

ferences and the role religion plays in these societies. The church-state binary central to western liberal thought allows little room for variation and indigenous understanding of democracy and its functioning in various parts of the world. The last section provides an insightful analysis of governance in the Muslim world and the lessons that can be extrapolated to International Relations. It provides a detailed analysis of how nation-states in the Muslim world have reconfigured and adapted to the Westphalian state system. Drawing on the teachings of three distinct Islamic scholars, Sayyid Qutub, Yusuf al Qaradawi and Adullah Ahmed Badawi, the contributors in the last section seek to apply their writings and concepts to navigate the relationships between the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

Scholarly contribution to the non-western approaches to IR emphasize the selective amne-

sia toward the interactions between the west and the rest of the world that led to the development of IR theory. IR theory fails to take into cognizance the global distribution of its subjects of analysis along with their involvement in contributing to a heterogeneous and rich discipline. There is a need to move beyond the procrustean knowledge production ossified by the mainstream theories in IR to move towards rearticulating the subjectivities and diverse subjectivities that compose the 'international.' Given the increasing polarization between 'Islam' and 'the West,' this book offers IR a chance to engage in a constructive dialogue with Islamic traditions, in order to better understand global politics. It will make excellent reading for anyone interested in the interplay between politics and Islam and would be particularly useful for undergraduate and graduate courses on Islam, secularism, modernity and Middle Eastern politics.

## The Experiences of Face Veil Wearers in Europe and the Law

*Edited by* Eva Brems

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The Islamic face veil is now banned in public spaces by several European countries; Austria being the last country to pass a bill for a general ban in March 2017 and Germany having decided for a partial ban for selected professions in April 2017. However, in reality many know very little about this religious practice that is marginal in numbers, yet has become an obsession of European domestic politics, embedded in narratives of security threat and gender equality –mostly formu-



lated by outsider perspectives. The book under review, edited by Eva Brems, offers therefore a timely and significant contribution to the topic and, more generally, to the body of literature on Muslims and Islam in Europe. *The Experiences of Face Veil Wearers in Europe and the Law* consists of 14 chapters and is methodologically divided into two parts. The first part contains studies based on empirical research from the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Denmark and the UK, and of-

fers valuable insight into the everyday lives, experiences and motives of Muslim women opting for the face veil (*niqab*) as a religious practice. The contributions in the second part of the book give their support to the subaltern voices emerging from Part I by analyzing the empirical material through different theoretical approaches.

The articles of this volume show how remarkably fallacious the arguments of the politicians and others advocating the criminalization of the *niqab* are. For instance, Annelies Moors argues in chapter two, that contrary to outsider assumptions about the presence of *niqabis* negatively affecting societal life, for interactions in the public space, communication is not a problem as the women wearing the face veil are very self-initiating in making contact with their fellow citizens and even consciously adjust their behavior to ensure a positive image of themselves. However, successful contacts are dependent on the goodwill of both sides, as is established also by Brems et al. in chapter four. Their research shows that sometimes the Belgian women wearing the *niqab* wish nothing more than to be “treated like anyone else,” such as having a door opened when moving with a baby buggy (p. 100). However, the negative images spread in the media make it difficult to overcome the false knowledge that is also crafted by politicians in their advocacy speeches about the women and the practice of wearing the face veil. Thus, it is such discourses and the false knowledge that some of these women fight against and aim to have proven worn by their own exemplary actions in the everyday-life.

Naima Bouteldja’s comparison in chapter four between France and England shows that in France the *niqab* was made into a race issue by the politician André Gérin, who pre-

sented it as an “anti-White struggle” (p. 117) connected with radical fundamentalism, with definite stigmatizing effects for the women. This is despite the fact, that as shown already by Moors in chapter two, the women wearing the face veil are not a single social category; rather, the wearers of the face veil have different spiritual backgrounds, including Sufism, and are also an ethnically diverse group consisting partly of ‘white European’ women. Moreover, Bouteldja’s research proves yet another stereotype wrong, showing that in both countries the women are overwhelmingly educated and that, significantly, in the UK 1/3 of the interviewees were employed, surpassing the overall percentage of employed Muslim women in the country. Indeed, the arguments brought forth against the face veil, stating that bans would ‘liberate’ these women, completely misrepresent the agency that the women attribute to themselves as free thinking and functioning human beings entitled to freedom of thought, religion and expression. They do not account for how the decision to opt for the face veil arises in some instances as a result of self-initiated religious studies and not for instance due to pressures from family. Indeed, sometimes the face veil should be understood by going beyond religious expression and understanding it instead as a sign of power over one’s body and integrity, having the choice to control “who can look at me and who can’t” (p. 150).

Lastly, chapter three by Østergaard, Warbug and Johansen can be praised for its vast methodological reflexivity, as it discusses the issue of doing qualitative research with hidden populations, their elusiveness also being partly due to the fear of stigma resulting from Islamophobic discourse. Their research was commissioned by the Danish government, and it had a strong effect on policy making since the idea of a general ban was omitted

after the study. The study offers an interesting insight into the self-image of the women, who attributed adjectives such as ‘self-confident,’ ‘strong,’ and ‘honorable’ to those who wear the face veil. Research data such as this importantly force readers to think about how narratives and definitions of concepts such as women’s agency and femininity have to be scrutinized in such contexts.

In the second part of the book, Bribosia and Rorive emphasize in chapter six that freedom of expression encompasses non-verbal expressions such as clothing; they point out the ways in which, in previous cases pertaining to religious attire handled by ECtHR, despite the garment being generally understood not as a religious duty, the subjective feelings of the believer about his/her garment have been decisive to rule in favor of the individual. Therefore, according to them, justification of the face veil bans raises the important question, whether states could/should protect the women against themselves, i.e. even if the inside perspective tells otherwise, face veils are to be seen coerced. Problematic discourses are also deconstructed in chapter seven by Jogchum Vrieling who argues that in the context of bans the *niqab* cannot be compared to anti-democratic symbols such as the swastika as these are historically embedded in processes of the demolition of democracy. Similarly, Alouane’s article in chapter eight and Howard’s in chapter nine point to other fallacious arguments regarding the bans. Alouane maintains, that if the *niqab* is to be banned due to its “human dignity degrading” nature, the state should also prohibit other practices such as scarifications of the body. His argument motivates the reader to think about the degree to which liberal states can intervene in their citizens’ lives via paternalistic legislation. Howard again argues that justifying the bans by reference to gender

equality reveals a double standard since any ban is only “another form of prescribing what women should wear” (p. 213).

Morondo Taramundi in chapter ten discusses the bans from a feminist perspective. Her argument states that any discussions on the polysemic meaning of the face veil fails to consider the decision-making processes of Muslim women. She thus asks, whether the women are at the end free to choose among the various meanings that have already been signified to the *niqab* within the patriarchal system. An original perspective on the criminalization of different forms of otherness in Europe is offered in chapter eleven by Malik. Drawing from the historical analyzes by R. I. Moore (1987) about Europe as a “persecution society,” Malik argues that the face veil bans bear similarity to the persecution of other minority groups such as Jews. The similarities are especially significant to consider in the context of the “security threat” argument, as heretics would historically be punished “even if no particular individual in the general public had complained of a harm to her” (p. 234), and the studies from Part I invariably have established that the women wearing the face veil not pose a threat to their fellow citizens, but rather the other way round.

Nadia Fadil in chapter twelve again argues that the diverse interpretations on what “an individual” or a “legal subject” means have directly affected Belgian state policies towards minorities. She establishes a connection between the regulation of otherness and the construction of an imaginary about a coherent state sovereignty, the ban being thus a “healing practice” (p. 256) of a society in deep institutional crisis. In chapter fourteen, Susan S. M. Edwards’ focus on individual court cases and the chronology of legal processes for bans all over Europe, are for non-

specialized reader a rather heavy distraction in the whole piece and shadow for instance her important argument on how the usage of labels such as *hijabi* and *niqabi* as part of an Orientalist discourse reduces the women “to the mere cloth which covers them” (p. 292). Lastly, Schirin Amir-Moazami’s article in chapter thirteen is a thought-provoking interpretation of the bans from a post-colonial perspective, arguing that the discourse deliberately uses false terminology such as *burqa* to speak of the face veil, in order to situate the Muslim woman away from the Western experience and instead to locate them in another spatial and normative “universe” (p. 267). She argues that such decontextualizing strategies keep alive the colonial legacy of unveiling the veiled Muslim woman, even though its object has moved from the faraway colonial lands to be encountered as the next-door neighbor. Moreover, like the feminist reading of the debates by Taramundi, Amir-Moazami also picks up the question of how Muslim women’s voices are actually heard in the debates. Her important contribution to the issue is that these voices might be dampened in the hegemonic discourses which pre-establish the perspectives to be taken and the questions to be asked and answered, rendering those voices largely inaudible in a hegemony which is also motivated by the Western ideological framework.

The studies of this edited volume raise many questions about the functionality and legitimacy of the bans. If the result of the public resentment against the face veil, backed up

by legislations and political speech, is that the women are being refused services in pharmacies, shops etc., is the law protecting all citizens equally? Rather, it has been shown in the book that the bans are completely counter-productive, resulting in increased victimization of Muslim women and putting them into a situation where they have to choose between their religious beliefs and pleasing those who have judged them without even ever making the effort to *listen* to them.

However, as was criticized by Amir-Moazimi, the face veil debates do not allow much space for alternative discourses apart from the pre-established frames of Human Rights or feminism, for instance. The book deeply questions the current conceptions in many accounts, and its contents follow tightly what is suggested in the title: a focus on the crossroads of individual experiences and the law. However, it could have had a wider variety of arguments by offering for instance more focused discussions on alternative definitions of femininity or the role of religion in public spaces, drawing from the non-Western tradition of epistemology and ontology. So, the question remains, that despite the genuine aim to let the women’s voices be heard in order to refute many of the misconceptions policymakers and the public have about Muslim women and the practice of the face veil, whether studies as these can only make the best out of a case already lost and attempt to save what little dignity Muslim women might have in the mold into which they have been put to by criminalizing their religious practices.