

UN unveils - “UN women”, France, hijab and misinformation

Monday 3 July 2017, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 2 July 2017).

2017. This year, Saudi Arabia will defend women's rights in the Commission on the Status of Women, and UN Women will support the right to disappear women behind a veil. Aren't we lucky ?

From its official twitter account, UN Women tweeted an article posted online on Jun 29 2017, 4:17pm [\[1\]](#) the floor is given to two young women wearing a hijab in France, who rant and rave at length about their plea, and in so doing, propagate false information regarding the laws in France. It is unfortunate that no one at UN women - which relayed the article (from @UN_women) on their official twitter account) - took the time to check on the evidence in legal texts, that can be so easily verified.

The first paragraph of this article already contains several factual 'mistakes' - which i would rather call lies and deliberate disinformation, as they reproduce the distortion of facts that have been displayed on fundamentalist sites for several years. Let's go over this first paragraph :

“In 2004, the French National Assembly voted to ban all overt symbols of religion in public school and government buildings. Many considered the move—which became colloquially known as the “headscarf ban”—a covert attack on the hijab and Muslim women specifically. In the years since, France has effectively banned the burka and niqab (Islamic headscarves that cover the face and head)”

It is not in **2004** that France voted a law forbidding political and religious signs in specific circumstances: it is in **1906**.

Please note in passing that, at the time, the law could not possibly be ‘against Muslims’ as such immigration did not exist, it started slowly during and after WWI.

Article 1 of the law establishes that the secular Republic of France guarantees all citizens the right to freedom of belief and practice; and Article 2 establishes that the secular Republic does not recognize any cult and therefore will not entertain any kind of links with representatives of religions, nor will it fund them. It is crystal clear: citizens as individuals can believe and practice what they want, religions as institutions are not recognized partners in government.

Most articles in the international media relay erroneous information on the law on secularism in France without taking the pain to check on facts. Laziness prevails. For a thorough exposé, in English, on the founding principles of French secularism, see: ‘the Secularity and the Republic, a secular recasting of the state: principles and foundations’ by Henri Pena Ruiz, a leading French philosopher and expert on French secularism [\[2\]](#)

Indeed, according the **1906** law, in spaces that are emblematic of the secular French Republic, there should be no display of religious or political affiliation: people are there as equal citizens, they are not there as representatives of a specific community. This includes state secular schools, and the

ban affects everyone in the premises: teaching staff, administrative staff or pupils. France gives special importance to the fact that children should be educated as equal citizens, - whatever their origin, religion, etc...

Please note that in France, schooling is compulsory - all children have a right to education and must be educated, until age 16- and education is free; from nursery school to university. This is a privilege that the secular Republic extends to citizens and to non-citizens as well. Students who repay their loans for decades in the USA will appreciate this...

Of course, like everywhere, there are also numerous private schools, including confessional ones, and everyone is free to avoid secular schools and to pay for their education.

The law that was passed in **2004**, under a right wing government, actually weakens the **1906** law: from 'no sign' of religious or political affiliation, the text mellows to 'no ostentatious religious sign' (without defining what would be considered 'ostentation'; it is wrongly translated as 'overt' in the article reproduced by UN Women). This is already a compromise, addressed to vocal Muslim fundamentalists. Far from being 'a covert attack on the hijab and Muslim women specifically', the law attempts to pander to their demands, without destroying too obviously a founding principle of the French Republic. Moreover, by using the 'colloquially known' concept invented and propagated by Muslim fundamentalist groups the world over: the "headscarf ban", the author of the article shows her sources of inspiration.

And finally, still in the same first paragraph (!), we note the deliberate confusion between two laws, grounded in very different sources of law.

In the years since, France has effectively banned the burka and niqab (Islamic headscarves that cover the face and head

This is presented as a second step after the ban of the veil in secular schools, as a consequence of secular principles. It is not. The law that bans face covering is not grounded in secularism. It is not applicable exclusively in specific locations that are emblematic of the secular Republic, but everywhere in France; it is based on security restrictions which started after the rise of attacks by Muslim fundamentalists. Everyone is concerned and not Muslims specifically: helmets worn when not on a motor bike, scarves hiding the lower half of the face or masks outside the time of Carnival are also targeted by this law.

Incidentally these are security provisions that have been passed in several countries in the Middle East and in South East Asia, -for just the same reasons and at the same time. Does the author conclude that these predominantly Muslim countries are 'anti-Muslim' too?

As the article entertains so much confusion in so many respects, let me reiterate that no one is prevented to wear a veil in France (it is part of the rights guaranteed under article 1 of the 1906 law: freedom of belief, freedom of practice), except in specific circumstances (in secular schools and Republic buildings when civil servants are in contact with the public and should represent secularism and equal treatment for all citizens). These two young women wearing hijabs are very obviously photographed in the street, not in a studio; anyone walking the streets in France will see hundreds of veiled women.

And as adults, after age 18, they attend university with their veil. No law forbids it. For those who doubt this fact, please check that National Front extreme right party has been, for years, precisely trying to impose a ban on the veil in universities - so far, in vain. Nor it is banned in hospitals.

Misinformation is a powerful tool at the service of Muslim fundamentalism.

Having gone through the first paragraph in great detail, I will spare readers a similar approach to the rest of the article which contains innumerable factual 'mistakes', all aimed at wrongly describing 'Muslims' as victims of secular France.

Let me end with this ironical remark: since both these young 'victims' intend to study medicine (gynecology and obstetrics for one and neurosurgery for the other – i.e. 6 years in university to become a General Practitioner, followed by at least three years of specialization – which amounts to, at minimum, a total of ten years in university) it should be appreciated that their entire schooling has been for free, thanks to the secular Republic of France. How many European and North American countries offer the same facilities to every child? This comes in contradiction to the following - unfounded - statement:

'as they get older the ban will prevent them from accomplishing far more important goals'

Finally, the article tries to get legitimacy from the fact that their 'families are both from Algeria — a country with a long history of French colonization.'

As an Algerian citizen, I appreciate the acknowledgement that we fought a long 7 ½ year-long liberation struggle against French colonialism, for our independence.

I would like to remind readers that Algeria is also a country that fought Muslim fundamentalism for ten years, throughout the nineties, a war that made about 200 000 victims, most of them at the hands of fundamentalist armed groups, with a vast majority of women among them. Many of these women were slaughtered in most horrendous ways, like Daesh is doing now in the Middle East, for not accepting to wear the veil. They were beheaded, their heads paraded in the streets, they were tortured, burnt alive, mutilated, kidnapped as domestic and sexual slaves, etc...They did not give up and it is ultimately thanks to their resistance and popular resistance that fundamentalist armed groups were defeated and that we do not live under their rule in Algeria.

In their name, I demand some decency from the UN bodies that are supposed to defend women's rights.

Marieme Helie Lucas, July 2, 2017

P.S.

* <http://www.siaawi.org/article14867.html>

July 4th, 2017, version (one mistake corrected).

Footnotes

[1] https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/vbmg4b/two-hijabi-girls-on-how-the-headscarf-ban-is-disrupting-their-lives?utm_source=broadlytwitterus

[2] ESSF (article 3230), [A secular recasting of the state : principles and foundations](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3230) : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3230>