to the demands of fundamentalists who were largely supported by human rights organizations, while the left hesitated in a cowardly fashion to support women secular activists.

While demonstration after demonstration took place in all main cities of France in support of secularism, while women of Muslim descent were taking all the risks, going public on television, radio and in women's magazines, only two French papers opened their columns to these women (already cited above: *l'Humanité* and *Marianne*).

As for the international media, charmed with the exoticism of 'the Muslims', they filled their pages with reports and images of the only two small Paris-based demonstrations of veiled women which, flanked with bearded men, demanded the end of secular laws. Our outspoken statements,

demonstrations, etc. were ignored.

Zazi Sadou, the spokesperson of Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocrates (RAFD – ‘rafd’ also means ‘refusal’ in Arabic) took a leading role in this battle in France. Set up in 1993 in Algiers, at the peak of fundamentalists’ onslaught on people and specifically on women, RAFD “gathered women who aimed at creating a space for struggle for all women and above all for resisting fundamentalism and terrorism”. “Some of the women who set up RAFD were NGO activists but most were housewives and many were in rural areas”; Zazi Sadou defines RAFD as “a women’s NGO” composed of “feminists inspired by a feminist vision of politics, with the aim to achieve equality of rights”. [106]

To do that, they only relied on their own forces, financial and otherwise: they did not apply for funding; all they needed came from donations of activists and allies. It was all done on a voluntary basis. RAFD undertook many actions in Algeria and, when several of its members took refuge, in France too.

In Algeria, they have an impeccable record of defying fundamentalist armed groups at the risk of their lives. They organized support and relief to the victims of fundamentalist armed groups, from providing basic utensils to those whose houses had been burnt, destroyed, ransacked, to supporting female school teachers who defied the orders of fundamentalist armed groups and re-opened their classes after attacks on villages, despite the threats, to organizing education and training programs for girls who survived armed fundamentalist raids on their villages. They instituted the Award for Women’s Resistance against Fundamentalism and against Forgetting. [107] This award was officially given each year to one or several women resisters – in one occasion post mortem – during a formal ceremony held in a public space in the heart of Algiers, while death threats were issued by fundamentalist groups against them and while both the state and private owners of conference rooms refused to rent space to them, for fear of armed attacks.

When RAFD took action in France too, its first-hand experience of the horrors of fundamentalists’ rule over women in Algeria made its contribution invaluable. RAFD undertook circulation of information and lobbying for secular laws. It engaged in the production of publications and films that showed women’s resistance to veiling.

RAFD members were invited to speak everywhere in France – and not just in the capital city – and in other countries. They testified endlessly on the fate done to women by fundamentalists when they gain power, dismantling the liberal idea that veiling girls was an innocuous step to be tolerated in the name of respect for the culture or religion of the ‘other’, producing evidence that it was only a first step on the way to a theocratic state.

Zazi Sadou’s testimony to the Stasi Commission showed the parallel in fundamentalist strategies between France and Algeria; she gave first-hand accounts of the dangers of letting such political forces grow and trying to compromise with them in a vain attempt to limit their greed for total power.

Fadela Amara, the then President of NPNS also took a firm stand. A believer herself, she said:

“Today, it is crucial for living together in our country to reaffirm the two principles of secularism and equality between sexes... The veil is not, as they would like us to believe, a religious obligation for Muslim women. This symbol of submission represents the seal of humiliation for women and the marker of a forever-minor status that they try to impose on women... Only a law that will reaffirm these two indissociable principles of secularism and equality between sexes will protect the girls of the suburbs and further protect the status of women.”

However, it is Chaddortt Djavann (originally from Iran) who for the first time examined veiling of school girls under the age of 16, in primary and secondary schools, from the angle of the human rights of the girl child. In a powerful essay entitled 'Bas les voiles' ('Down with the veils', but this is also a sailor's call for bringing down the sails on ships), an essay that she submitted to the Stasi Commission, she argues that hiding supposedly erotic parts of their bodies – in that case, their hair – marks the psyche of the girl child forever, making her responsible for inciting men's lust from an early age and guilty of his misbehavior and sexual crimes. She stated:

"I am convinced that veiling minors should be forbidden in the whole of the country. In the name of equality between minors of all origins, religions and gender, I demand that the veil on minors, this veil that stigmatizes their female sexuality, this veil whose scars they will bear throughout their lives, be considered as ill treatment."

She was speaking from experience as she herself was veiled from the age of seven in Iran. Direct experience of what we were talking about is what gave such an impact to the voices of migrant women or women of migrant descent. For us all, it was sheer survival and we had to engage all our forces in this battle, otherwise we would experience again in France what we had just fled from in Algeria or in Iran.

Unheard women voices

It is my deeply rooted certitude that this battle will definitely not have been won in France without the dedicated activism of women from migrant Muslim descent. These women do know what we have to lose if France allows fundamentalists to speak for us and make laws that will govern us. We won this battle, facing the silence of the left and the opposition of human rights organizations.

Giving back the floor to ordinary women from migrant Muslim descent, here is what they had to say when they were interviewed by women's magazines:

"The veil is meant to avoid provoking the desire of men. This is a way to alleviate their responsibility and to potentially charge us with guilt – I cannot accept that!" (Meryem, age 23, student in Paris).

"I stand for all mixed spaces: in school, in the swimming pool, in marriage, in the suburbs... otherwise one moves from geographical ghetto to mental ghetto and to communalism." (Farida, 27, social worker, Narbonne)

"When I hear a girl say: The veil protects me, I respond: No, it is the Republic that protects you." (Meriem, 25, lawyer)

"The Muslim woman is not a veiled woman. Under pressure, some women feel that they are not good Muslims if they do not wear it. But everywhere in the world, women fight for their emancipation, just like our mothers have done before us." (Safia, 29, NPNS, Clermont Ferrand)

"I have no problem with my identity. I am a French citizen, of Algerian culture, my religion is Islam. I speak Arabic. I know the history of my family, and I used to go to Algeria on holidays. This prevented me from fantasizing about my country of origin or from having a distorted image of my culture." (Warda, 23, manager, Neuilly)

"Today, the little brothers are the ones who tell their mothers: your daughter must be veiled. This is the culture of the suburbs. What upsets me? That the extremists monopolise the attention of the state and of the media. Nobody listens to Muslims that do not create any problem, who practice their religion in the private sphere." (Aicha, 34, social worker, Fontenay Sous Bois)

"I was born in Algeria. I witnessed the rise of fundamentalism. Disoccupied boys who force you to wear a head scarf, mosques that rise like mushrooms, the social discourse, the extremists who pose as victims, etc. They are doing the same thing in France..." (Asma, 28, psychologist, Saint Ouen) [108]

Backlash: Threats from fundamentalists and manipulation of women's struggles by the far right

I will not expand on threats by fundamentalist groups or individuals: the fact is that, as indicated previously, in broad daylight, secular activists of migrant descent, both men and women, can be attacked in France. Many already take basic precautions, as if having to work underground: not disclosing their private addresses, avoiding having their photo taken, etc. Those who don't, often face death threats, directly or by mail and email. They receive, just like the case in Algeria, miniature coffins and shrouds in their letterbox. They face verbal and physical attacks. [109] Several cases were mentioned in the course of this article. Clearly, France has not yet taken the full measure of what fundamentalists aim at. France is still hoping to find a compromise with fundamentalists, in the vain hope that their demands will stop and that they will be satisfied. We realize that, just like in our countries of origin, it will take a few assassinations before the international community starts reacting.

The tragedy for us is that, in the wake of the abandonment we suffer from progressive forces, human rights organizations and an important section of the feminist movement, not only do we fight in isolation, but it is the far right that takes up the issue of the rise of fundamentalism.

On the one hand, extreme right political parties, such as the National Front in France and the Freedom Party in Austria, supported the Algerian FIS, in the name of the right for Muslims to be different. One is familiar with the 'otherization' strategy of the extreme right, which ends up with separation policies (such was apartheid).

On the other hand, we are more and more confronted by its attempt to appropriate our struggles by 'supporting' us - an entryist policy that the Council of Ex-Muslims in the UK faces at each of its public rallies, or NPNS in some of its regional committees, and that many of us face when speaking to large audiences.

As many organizations of women of migrant Muslim descent locate themselves in the realm of human rights, women's human rights have been persistently manipulated by all political trends including the far right. A strategy, common to all our organizations, consists in firmly distancing ourselves from the far right.

In denouncing and combating fundamentalists in France, women walk the tightrope and refuse to be co-opted by political forces from the extreme right. They are very vigilant in refusing any support which in fact manipulates both the aims and the public image of our organizations.

It is for women to set rules that do not allow membership of individuals who join our ranks for reasons we disapprove of. [110] While women from migrant descent are combating fundamentalist political groups that use Islam for political purposes, the extreme right is fighting against an imaginary essentialist Islam, and giving legitimacy to discrimination against 'Muslims' (i.e. people of migrant Muslim descent who are all seen as real or potential fundamentalists). [111] These forces efficiently play on the conceptual confusion between migrants, 'Muslims' and 'fundamentalists'.

As long as progressive people around the world - regardless of Muslim fundamentalists' political

agenda, regardless of what they do to women when they are in power – still perceive Muslim fundamentalists as legitimate representatives of the oppressed people facing world imperialism and globalization, as long as French and European feminists do not dare challenge imposed cultural and religious identities in the name of universal women's rights, women from migrant Muslim descent will have to continue educating European audiences and will keep their leading role in combating the fundamentalism agenda in Europe. [112], [113], [114], [115]

Marieme Hélie-Lucas, June 2010

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] WLUMML (2005), Alert for Action: 'Support Canadian Women's Struggle Against Sharia Courts', 7 April: "We are also keenly aware that any victory for conservative forces among Muslim communities in Europe and North America will in this globalized world automatically reinforce fundamentalist groups in Muslim countries and communities elsewhere. This will lead to a backlash against us in contexts where we have had a measure of success in preserving the space for women's and alternative voices. In addition to our sense of solidarity, it is fear of such a development that leads WLUMML to express our support for women in migrant Muslim communities in Canada and elsewhere."

[2] The French concept of *laïcité* will be translated here as secularism. We have to keep in mind that, since 1905, secularism in France (i.e. *laïcité*) implies a total separation between state and Church, while other European countries understand it as equal tolerance by the state vis-à-vis different religions. For further discussion of French secularism, see Henri Pena-Ruiz (2005), www.siaawi.org/article17.html; available on ESSF (article 3230): [A secular recasting of the state : principles and foundations](#).

[3] It is not unimportant to remember here that anti-migrants feelings and occasional violence were present at all time. Local groups opposed migrant man power. As early as 1893, a pogrom took place in a part of Southern France, in the salt evaporation ponds near Aigues Mortes, killing nine and injuring hundreds of Italian workers. I personally remember hearing violently derogatory remarks about Italian, Spanish and Portuguese migrant workers when I first visited France as a child in the 1950s – not dissimilar to those one can hear today about Africans (North and South of the Sahara): migrants are traditionally held responsible for unemployment, suspected of being disloyal to France and now additionally accused of religious proselytism. The permanence of such accusations, over time and through migration of different ethnic groups, allows to temper the importance that factors such as 'race', 'colour' or religion may play in anti-migrant feelings.

[4] Patrick Simon, Paris: INED, www.ined.fr/en/current_researchs/researchers/bdd/nom/

[5] France Prioux (2006), Recent Demographic Developments in France, Paris: INED.

[6] Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj (2005), 'Rapport au politique des Français issus de l'émigration', CEVIPOF et Sciences politiques, June.

[7] See note 6.

[8] See note 6.

[9] See note 6.

[10] Chloé Tavan (2005), INSEE Première, Sep, www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/ip1042.pdf

[11] Public statement during a debate over girls under age wearing a veil in state schools.

[12] Fundamentalists were active in Algeria since independence (1962). There is lack of scholarly research on the early stages of their movement and on the origin of their resources. Nevertheless, fundamentalist organisations already existed in the 1960s: Nahnah led organised sabotage groups who lived underground (he was to become the leader of Hamas in the 1990s), and in the 1970s organised teams of preachers toured the country (tabligh). Media said that their financing came from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood.

[13] Marieme Hélie-Lucas (2001), 'Algeria: Ordinary fascism, fundamentalism and femicide', Dossier 23-24. London: Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

[14] Clive Coleman (2006), 'UK: One legal system?', The Times, 2 Dec, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article108

[15] bul Taher (2008), 'Revealed: UK first sharia courts', The Sunday Times, 14 Sep, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article4749183.ece

[16] Joshua Rozenberg (2006), 'Sharia law spreading as authority wanes', Telegraph, 29 Nov, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1535478/Sharia-law-is-spreading-as-authority-wanes.html

[17] Richard Edwards (2008), 'Sharia courts operating in Britain', Telegraph, 14 Sep, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2957428/Sharia-law-courts-operating-in-Britain.html

[18] The 1991 Arbitration Act allowed for the use of any laws in arbitration. It did not differentiate between areas such as commercial or family, and so the Act was permissible for religious communities. There were no Christian groups using the Act for family matters. The Jewish Beit Din (religious tribunal) did use private legally binding arbitration for commercial matters and in a year we heard that there were two family issues when the Arbitration Act was used. There were no records of any other arbitral awards. According to the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) (private communication, 13 April 2009), the Arbitration Act allowed for the use of private legally binding arbitrations and there were only two Jewish instances that came forward in their research. The CCMW went for no religious arbitration. Now of course no religious laws are recognised by the courts.

[19] WLUML (2005), Alert for Action: 'Support Canadian Women's Struggle Against Sharia

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condemnation in court of the owner of a guesthouse who requested that two veiled women unveil in her house; they refused, went to court and won their case. Fanny Truchelut was given a suspended sentence of four months' imprisonment and fined €8,500 in Aug 2006 for discrimination.

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[57] See note 54.

[58] Hugh Schofield (2008), 'Anger over 'Ramadan' trial delay', *Worldwide Religious News*, 7 Sep, <http://wwwrn.org/articles/29278/?&place=france&ion=islam> - "Critics say the decision is a breach of France's strict separation of religion and state. The trial of seven men for armed robbery was due to start on 16 September in Rennes. But last week the court agreed to a request from a lawyer for one of the accused to put it off until January. In his letter asking for the delay, the lawyer noted that if the trial were to start now, it would fall in the Muslim month of Ramadan. His client, a Muslim, would have been fasting for two weeks and thus, he said, be in no position to defend himself properly. He would be physically weakened and too tired to follow the arguments as he should."

[59] Emma-Kate Symons (2008), 'France closes ranks against burka', *The Australian*, 18 July, www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24036168-2703,00.html France 24 (2008), 'La nationalité refusée à une Marocaine en burqa', 12 July, www.france24.com/fr/20080712-une-marocaine-burqa-voit-refuser-nationalite- francaise-religion-immigration

Cécilia Gabizon (2008), 'La Halde juge la burqa contraire à l'intégration', *Le Figaro*, 9 Oct, www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2008/10/10/01016-20081010ARTFIG00012-la-halde-juge-la-burqa-contre-a-l-integration-.php

[60] In particular, Europe is waiting on France to abandon its definition of secularism and to adopt the Anglo-Saxon definition: state's equal tolerance for all religions. This would allow France to 'accommodate' demands of Muslim fundamentalists, at the cost of women's human rights.

[61] Mona Eltahawy (2008), 'Caught in the clash of civilisations', International Herald Tribune, 18 Jan, www.siaawi.org/article286.html - "Germany, a country where a painful history has meant at times an absurd reluctance to criticize minorities, provided an example last year of how ludicrous and dangerous culture relativism can be. A Frankfurt judge refused to grant a fast-track divorce to a German Muslim woman who had complained that her husband beat her. The judge said both partners came from 'a Moroccan cultural environment in which it is not uncommon for a man to exert a right of corporal punishment over his wife,' and she cited passages in the Quran that, according to the judge, sanctioned physical abuse. She was removed from the case."

[62] 'Marche des Beurs', http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marche_des_beurs - Nicknamed 'Marche des Beurs', this March for Equality demonstrated for equality and against racism which took place in 1983; it is the first national demonstration against racism. After riots in a part of Marseille in response to a boy being injured, inhabitants of the area, including a Catholic priest and a Protestant clergyman decided on a two-months long, Gandhian style, peaceful march. It left Marseille with 32 demonstrators, were met in Lyon by 1,000 people and in Paris by 60,000 people. A delegation met with President Mitterrand who promised that foreigners could be granted a 10-year work permit in France.

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[72] Soheib Bencheikh (1998), *Marianne et le Prophète: l'islam dans la France Laïque*. Paris: Grasset, pp88-89: "Il est difficile voire impossible d'indiquer avec précision le nombre de

musulmans vivant en France, qu'ils soient étrangers ou de nationalité française. Les estimations avancées par certains journalistes sont approximatives et invérifiables... Ces estimations ne prennent en compte que l'origine géographique: toute personne venant du Maghreb ou de l'Ouest de l'Afrique est considérée comme musulmane. Ainsi est musulman tout Turc ou ressortissant d'un pays où l'islam est majoritaire."

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[94] Collectif 20 ans barakat Ile de France, <http://20ansbarakat.free.fr/>

[95] WACHDAK : Collectif '20 ans barakat' par www.algerie-femme.com, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNkHmEN0III

[96] AWICUR (2009) Manifesto: Initiative de Femmes pour la Citoyenneté et les Droits Universels (IFCDU), May: "Les femmes françaises issues de l'immigration et les femmes migrantes se retrouvent confrontées à des situations dramatiques du fait de la reconnaissance « implicite » du fait culturel à leur égard (répudiation, polygamie, mariage forcé, excision, crimes d'honneur)... Ce multiculturalisme (c'est à dire, l'utilisation de la « culture » afin de créer des différences où les droits des femmes et des hommes sont bafoués), brèche idéale pour les intégrismes religieux constitue une menace réelle et s'attaque directement à la tradition républicaine française, à la laïcité et à l'égalité de tous les citoyens devant la loi... Il favorise le communautarisme, la ghettoïsation et freine l'objectif « d'intégration » (ne pas confondre avec le concept colonial d'assimilation, qui signifie abandon de tous les particularismes); en fait le Relativisme Culturel est une manière pernicieuse de perpétuer les différences de droits... à la place de lois civiles égalitaires, des statuts personnels justifient l'infériorisation des femmes. En France, et dans d'autres pays européens, nous constatons un déni de justice à leur égard, un déni de citoyenneté."

[97] 'Yasmina Benguigui', http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamina_Benguigui

[98] Films by Yasmina Benguigui: Le paradis, c'est complet (2009), Aisha (2008), Le plafond de verre (2004), Les défricheurs (2004), Mémoires d'immigrés (2004), Pas d'histoires ! (2000), Le jardin parfumé (2000), Inch'allah dimanche (2000), Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin (1997), www.premiere.fr/Star/Yamina-Benguigui#bio

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[107] Aude Lalande (2006) 'Le refus', Vacarme 34, www.vacarme.org/article556.html

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[114] Ayaan Hirsi Ali et al (2006), 'Writers' statement on cartoons', BBC News, 1 March, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4764730.stm>

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