

# 08

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**Miriam Zapf**

This contribution is concerned with the discourse on the hijab and the burkini within the French Senate. It explores the processes leading to the construction of these garments as socially meaningful signs and their implications for the discursive construction of “the Muslim woman.” For this purpose, a corpus containing 18

debates regarding legislation on wearing a hijab or a burkini, held in the French Senate between 2018 and 2023, was compiled and analyzed, drawing from an intersectional approach that takes into consideration both gender and religious adherence. The analysis reveals that the hijab and the burkini are constructed as indexical signs of an affiliation to Islam in general, but also to a specific politico-religious ideology and as an instrument to impose this ideology. The depiction of alleged “Islamic” values – most notably gender inequality – standing in sharp contrast with “French” values suggests a need for France to defend “its” values against the perceived threat posed by Islam and/or Islamism (with the distinction between the two often being blurred), for which restrictions on wearing a hijab and a burkini seem to be the solution. From this, two images of hijab/burkini-wearing women are constructed: the oppressed woman suffering from (Muslim) patriarchy and unable to protect herself, and the militant woman refusing to take off the hijab or the burkini, thereby imposing her ideology on others. In the debates about the hijab, another image of the Muslim woman is drawn as a positive counterexample to and as a model for hijab-wearing women: the emancipated woman who has “freed” herself from the hijab. Both images of hijab/burkini-wearing women are depicted as deviating from Western norms or conventions of female behavior, either for not being emancipated or for not acting in a moderate way. Hence, Muslim women are othered, due to being both Muslim and female. In this reasoning, the only way to be accepted as French appears to be to remove the hijab/the burkini, that is, to fully assimilate and thus conform to Western conventions.

## 1 Introduction

In October 2021, the Council of Europe launched a social media campaign aimed at promoting tolerance and respect for diversity in general and hijab-wearing women in particular. This campaign was sharply criticized after its publication and finally withdrawn by

the Council in November 2021. What led to a particularly strong controversy was the slogan “Beauty is in diversity as freedom is in hijab,” displayed alongside a picture showing half the face of a woman with a headscarf and half the face of a woman without a headscarf.<sup>1</sup> Several right-wing French politicians accused the campaign of promoting the veiling of young wom-

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<sup>1</sup> The poster, although deleted on the official Twitter (now X) account of the Council of Europe, has been reproduced by several newspaper articles and can, among others, be found in the following BBC article from November 3, 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59149035> (accessed September 2023).

en.<sup>2</sup> However, critique also came from other political directions. In a debate in the French Senate, then Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian (*Parti Socialiste*) described the campaign as “choquante” (‘shocking’),<sup>3</sup> and Sarah El Haïry (Secretary of State for Youth, *Mouvement démocrate*) said in an interview that it promotes the hijab as an element of identity.<sup>4</sup>

The debate generated by this campaign exemplifies a whole series of controversies around the hijab in France and other countries with high immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Questions of integration in these countries often deal with the role of perceived religious signs – among which the hijab seems to be the most prominent one – in public. In these debates, the hijab is attributed a high symbolic value, and the (supposed) position of Muslim women in society seems to be a yardstick for measuring the success of integration efforts. However, most of the time, the discourse is *on* Muslim women, rather than *with* them (cf. Amir-Moazami 2007: 18, Fredette 2014: 155): Women wearing a hijab are depicted as differing from Western conventions of dressing, i.e., as “Other.” This raises questions about the processes which enable the interpretation of the hijab as a sign that refers directly

to the Islamic religion and about the implications of this interpretation for the portrayal of women who wear it. These questions will be explored in more detail below.

For this purpose, debates within the French Senate (the upper house of the French parliament) regarding legislation on wearing a hijab and a burkini are analyzed, with a focus on the following questions: 1) How are the hijab and the burkini discursively constructed as socially meaningful signs, and what kind of signs are they?; and 2) How are women who don a hijab or a burkini – often perceived as the prototype of “the Muslim woman” – depicted and how does this connect to the meanings attributed to the hijab and the burkini?

The first question presupposes a constructivist perspective on signs, following Gal & Irvine (2019: 85) who assert that “[h]uman beings make signs by conjecturing – guessing, hypothesizing – about the meanings of everyday phenomena.” How the hijab and the burkini are discursively filled with meaning will be examined in the following. The second question, which pertains to the consequences of this process for the discursive construction of “the Muslim woman,” suggests an intersectional approach (cf. Crenshaw 1989) that takes into account the dimensions of gender and religion,

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., the following tweet by Eric Zemmour (founder and leader of the nationalist political party *Reconquête*): “L’Islam est l’ennemi de la liberté. Cette campagne est l’ennemie de la vérité. Elle promeut le voilement des européennes. C’est du djihad publicitaire financé par vos impôts.” ‘Islam is the enemy of freedom. This campaign is the enemy of truth. It promotes the veiling of European women. It’s a public advertising jihad financed by your taxes.’ (<https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1455504974708944898>) Marine Le Pen (president of the far-right political party *Rassemblement National*, former *Front National*, from 2011 to 2022) commented the campaign in a similar way: “Cette communication européenne en faveur du voile islamiste est scandaleuse et indécente alors que des millions de femmes se battent avec courage contre cet asservissement, y compris en France. C’est quand les femmes retirent le voile qu’elles deviennent libres pas l’inverse !” ‘This European communication in favor of the Islamist veil is scandalous and indecent, especially while millions of women are courageously fighting against this subjugation, including in France. It’s when women remove the veil that they become free, not the other way round!’ ([https://twitter.com/MLP\\_officiel/status/1455511516019625997?lang=de](https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1455511516019625997?lang=de), accessed July 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/282335-jean-yves-le-drian-03112021-laicite> (accessed July 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. here: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1455621245781819393> (accessed July 2024)

assuming that discourses on this topic – often entailing processes of Othering of Muslims or even anti-Muslim racism – cannot be analyzed without considering both dimensions.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the social and ethno-religious meanings typically attributed to the veil in Western countries and calls them into question from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. Section 3 provides an overview of the legislation in France regarding (perceived) religious signs, along with key events that led to a reevaluation of the legislation. Section 4 introduces the corpus and the method employed for the analysis, and section 5 presents the results. This section is further divided into two parts: an examination of the discursive processes in the debate which lead to the perception of the hijab and the burkini as socially significant signs (section 5.1), and the implications of these processes vis-a-vis the portrayal of “the Muslim woman” (section 5.2). Finally, section 6 summarizes the findings and underscores the necessity of an intersectional approach to explain the discursive Othering of “the Muslim woman.”

## 2 Meanings attributed to the veil<sup>5</sup>

In Western societies, the veil often features in debates about Islam in general and the integration of Muslim immigrants in particular. This can be attributed to the veil being perceived as a visible sign of adherence to the Islamic religion, and, from a Western perspective, as a “sign of difference” (Chakraborti & Zempi 2012: 270), inasmuch as veiling violates (contemporary) Western conventions

according to which women do not cover their hair.

In many instances, this perceived difference is framed negatively by interpreting the veil as a sign of women’s oppression (cf., e.g., Bullock 2002: 122–133, Macdonald 2006: 8, Fretette 2014: 12), under the assumption that Muslim women do not cover voluntarily, but rather are forced to do so by Muslim men. In this way, the veil appears to challenge Western ideals of gender equality, which often leads to the stance that its wearing in public should be restricted (cf. Keaton 2006: 4). Additionally, veiling is often associated with the promotion of fundamentalism and terrorism (cf., e.g., Freedman 2007: 30, Perry 2014: 10, Gidaris 2018: n. pag.). This, again, is frequently presented as a reason for limiting its wearing in public spaces. Consequently, the veil is interpreted simplistically as a sign of negative values and interests commonly associated with Islam, or even Islamism, “reinforc[ing] the monocular representation of that religion” (Macdonald 2006: 8; cf. also Karim 1997: 156).

These portrayals of the veil shape common images of Muslim women often encountered in Western discourse on veiling, for example in mass media. On the one hand, Muslim women are attributed a passive role: They are assumed to be coerced into veiling against their will by Muslim men or their (Muslim) social environment; this portrays them as some kind of puppets and deprives them of agency (cf., e.g., Bullock & Jafri 2000: 36, Jiwani 2005: 63, Freedman 2007: 37, Dhamoon 2009: 134–135, Golnaraghi & Dye 2016: 148, Durrani 2020: 355). On the other hand, Muslim women are por-

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Veiling’ can cover a wide range of different clothing, from the headscarf (e.g., *hijab*) to the face-veil (e.g., *niqab*) to the full-body veil (e.g., *burqa*) (cf., e.g., Mir 2021: 436), ‘veil’ often being used as an umbrella term.

trayed as dangerous extremists who threaten the Western world (cf., e.g., Bullock & Jafri 2000: 36, Freedman 2007: 30, Khiabany & Williamson 2008: 77).

These two images, although partly contradicting each other (cf. Shooman 2014: 29, Gidaris 2018: n. pag.), present Muslim women as a counterimage to the ideal of Western women. Additionally, they homogenize Muslim society, especially Muslim women, by attributing the same experiences to all women (cf. Freedman 2007: 31, Chakraborti & Zempi 2012: 275, Golnaraghi & Mills 2013: 166, Fredette 2014: 8). Consequently, as Bilge (2010: 10) puts it, “the veiled Muslim woman has been turned into an allegory of undesirable cultural difference.”<sup>6</sup>

Many researchers have called into question this simplistic interpretation of women’s veiling. Historically, veiling was not exclusively linked to Islam or to women; additionally, it has fulfilled a variety of functions for Muslim women in the course of history and according to their cultural and socio-economic situation (cf. Hoodfar 1997, el Guindi 1999). In sharp contrast to the current conventional Western interpretation of veiling as a sign of a lack of agency, the veil came to be seen as a tool of resistance: During the colonization of Algeria, French colonizers regarded Algerian women as the guardians of Algerian culture (and thus of Algerian society), and viewed the veil as emblematic of their status (cf. Fanon 1965 [1959]: 36–38). In this context, the unveiling of Algerian women could be seen as a metaphor for conquering Algerian society: “[H]aving access to [Algerian women]

and their bodies symbolized the means for a successful penetration to the heart of the colonized culture.” (Yeğenoğlu 2005: 141) As a result, veiling was interpreted as women’s refusal to submit to French domination: “[F]or the colonial gaze, just wearing the veil was a sufficient sign of resistance” (Yeğenoğlu 2005: 142, cf. also Golnaraghi & Dye 2016: 140–141).

Studies conducted in Western countries among Muslim women who cover reveal that they ascribe a variety of meanings or functions to the veil, including self-determination, empowerment, affirmation of ethno-religious identity, modesty, resistance, and agency (cf., e.g., Gaspard & Khosrokhavar 1995, el Guindi 1999, Bullock 2002, Amir-Moazami 2007, Freedman 2007, Golnaraghi & Dye 2016). Hence, the reductionist Western view on veiling has been criticized from diverse angles, most notably from postcolonial and feminist perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

From a postcolonial perspective, common Western interpretations of the veil are highly problematic for two reasons. Firstly, they portray Islam as backward and uncivilized, culturalizing the religion and implying a superiority of Western cultures (cf. Barskanmaz 2009: 366, Ahmed 2021: 152–155); this perpetuates Orientalist (cf. Said 1978) and colonial narratives. Secondly, they legitimize Western intervention and imposition of their own norms, e.g., through legislation that restricts veiling in public; this suggests that Muslim women need to be protected (cf. Abu-Lughod 2002: 788–789, Golnaraghi & Dye 2016: 140, Panighel 2022: 158–

<sup>6</sup> This strongly reminds Huntington’s (1996) highly criticized notion of a “clash of civilizations,” which suggests that future global conflicts will primarily revolve around cultural differences. The Western and the Islamic civilization are among the major civilizations he identifies.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars have pointed out that, if Muslim women’s voices are heard in this discourse, only those opposed to the veil are taken into consideration, while women who defend veiling are largely ignored (cf., e.g., Bilge 2010: 16).

159) – a narrative Spivak (1988: 296) resumes (albeit in a slightly different context) with the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men.”

Portraying Muslim women as helpless victims is also criticized from a (non-Western or intersectional) feminist perspective. As many studies have shown (cf. above), veiling can be a means of agency and resistance, most notably against Western norms and Western hegemony – and, as such, also against Western men. In this respect, veiling could be interpreted as a feminist statement, an opposition to (Western) patriarchy. Moreover, veiling has been described as a “means of protection from the male gaze” (Zine 2006: 243, cf. also Read & Bartkowski 2000: 404–406), hence as “an empowering move that represents a feminist stance for resisting the hegemony of sexualized representations of the female body” (Zine 2006: 243).<sup>8</sup> Framing the veil as a sign of oppression thus draws from a specific Western perspective on feminism.

The arguments above suggest that in order to understand the Western construction of “the Muslim woman,” it is crucial to take into consideration both gender and religion. This reasoning has led to the concept of ‘gendered Islamophobia,’ according to which the notion of Islamophobia<sup>9</sup> alone, describing a gender-neutral form of cultural racism against Muslims, cannot account for specific forms of discrimination against Muslim women, who may encounter forms of violence or hatred stemming

from their dual identity as a Muslim and a woman (cf. Chakraborti & Zempi 2012, Perry 2014, Alimahomed-Wilson 2020, Durrani 2020).

Previous studies have examined the meanings associated with veiling (cf., e.g., the studies cited above) but have hardly explored the specific processes through which the veil was constructed as a meaningful sign, or the specific type of connection established between the veil and the meanings attributed to it. Studies on the discourse about Muslim women have typically focused on media debates (e.g., Bullock & Jafri 2000, Jiwani 2005, Schiffer 2007, Khiabany & Williamson 2008, Byng 2010, El-Menouar 2019) and few concentrate on debates within political institutions (e.g., Terray 2004, Halm et al. 2007, Roggeband & Lettinga 2016). Additionally, many of the studies were carried out more than fifteen years ago, which calls into question whether their results are still applicable today. Furthermore, previous studies on this topic stem mainly from areas such as sociology, anthropology, and political sciences, while linguistic scholars have focused on this subject to a lesser extent. As a result, the linguistic devices employed in this discourse have not been fully examined – a research gap that the present study aims to address.

### **3 Legislation on veiling in France in the light of *laïcité***

Article 1 of the French Constitution stipulates:

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, it has to be mentioned that in this interpretation, it is the women’s responsibility to protect their bodies from the male gaze (cf. Zine 2006: 243) which, in turn, can be seen as an anti-feminist stance.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of Islamophobia itself has faced criticism, most notably because {phobia} pathologizes hatred/racism and because it implies that it is the religion itself that is feared/hated rather than individuals who adhere to it. Moreover, the lack of a precise definition for the concept has raised concerns, as it is applied to encompass a wide range of phenomena, from mere critiques of Islam to overt racism against Muslims (cf., e.g., Halliday 1999, Kahlweiß & Salzborn 2012, Pfahl-Traughber 2012). Additionally, Amir-Moazami (2007: 19) points out that the concept portrays Muslims as passive victims, thereby perpetuating an Orientalist narrative.



La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale. Elle assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d'origine, de race ou de religion. Elle respecte toutes les croyances.<sup>10</sup>

'France is an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic. It guarantees equality before the law for all citizens without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It respects all beliefs.'

The fact that the principle of *laïcité* – often translated as 'secularism' into English – is mentioned in the Constitution's very first article shows that it holds a special place in France, and current legislation on veiling must be seen in this light.

The *Loi concernant la separation des Églises et de l'État* ('Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State'), enacted in 1905, is seen today as the law introducing *laïcité* in France, although the word '*laïcité*' is not explicitly mentioned. It guarantees religious freedom and neutrality of the state in religious issues.<sup>11</sup> However, it was

preceded by several laws concerning religious neutrality in public schools, namely the *Lois Ferry* (1881, 1882) and the *Loi Goblet* (1886). The *Lois Ferry* made public primary education secular, free of charge, and compulsory for boys and girls. Most notably, the influence of religious institutions was limited, and religious instruction was removed from the official curriculum.<sup>12</sup> The *Loi Goblet* expanded secularism in schools, stipulating that the staff at public schools must be secular.<sup>13</sup> The principle of *laïcité* has been reinforced several times throughout the years, for example via the *Charte de la laïcité à l'école* ('Charter of *laïcité* in schools'), published in 2013, or the *Charte de la laïcité dans les services publiques* ('Charter of *laïcité* in public services'), published in 2021.<sup>14</sup>

Legislation within the framework of *laïcité* and its interpretation frequently sparks controversial debates in France, most notably regarding the hijab in schools, the full-body veil in public spaces, and the burkini at public beaches and in swimming pools (cf. Mir 2021). The hijab came under debate in 1989, when

<sup>10</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/texte-integral-de-la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958-en-vigueur> (accessed July 2024)

<sup>11</sup> The first two articles of this law read as follows: "Article 1. La République assure la liberté de conscience. Elle garantit le libre exercice des cultes sous les seules restrictions édictées ci-après dans l'intérêt de l'ordre public. Article 2. La République ne reconnaît, ne salarie ni ne subventionne aucun culte. [...]" ('Article 1. The French Republic ensures freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of worship under the sole restrictions set forth below in the interest of public order. Article 2. The French Republic neither recognizes, nor subsidizes, nor wages any religion.') Cf. here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000508749> (accessed July 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000877118> (*Loi du 16 juin 1881 établissant la gratuité absolue de l'enseignement primaire dans les écoles publiques* 'Law of June 16, 1881, establishing the absolute exemption from costs of primary education in public schools') and here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000006070887> (*Loi du 28 mars 1882 portant sur l'organisation de l'enseignement primaire* 'Law of March 28, 1882, regarding the organization of primary education'), accessed July 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000006070886> (*Loi du 30 octobre 1886 portant sur l'organisation de l'enseignement primaire* 'Law of October 30, 1886, regarding the organization of primary education'), particularly Article 17: "Dans les écoles publiques de tout ordre, l'enseignement est exclusivement confié à un personnel laïque." ('In public schools of all levels, education is exclusively entrusted to secular staff.' accessed July 2024)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2024-03/charte-de-la-la-cit-a4-43565.pdf> and here: [https://www.info.gouv.fr/upload/media/organization/0001/01/sites\\_default\\_files\\_contenu\\_piece-jointe\\_2022\\_12\\_charte\\_de\\_la\\_laicite-.pdf](https://www.info.gouv.fr/upload/media/organization/0001/01/sites_default_files_contenu_piece-jointe_2022_12_charte_de_la_laicite-.pdf) (accessed November 2025)



three students in Creil (a French commune in the Oise department) refused to take it off in school and were consequently expelled. This was followed by a series of similar incidents in different places in France (cf. Killian 2003: 567–568). Finally, with the *Loi encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics* ('Law regulating, in accordance with the principle of *laïcité*, the wearing of symbols or clothing indicating religious affiliation in public schools'), enacted in 2004, students in public primary and secondary schools were forbidden to wear conspicuous religious symbols,<sup>15</sup> which was interpreted to refer primarily to the hijab. Since then, debates on donning a hijab in public schools have repeatedly flared up, for instance whether the ban also applies to school trips. Additionally, the hijab has been under discussion in several other contexts, for example, whether donning a hijab should generally be prohibited to underage girls.<sup>16</sup>

Another important law in this context is the *Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public* ('Law prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space'), adopted in 2010, which prohibits the wearing of clothing that covers the face in public spaces.<sup>17</sup> While it was officially framed as a measure to ensure

public security, it was particularly debated with regard to Muslim women, since it was interpreted to refer mainly to the full-body veil (cf. Fornerod 2016).

In recent years, another item of clothing worn by some Muslim women has attracted public attention, namely the burkini, a swimsuit that covers the head and the body, but not the face, the hands, or the feet. In 2016, several French municipalities banned burkinis from public beaches, which, once again, led to controversies across the country (cf. Almeida 2018). The topic came up again several times, for instance in 2019, when a controversy arose about whether wearing a burkini should be allowed or forbidden in public swimming pools in Grenoble, which even led to the involvement of the *Conseil d'État* (Council of State).<sup>18</sup>

Topics related to clothing associated with being Muslim and supposedly challenging the principle of *laïcité* are repeatedly discussed in France, both in media and in politics. In what follows, some of the political debates on this matter are examined in more detail, focusing on depictions of the hijab/the burkini and portrayals of "the Muslim woman" in debates in the French Senate.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000417977/> (accessed July 2024). Literally, the law stipulates in its first article: "Dans les écoles, les collèges et les lycées publics, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit." ('In public primary and secondary schools, the wearing of symbols or clothing through which students visibly demonstrate religious affiliation is prohibited.')

<sup>16</sup> Cf. also the debates in the corpus analyzed in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000022911670> (accessed July 2024). Article 2 also clarifies what is considered "public space": "[L]'espace public est constitué des voies publiques ainsi que des lieux ouverts au public ou affectés à un service public." 'The public space consists of public roads as well as places open to the public or dedicated to a public service.'

<sup>18</sup> For more details, cf. here: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/le-conseil-d-etat-confirme-la-suspension-du-reglement-interieur-des-piscines-de-la-ville-de-grenoble-autorisant-le-port-du-burkini> (accessed July 2024). Cf. also the debates on this issue in the corpus.

#### 4 Corpus and method

The corpus used for the following analysis consists of debates in the French Senate on the hijab<sup>19</sup> and the burkini which took place between April 2018 and June 2023. It was compiled via the Senate's website, which contains videos and transcripts of its public sessions,<sup>20</sup> using the search terms 'hijab,' 'foulard,' 'voile islamique,' and 'burkini.' The parts of the debates discussing issues related to these topics were then extracted from the provided transcripts, resulting in a final version of the corpus which consists of 15 debates on the hijab and three debates on the burkini, with a total duration of 8:07:25h (6:58:33h on the hijab and 1:08:52h on the burkini).<sup>21</sup> The debates on the hijab predominantly deal with the application or extension of existing laws, for instance, regarding the questions of whether mothers accompanying school trips should be allowed to wear a hijab, or whether wearing a hijab should be tolerated during sports events. One debate also addresses the campaign of the Council of Europe mentioned in section 1. The debates on the burkini revolve around the questions of whether the burkini should be banned from public swimming pools and how the French Government should react to a group of women who resisted the ban of the burkini in a swimming pool in Grenoble in 2019.

The corpus compilation was followed by an in-depth analysis. To this end, passages containing both explicit and implicit depictions of the hijab and the burkini were examined to unravel the dynamics of "sign making" (Gal &

Irvine 2019: 89) in these debates. It became evident that some of the meanings associated with the hijab and the burkini are directly or indirectly contrasted with values considered "French" in the corpus, and that this contrast forms part of the process through which these garments are constructed as signs; therefore, passages referring to these values were analyzed in more detail as well.

Subsequently, to retrace how the image of "the Muslim woman" is drawn in the debates, statements about women and girls who wear a hijab or a burkini were scrutinized. In doing so, aspects of gender as well as of religion were taken into consideration. These findings were related to the uncovered processes which construct the hijab/the burkini as a sign; this helped to explain the portrayal of "the Muslim woman" in the corpus.

As is evident from the proportions in the corpus (more than 85 % of the debates deal with the hijab, cf. above), the analysis primarily focuses on statements about the hijab, while those about the burkini were analyzed with the intention to complement the findings. The construction of the hijab and the burkini as socially meaningful signs occur in a similar manner. For this reason, statements about the hijab and the burkini are not analyzed separately. However, noteworthy differences in the attributed symbolic meanings are acknowledged when present.

The analysis of the processes of sign making in these debates is based on Gal & Irvine's (2019) theoretical framework on the construction of difference through language. As

<sup>19</sup> In order to avoid ambiguity in this article, the term 'hijab' is used to refer to the headscarf used by some Muslim women to cover their hair, which is under discussion in the analyzed Senate's debates.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. here: <https://videos.senat.fr/videos> (accessed July 2024)

<sup>21</sup> More information on the corpus is provided in the appendix.

mentioned above, they state that signs are always created as such: "Nothing is a sign in itself, but any phenomenon recognizable by participants can (potentially) be taken as a sign." (Gal & Irvine 2019: 89) They call this process of sign making 'conjecturing' and describe it in the following way: "The conjecture connects a phenomenon posited as a sign to some other phenomenon conjectured to be its object." (Gal & Irvine 2019: 90) Hence, the analysis will focus on the processes that make the hijab and the burkini a socially meaningful sign.

In this process of sign making, only specific elements are highlighted, while others are ignored. Gal & Irvine (2019: 20) describe this as an 'erasure':

*Erasure* is that aspect of ideological work through which some phenomena [...] are rendered invisible. Whatever is inconsistent with the ideologized schema either goes unnoticed or is explained away.

Importantly, it often goes unnoticed that a sign was (discursively) made. According to Gal & Irvine (2019: 107), this is also a form of 'erasure': "Perhaps most consequential is the systematic forgetting – erasure – of the metasemiotic step by which conjecture itself creates the link between sign and object."

According to Gal & Irvine (2019), another important step in establishing differences between groups is comparison, a process which can create an "axis of differentiation":

Contrasting, complementary qualities – formulated as defining each other in some socio-historical imaginary – constitute an axis. Axes usually consist of large clusters of paired, contrasting qualities that make two contrast-

ing multidimensional images. Since the qualities of these contrasting pairs are complementary, one "side" of the contrast is ideologically defined as what the other is not. [...] Any axis of differentiation is a totalizing schema. When invoked it divides a whole world of phenomena into qualitatively contrasting images or "sides." (Gal & Irvine 2019: 118)

The notions of 'conjecturing,' 'erasure,' and 'axis of difference' thus provide the framework for the following analysis.

It is important to mention that, for the analysis, the political affiliation of the respective speakers was not considered because the research question did not pertain to whether the hijab and the burkini are depicted differently according to political beliefs. Rather, the aim is to understand the overall discursive construction of the signs under discussion as well as the image of "the Muslim woman" that emerges from the contributions in the Senate's debates. However, during the analysis, it became evident that it is largely conservative and right-wing politicians who shape the discourse on these topics; critical statements towards this dominant discourse, in turn, usually come from left-leaning politicians. In order to be transparent in this regard, the faction affiliation of the speaker is indicated for each quote. In cases where the speaker is not a member of the French Senate, the political position that they held at the time is indicated instead.

## 5 Results

Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains,  
05/15/2019)

### 5.1 The process of sign making

#### 5.1.1 Constructing the hijab and the burkini as an index

##### The hijab and the burkini as an index for religious adherence

In numerous comments in the debates, the hijab and the burkini are described in a direct manner by adjectives and subject complements. In these descriptions, the nouns *signe* ‘sign’ and *symbole* ‘symbol’ are used particularly often. Not surprisingly, in many of these statements, the hijab is first labeled as a sign of the Islamic religion:<sup>22</sup>

- (1) [...] le voile, quel qu’il soit, est non pas un simple accessoire de mode, un simple élément vestimentaire, mais **un signe ostentatoire d’appartenance religieuse**. ‘the veil, regardless of its type, is not a mere fashion accessory, a mere piece of clothing, but **an ostentatious sign of a religious affiliation**.’ (Sylvie Goy-Chavent, groupe Les Républicains, 05/15/2019)
- (2) L’école publique doit demeurer un espace où les élèves ne sont exposés à aucun **signe religieux ostentatoire**. ‘Public schools must remain a space where students are not exposed to any **ostentatious religious sign**.’ (Jacqueline

The burkini is also explicitly labelled as a symbol. However, there is a difference insofar as it is associated with Islamism rather than with Islam in general. This is illustrated, among others, by the following statement:

- (3) Le burkini est **un symbole** non pas de l’islam – nous sommes tous d’accord sur ce point –, mais de **l’islamisme**, c’est-à-dire **d’un projet totalitaire**. ‘The burkini is **a symbol** not of Islam – we all agree on this point – but of **Islamism**, that is to say, of **a totalitarian project**.’ (Max Brisson, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

In such comments, the hijab and the burkini are discursively made signs by labelling them as such and by connecting them to a specific meaning, namely the adherence to the Islamic religion. It is crucial to notice that this process of conjecturing is highly arbitrary: Instead of the hijab, for example, one could also interpret women’s (visible) hair as a sign (cf. the discourse on women in Iran described in section 5.2, where showing their hair is associated with freedom). However, the choice of what is made a sign reveals what is perceived as a deviation from the norm, and consistently (re)constructing this sign in discourse might also perpetuate this norm. In the present case,

<sup>22</sup> The quotes are presented as they appear in the transcripts provided on the French Senate’s website; comments related to proceedings during the speeches, such as applause or interruptions, have been excluded. The relevant words or passages in each quote are highlighted in bold; all bold formatting in the quotes of this paper has been applied by the author. Additionally, if it is not clear from the comment whether it refers to the hijab or the burkini, an indication is provided in square brackets. The respective debates are identified via the date when they took place, indicated in the MM/DD/YYYY format. For more information, see appendix.

showing hair is considered “normal” behavior for women, aligning with what the majority of European women do, and covering one’s hair is viewed as an exception. The same process can be observed with the burkini. Here, considering the burkini as a sign implies – and perpetuates – a (highly arbitrary) norm in which a bikini is the standard swimwear.

A closer examination of how the hijab and the burkini are discursively linked to Islam, or even Islamism,<sup>23</sup> reveals that this relationship is based on contiguity. Both the hijab and the burkini are perceived as garments worn by women of Muslim faith (or, in the case of the burkini, by women following a radicalized and politicized version of Islamic beliefs), and this contiguity is interpreted in such a way that the hijab and the burkini come to index the religion of its wearers. Thus, both are constructed as indices in the Peircean sense. As mentioned above, this process of conjecturing occurs in a very direct manner since the speakers explicitly designate the hijab and the burkini as a *signe* ‘sign’ or a *symbole* ‘symbol’. However, the speakers depict the hijab and the burkini as if they were “objectively” an index of the Islamic religion. Hence, the signs are not perceived as constructed, but rather as “natural,” which indicates that a form of ‘erasure’ (cf. Gal & Irvine 2019: 107) has occurred here.

At the same time, an adherence to the Islamic religion is negatively framed in these statements, particularly by highlighting the visibility of the hijab (cf. “*signe ostentatoire*”

in (1) and (2)). If the hijab is perceived as indexing a religious adherence, and if the visibility of this sign is deemed undesirable (cf. (2), where the negative qualities associated to the hijab are indicated by the verb *exposer* ‘expose’), one can deduce that it is, in fact, an adherence to the Islamic faith that is considered undesirable. Hence, veiling is not only depicted as a deviation from Western norms, but also as a deviation from a normative ideal. Furthermore, these statements contain an implied accusation that women wearing a hijab or a burkini are somehow showing them off. Considering the discursively established relation between these garments and the Islamic faith, the speakers implicitly accuse these women of flaunting their religion. In this reasoning, it appears to be impossible to wear a hijab or a burkini in an unobtrusive way, which finally suggests that only a private, or even secret, adherence to the Islamic religion would be tolerated.

### **The hijab and the burkini as an index for a specific ideology**

This negative framing of the Islamic faith is made more explicit in numerous statements, in which the hijab and the burkini are not only constructed as an index of the religion itself, but further as an index of a specific ideology in terms of gender roles and social control. They are labelled, among others, as signs or symbols of gender inequality, as well as of totalitarianism, communitarianism, and terrorism.

<sup>23</sup> While ‘Islam’ refers to a faith, ‘Islamism’ denotes a politico-religious ideology. As Tībī (2012: 1) explains: “In the case of Islamism, the religionization of politics means the promotion of a political order that is believed to emanate from the will of Allah and is not based on popular sovereignty. Islam itself does not do this. As a faith, cult, and ethical framework, it implies certain political values but does not presuppose a particular order of government. Islamism grows out of a specific interpretation of Islam, but is not Islam: it is a political ideology that is distinct from the teaching of the religion of Islam.” However, in the debates analyzed here, Islam and Islamism are often not clearly distinguished.

This becomes clear in statements like the following ones:

- (4) Il est de notre responsabilité de dire haut et fort que nous ne pouvons pas accepter que, en France comme ailleurs, une petite fille porte **ce signe d'infériorisation**. [in reference to the hijab]  
'It is our responsibility to say loudly and clearly that we cannot accept that, in France as elsewhere, a little girl wears **this sign of inferiorization**.' (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)
- (5) [...] le hijab, **pire symbole de l'infériorisation, de l'enfermement et de la négation du corps de la femme** [...].  
'the hijab, **worst symbol of inferiorization, confinement, and the negation of the woman's body**' (Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains, 07/08/2020)
- (6) Dans le temple du savoir et de la connaissance qu'est l'université, on ne saurait tolérer **un tel symbole d'asservissement de la femme**.  
'In the temple of knowledge and learning that is university, **such a symbol of women's subjugation** cannot be tolerated.' (Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique,<sup>24</sup> 03/30/2021a)
- (7) [...] il faut une réponse globale aux **dérives communautaristes**. À l'évidence, dans ce domaine, le port du voile est **un élément emblématique** [...] ! [in reference to the hijab]  
'we need a global response to the **communal deviations**. Clearly, in this domain,

wearing the veil is **an emblematic element**' (Jean Louis Masson, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 10/29/2019)

- (8) On voit donc bien qu'il y a derrière ces accoutrements non pas tellement un signal religieux, mais **le signe d'une contre-société sexiste**, qui dit aux femmes qu'elles sont inférieures aux hommes et qu'elles doivent se soumettre, et qui veut séparer une communauté des croyants de la communauté des citoyens, de la communauté nationale. [in reference to the burkini]  
'So we can clearly see that behind these outfits, there is not so much a religious signal, but **the sign of a sexist counter-society**, telling women that they are inferior to men, that they must submit, and aiming at separating a community of believers from the community of citizens, from the national community.' (Bruno Retailleau, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

This link between the hijab and the burkini on the one hand, and interests or values like gender inequality and totalitarianism on the other, can be understood as a secondary form of conjecture. As Gal & Irvine (2019: 101) note, a previously established link between a sign and an object (in the broadest sense) can be the basis for further links: "[W]herever one starts, a chain of abductions unfolds through acts of conjecture, metasemiotically building on previous conjectures, typifications and sign relations of both iconicity and indexicality." In the present case, the hijab and the burkini can be constructed as indices for gender inequality and totalitarianism because Islam itself is

<sup>24</sup> This term refers to the 'administrative grouping of senators who do not appear on the list of any political group'.



commonly associated with them. Hence, the indexical connections *hijab/burkini* → *Islam/ Islamism* and *Islam/Islamism* → *gender inequality and totalitarianism* are blended, resulting in a connection *hijab/burkini* → *gender inequality and totalitarianism*. Consequently, the construction of the hijab and the burkini as an index for these interests or values works through the intermediary step of constituting them as an index for Islam (or, in the case of the burkini, of Islamism).<sup>25</sup> This is possible because, as mentioned above, a process of ‘erasure’ has taken place, which means that the hijab and the burkini are not recognized as arbitrary and discursively constructed signs of the Islamic religion, but rather perceived as “natural” signs. In the same vein, the hijab and the burkini are now represented as “natural” signs of a particular ideology, which shows that, as before, the process of conjecturing is ‘erased.’

Once again, the visibility of these (supposed) religious signs is negatively evaluated by implying that wearing them means flaunting them. This becomes clear in statements where the hijab is labelled as an *étendard*,

a ‘banner,’ which is displayed publicly, like in the following examples:

- (9) Le voile doit être interdit dans l’espace public parce que, outre son caractère discriminant, il sert aujourd’hui d’**étendard aux revendications communautaires et islamistes**.

‘The veil must be prohibited in public spaces because, in addition to its discriminatory nature, it serves today as **a banner for communitarian and Islamist demands**.’ (Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d’aucun groupe politique, 03/30/2021b)

- (10) Alors que le voile semble être la pierre angulaire du régime des mollahs en Iran, le Gouvernement va-t-il enfin admettre qu’il s’agit d’un **étendard politico-religieux**?<sup>26</sup>

‘While the veil appears to be the cornerstone of the regime of the mullahs in Iran, will the French government finally admit that it is **a politico-religious banner**?’ (Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)

<sup>25</sup> However, some speakers do criticize this direct association between hijab or burkini and Islam/Islamism, for example in the following statement which is made in one of the debates about the burkini: “Mais réduire, dans tous nos discours, le fait religieux et les croyances religieuses à des considérations textiles, cela n’a aucun sens !” ‘But reducing, in all our speeches, religious facts and religious beliefs to textile considerations, this makes no sense!’ (Jean-Pierre Sueur, groupe Socialiste, Écologiste et Républicain, 03/30/2021c)

<sup>26</sup> Note the suggestive wording here: It presupposes that the hijab is an *étendard politico-religieux* (‘a politico-religious banner’), and the question at hand is merely whether this is admitted or not.



Hence, through linking the hijab not only to the Islamic faith, but to a specific, negatively evaluated ideology, women wearing a hijab are accused of propagating “their” ideology.<sup>27</sup> This accusation becomes even more evident in the statements analyzed below.

### The hijab and the burkini as an instrument to impose a specific ideology

In other statements, the hijab and the burkini are not only labelled as a sign or symbol but are even depicted as an instrument for the implementation of what is considered to be the interests of Muslims (or, more specifically, Muslim men). This becomes evident in numerous examples, among which the following ones:

- (11) [...] personne ne m’a jamais prise en défaut lorsqu’il s’est agi de qualifier le voile islamique<sup>28</sup>, l’abaya, le hijab, tous ces oripeaux, pour ce qu’ils sont: **les outils d’un projet religieux et politique**, qui tous portent en eux l’oppression et la domination des femmes [...].
- ‘no one has ever found fault with me when it came to describing the Islamic veil, the abaya,

the hijab, all these garments, for what they are: **the tools of a religious and political project**, which all carry within them the oppression and domination of women’ (Laurence Rossignol, groupe Socialiste, Écologiste et Républicain, 10/05/2022)

- (12) Monsieur le Premier ministre, le voile est-il, oui ou non, **un instrument d’oppression des femmes** ?
- ‘Mister Prime Minister, is the veil, yes or no, **an instrument of women’s oppression?**’ (Céline Boulay-Espéronnier, groupe Les Républicains, 03/07/2019)
- (13) [...] fondé sur le jugement que les femmes seraient impudiques, ou, pire encore, impures, et qu’elles seraient susceptibles d’éveiller chez les hommes des pulsions incontrôlables, le voile est **une arme politique**, bien évidemment contraire à nos valeurs.
- ‘based on the judgement that women would be immodest, or, even worse, impure, and that they could awaken uncontrollable impulses in men, the veil is **a political weapon**, obviously contrary to our values.’ (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 11/03/2021)
- (14) [...] on sait de quoi le burkini est le nom : c’est **un interdit de fraternité, un interdit d’égalité**,

<sup>27</sup> These comments characterize adherents of the Muslim faith rather indirectly by referring to the values or interests they supposedly stand for. However, although to a small extent, there are also some comments in the corpus in which Muslims are more openly discriminated against. In the following example, in which the us/them-dichotomy is particularly pronounced, the speaker accuses Muslim immigrants not only for a lack of will to adapt to French norms, but also of being radical terrorists: “Monsieur le Premier ministre, par le passé, les immigrés qui venaient en France voulaient s’intégrer dans notre société. Aujourd’hui, les flux migratoires sont différents. Ils conduisent à des noyaux communautaristes qui rejettent notre façon de vivre. Or les terroristes musulmans trouvent leur vivier de recrutement dans le communautarisme radicalisé. Cette radicalisation recrute elle-même dans le communautarisme ordinaire. Il est urgent de réagir.” ‘Mister Prime Minister, in the past, the immigrants who came to France wanted to integrate into our society. Today, the migratory flows are different. They lead to communitarian cores that reject our way of life. So, the Muslim terrorists find their recruiting pool in the radicalized communitarianism. This radicalization, in turn, recruits in the ordinary communitarianism. It is time to react.’ (Jean Louis Masson, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d’aucun groupe politique, 10/16/2019) A bit later in his speech, he adds: “C’est aux gens qui viennent dans notre pays de s’adapter à nos règles de vie et non à nous de subir les leurs !” ‘It is for the people who come to our country to adapt to our rules of life and not for us to endure theirs!’, distinguishing once again very clearly between the in- and the outgroup.

<sup>28</sup> The common designation ‘voile islamique’ makes evident that the hijab is perceived as a “natural” index of the Islamic faith, which underscores that the process of conjecturing has been ‘erased.’

**un interdit de liberté.** Il est là pour **séparer les hommes des femmes** [...].

‘we know what the burkini represents: it’s a **prohibition of fraternity, a prohibition of equality, a prohibition of freedom.** It is there to **separate men from women**’ (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

- (15) Or, en réalité – ce n’est pas la peine d’être naïf ! –, tout le monde sait que le burkini est devenu pour des associations islamistes **un élément de combat et de provocation permanente.**

‘However, in reality – there is no need to be naïve! – everyone knows that the burkini has become for Islamist associations **an element of combat and of constant provocation.**’ (Roger Karoutchi, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

In these statements, the hijab and the burkini are not depicted as indexing a religious adherence or a particular ideology anymore, but seem to assume an active role, insofar as they are perceived as a means to impose this ideology on others. Hence, they are ascribed a performative force. According to such comments, simply by wearing these garments, it is possible to enforce Islamist interests. Additionally, wearing them is presented as an inherently provoking or aggressive act (cf. especially (15)), which suggests that the hijab and the burkini are not only perceived as possible instruments to impose these interests, but that imposing these interests might even be their sole purpose. Alternative reasons for which women might wear a hijab are thus ignored, which constitutes a process of ‘erasure’ in the

sense of “explaining away” (Gal & Irvine 2019: 21) aspects that do not fit.

Interestingly, it is the hijab and the burkini that are the focus in these statements; the women who wear them are often not even mentioned, which creates the impression that the hijab and the burkini are somewhat independent of them – it is not the women, but the garments that unfold the performative force. Thus, Muslim women become literally invisible behind the hijab/the burkini.<sup>29</sup>

### 5.1.2 Opposing “French” values to “Islamic” values

#### A France/Islam axis of differentiation

The construction of the hijab and the burkini as socially meaningful signs occurs not only through direct descriptions of these garments, as analyzed above, but also by depicting some values as specifically French, thereby creating a sharp opposition between “French” and supposedly “Islamic” values. In the debates, speakers frequently make references to what they label *valeurs républicaines* ‘republican values,’ implying that wearing a hijab or a burkini – and, against the backdrop of the established link between hijab/burkini and Islam, an adherence to the Islamic religion in general – is not compatible with these values. This becomes evident when speakers point to these values as an argument for strict laws against the hijab, like in the following examples:

<sup>29</sup> In this context, cf. the following comment in which the speaker criticizes that the focus is on the hijab rather than on women: “Où est l’humain dans cet amendement ? Je me le demande. Une maman voilée n’est-elle plus une maman ?” ‘Where is the human being in this amendment? I wonder. Is a veiled mother no longer a mother?’ (Daniel Salmon, groupe Écologiste - Solidarité et Territoires, 03/30/2021a)

- (16) L'école, à mon sens, doit rester un sanctuaire, un abri pour permettre à tous les enfants de grandir avec **les valeurs républicaines**.

'School, in my opinion, must remain a sanctuary, a refuge to allow all children to grow up with **the republican values**.' (Colette Mélot, groupe Les Indépendants - République et Territoires, 10/29/2019)

- (17) [...] pour nous, l'école est un sanctuaire, un sanctuaire républicain ! Nous n'y acceptons aucune atteinte **aux valeurs de la République**.<sup>30</sup>

'for us, school is a sanctuary, a republican sanctuary! We will not accept any infringement on **the values of the Republic**.' (Sarah El Haïry, Secretary of State for Youth, 10/10/22)

Not further specifying these values creates the impression that wearing a hijab or a burkini does not enter into conflict with a specific value, but rather with French society as a whole. What makes this contrast with French values seem even more pronounced is the portrayal of French society as standing unitedly behind these values, which are allegedly threatened by the hijab and the burkini. Speakers often refer to French citizens without using partitives or hedges; this suggests that the entire (non-Muslim) French population holds the same opinion. This is enforced by pronoun use. Speakers frequently use the first-person plural pronoun *nous* 'we,' seemingly in reference to all non-Muslims. In the same vein, when addressing "French" values, speakers

regularly use the first-person plural possessive *notre* 'our':

- (18) **Nous** sommes **tous** très heureux, me semble-t-il, d'**avoir en commun** l'héritage républicain ; il est ce qui **nous unit tous ensemble** et ce qui **fonde notre contrat social**.

'We are **all** very happy, it seems to me, to **have in common** the republican heritage; it is what **unites us all together** and what **forms the basis of our social contract**.' (Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education and Youth, 10/16/2019)

- (19) Il revient à votre gouvernement de défendre les principes qui **nous fondent** et qui **nous portent**.

'It is the responsibility of your government to defend the principles which **found us**, and which **carry us forward**.' (Hugues Saury, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)

- (20) Ce n'est pas l'ambiguïté qui contribuera au réarmement moral **de notre pays** et au respect des principes qui **font la France** et qui **unissent les Français**.

'It is not ambiguity that will contribute to the moral rearmament **of our country** and to the respect of the principles that **found France** and that **unite the French**.' (Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains, 10/16/2019)

Such statements open up two contrasting worlds, with France on the one hand, and Islam on the other. As such, an "axis of differentiation" (Gal & Irvine 2019: 118) is created. Importantly, the two worlds are not only con-

<sup>30</sup> Note the wording in both statements, where school is described using terms stemming from a religious frame. This is surprising, especially in the context of the repeated emphasis on the principle of *laïcité* in this debate, and further highlights a good/bad dichotomy.

trasted, but also evaluated, so that “French” values are perceived as positive and “Islamic” values as negative, as will be exposed in more detail below.

This axis is illustrated particularly by referring to two concepts, namely gender equality and *laïcité*. These are depicted as specifically French (or, more broadly, Western) values, thus placed in direct opposition to “Islamic” values.

Gender equality is repeatedly presented as a value supported by all French citizens. The fact that gender equality might not have been fully achieved within French society and that not all French citizens may embrace the notion of gender equality is disregarded, ‘erased.’ Once again, the use of first-person plural pronouns and possessives is particularly noticeable because it fosters the notion of a strong sense of community within French people, reinforcing the impression of a fully united society. This becomes evident in the following examples:

- (21) **Le statut de la femme**, sa place dans la société, la mixité, **l’égalité entre hommes et femmes** sont parmi **nos points cardinaux**.  
 ‘**The status of the woman**, her place in society, the mixing of genders, **gender equality** are among **our cardinal points**.’  
 (Olivier Paccaud, groupe Les Républicains, 01/08/2020)
- (22) Ce n’est qu’un exemple, mais je crois que l’entrée par **l’égalité entre les femmes et les hommes** doit **nous mobiliser**.  
 ‘It is only an example, but I believe that the entry point through **gender equality** should **mobilize us**.’ (Christophe Castaner, Minister of the Interior, 01/08/2020)
- (23) Je le dis au nom du principe d’**égalité entre les hommes et les femmes**, comment

peut-on soutenir **dans notre pays** l’existence de telles tenues, qui sont contraires à **nos principes constitutionnels** ?

‘I say it in the name of the principle of **gender equality**, how can one support **in our country** the existence of such clothing, which goes against **our constitutional principles**?’ (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

By invoking gender equality, France is directly opposed to Islam, which, as described above, is discursively associated with gender inequality. The opposition between “French” and “Islamic” values is evident in the specific word choice. The speakers repeatedly use the noun *égalité* ‘equality’ to describe supposedly “French” values, and antonyms like *infériorisation* ‘inferiorisation’ (cf. (4) and (5)) or *oppression* ‘oppression’ (cf. (12)) for “Islamic” values. Furthermore, the incompatibility is explicitly stated in (14), where the burkini is said to be contradictory to what are taken to be French core values: *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Considering that the hijab and the burkini are depicted not only as indices of these values, but even as instruments to impose them, it becomes clear that, according to this reasoning, wearing these garments endangers French values, hence French society.

The second aspect frequently addressed in the debates (especially in those about the hijab) is the principle of *laïcité*. It is not only described as a uniting factor for all French citizens, but also as a feature characterizing French society specifically, thus distinguishing French citizens from citizens of other countries. As before, the use of first-person plural pronouns and possessives creates a sense of community and contributes to the homogenizing effect in depicting

French society. This becomes evident, among many others, in the following comments:

- (24) **La laïcité** [...] nous est très utile : dans la société d'aujourd'hui, en effet, nous avons besoin d'**une République une**, de citoyens égaux. Ce point est très important – **c'est ce qui nous différencie d'autres pays**, y compris de pays voisins.  
'*Laïcité* is very useful to us: in today's society, we indeed need **a united Republic**, equal citizens. This point is very important – **it is what sets us apart from other countries**, including neighboring countries.' (Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education and Youth, 10/16/2019)
- (25) [...] la France est une République **laïque**. Cette règle, **fruit de notre histoire**, a longtemps divisé notre nation, mais, aujourd'hui, **elle la rassemble** et elle doit la rassembler!  
'France is a **secular Republic**. This rule, **born of our history**, has divided our nation for a long time, but today, **it unites it**, and it must unite it!' (Pascale Gruny, groupe Les Républicains, 10/29/2019)
- (26) **La laïcité est au cœur du pacte républicain**.  
'*Laïcité* is **at the heart of the republican pact**.' (Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, Minister of Sports and Olympic and Paralympic Games, 06/28/2023)
- (27) Monsieur le ministre, ma question est simple : quand le Gouvernement définira-t-il un cap clair et ferme pour défendre le principe de **laïcité** ? Quand le Président de la République s'exprimera-t-il en faveur de **ce pilier fondateur de notre République** ? Saura-t-il prendre les responsabilités qui lui incombent pour

faire triompher ce qui **nous rassemble** sur ce qui nous divise ?

'Mister Minister, my question is simple: when will the Government set a clear and firm course to defend the principle of *laïcité*? When will the President of the Republic speak in favor of **this foundational pillar of our Republic**? Will he be able to take the responsibilities that fall upon him to make triumph what **unites us** over what divides us?' (Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains, 01/08/2020)

- (28) Au pays de Marianne, dans notre patrie qui fut celle de Marie quand la France était la fille aînée de l'Église, **la laïcité est un socle du contrat social**, permettant que **nos différences ne deviennent pas distances**.

'In the country of Marianne, in our home country which was once Mary's when France was the eldest daughter of the Church, *laïcité* is **a cornerstone of the social contract**, which allows that **our differences do not become distances**.' (Olivier Paccaud, groupe Les Républicains, 01/08/2020)

French *laïcité* stands in sharp contrast to the perceived ostentation of their religion that Muslims are accused of (cf., e.g., (11) and (15)), as well as to *communautarisme* 'communitarianism' (cf., e.g., (7) and (8)). This further expands the axis of differentiation between France and Islam and highlights the supposed incompatibility between "French" and "Islamic" values.

In addition to implicitly contrasting French and Muslim society, an opposition between them is even directly mentioned in comments like the following ones:

- (29) Mais il prend tout son sens dans les quartiers où les gens sont exaspérés de voir **le communautarisme** se développer au quotidien, **mettant à mal les valeurs qui fondent la République**.

'But it becomes highly relevant in the districts where people are exasperated to see **communitarianism** develop day by day, **undermining the values that form the basis of the French Republic**.' (Philippe Pemezec, groupe Les Républicains, 04/19/2018)

- (30) Ce qui est en question, dans cette affaire, c'est **la remise en cause régulière des valeurs de notre société et de notre vivre ensemble** par les tenants d'une vision de l'islam **communautariste et radicale**.

'What is at stake in this matter is **the regular challenge of the values of our society and of our living together** by the proponents of a **communitarian and radical** vision of Islam.' (Philippe Pemezec, groupe Les Républicains, 10/29/2019)

- (31) La France, **ce n'est ni le communautarisme ni le multiculturalisme**.

'France is **neither communitarianism nor multiculturalism**.' (Jérôme Bascher, groupe Les Républicains, 05/24/2018)

Overall, these statements depict France as a country defined by specific, positively connoted values, which are juxtaposed against negatively connoted values or interests associated with the Muslim community, implying (or stating explicitly, as in (31)) that France

stands in antithesis to Islam. With these comments, the French society as well as the Muslim community are homogenized, which eventually paints a picture of two distinct groups, each with their own values. Consequently, within this axis of differentiation, France as a nation deeply committed to human rights, gender equality, and religious neutrality, appears to stand diametrically opposed to and incompatible with Islam.<sup>31</sup> Considering that the hijab and the burkini are depicted as indexing (or even as an instrument to impose) "Islamic" values, living together peacefully doesn't seem to be possible if women wear a hijab or a burkini.

This impression is strengthened by comments that imply that the garments under discussion pose a danger to French society, especially to supposedly more vulnerable members of society, like children. In the debate about the hijab, this becomes particularly evident through the frequent association of the hijab with *communautarisme* 'communitarianism' and *terrorisme* 'terrorism' (as described above) as well as through verbs like *protéger* 'protect' (or *exposer* 'expose' in (2)), as in the following examples:

- (32) De ce point de vue, il est utile de rappeler que le voile, comme toute autre tenue inspirée par la religion, à condition qu'elle ne trouble pas l'ordre public, n'est pas interdit en France. Son usage, en revanche, est encadré, notamment pour préserver la neutralité dans les services publics et **protéger**

<sup>31</sup> The argument according to which wearing a hijab or a burkini challenges *laïcité* presupposes a very specific understanding of this principle, which Amir-Moazami (2007: 47–59) examines in more detail.



l'enfant dans l'école alors que sa conscience n'est pas encore formée.<sup>32</sup>

'In this perspective, it is useful to remind that the veil, like any other clothing inspired by religion, provided it does not disturb public order, is not prohibited in France. Its use, however, is regulated, especially to preserve neutrality in public services and to **protect** children in school while their conscience is not formed yet.' (Laurent Lafon, groupe Union Centriste, 10/29/2019)

- (33) Parce que les enfants sont en croissance, le corps et l'esprit en évolution, ils ont besoin qu'on les **protège**.

'Because the children are still growing up, with their body and their mind evolving, they need to be **protected**.' (Jean-Marie Mizzon, groupe Union Centriste, 10/29/2019)

As before, women wearing a hijab are hardly ever mentioned, and the danger seems to originate rather from the hijab itself. This shows again the extent to which the hijab is ascribed a performative force. Apparently, it itself can lead astray people, disturb public order, or manipulate young students, and not banning its wearing in public spaces poses a risk of supporting an Islamic or even Islamist ideology.

It is noteworthy that the two sides of the axis of differentiation – France and Islam – are situated on vastly different levels. France is a single country and is even differentiated from

other European countries (cf. (24)), while Islam is an entire religion and refers, to some extent, to a whole cultural sphere. This portrayal makes the ingroup – French citizens – appear much more distinguishable than the outgroup – Muslims –, enhancing the image of an external danger, an aspect further analyzed in the subsequent section.

### A war between French and Islamic values

The frequent use of war- or fight-related lexemes in this context is particularly remarkable. According to the comments, French society or politics must fight for "their" values; this creates a sense that French values are being threatened by Islamic values, which enhances the good/bad-dichotomy between the ingroup and the outgroup. While "French" values are good and must be protected, "Islamic" values are bad and must be combatted. The following examples illustrate this depiction.<sup>33</sup>

- (34) **Mener la bataille** contre le voile islamiste, c'est **mener une bataille** pour l'humanité et pour la liberté. Car en enlevant aux femmes leur identité, leur visage, on leur enlève leur humanité.

'**Fighting** against the Islamist veil is **fighting** for humanity and for freedom. Because by taking away women's identity, their face, one takes away their humanity.'

<sup>32</sup> However, clothing or symbols typically associated with religions other than Islam are not subject to the same type of scrutiny. The kippah, for instance, is occasionally mentioned in the Senate's debates, but primarily in two contexts: either when proponents of stricter regulations on the hijab preempt critiques that debates over "ostentatious religious symbols" disproportionately target the hijab, or when critics of such regulations draw comparisons to other religious symbols to highlight the differing treatment of the hijab.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also, among others, "combat" in (15), "réarmement" in (20), "mobiliser" in (22), "embrigadement" in (39), "rempart" in (51), and "offensive" in (56).



- (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)
- (35) Nous voulons **lutter** contre le totalitarisme islamique ; il faut **combattre** ce qui en est le symbole.  
 'We want to **fight** against Islamic totalitarianism; we must **combat** what is the symbol of it.' (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021b)
- (36) [...] il est essentiel de rappeler que **le combat** pour une véritable égalité hommes-femmes passe aussi par **le combat**, sur notre territoire, contre toute forme de fondamentalisme, dont le voile est souvent un étendard.  
 'it is essential to remind that **the fight** for true gender equality also involves **a fight**, within our territory, against any form of fundamentalism, of which the veil is often a banner.' (Céline Boulay-Espéronnier, groupe Les Républicains, 03/07/2019)
- (37) Nous sommes une nation ouverte, mais une nation ferme dans ses principes et qui **lutte sans relâche** contre la radicalité et le communautarisme.  
 'We are an open nation, but a firm nation in its principles and who **fight**s relentlessly against radicality and communitarianism.' (Sibeth Ndiaye, Secretary of State to the Prime Minister and Government Spokeswoman, 10/16/2019)
- (38) **Le combat** pour la liberté au titre de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes est, à mon avis, essentiel dans **la lutte** contre le communautarisme et l'islamisme rampant dans certains quartiers.  
 'The **fight** for freedom in the name of gender equality is, in my opinion, essential in **the fight** against communitarianism and Islamism which creep in certain areas.'
- (Christophe Castaner, Minister of the Interior, 01/08/2020)
- (39) [...] nous continuerons de **mener un combat sans ambiguïté et sans faiblesse** contre l'embrigadement religieux et le repli communautaire, et nous **poursuivrons notre lutte sans merci** pour l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes.  
 'we will continue to **fight without ambiguity and without weakness** against religious indoctrination and communitarian withdrawal, and we will **pursue without mercy our fight** for gender equality.' (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 12/01/2021)
- (40) Nous serons **intransigeants sur la lutte** contre toutes les formes de prosélytisme et de radicalisme. Nous serons également déterminés à garantir **la défense** de l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes.  
 'We will be **uncompromising in the fight** against all forms of proselytism and radicalism. We will also be determined to guarantee **the defense** of gender equality.' (Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, Minister of Sports and Olympic and Paralympic Games, 06/28/2023)
- (41) [I]l est de la responsabilité de l'État de ne pas laisser les maires seuls **en première ligne**.  
 'It is the responsibility of the State not to leave the mayors alone **on the front lines**.' (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

In order to fully grasp the process of sign making taking place in this debate, it is instructive to observe how the banning of the hijab and the burkini is equated to averting the risk of an Islamist ideology being propagated

(cf. particularly the explicit equation in (34)). According to this reasoning, the hijab and the burkini are not only possible instruments for imposing politico-religious interests, but their presence appears to be a condition for imposing these interests, insofar as banning them can supposedly prevent this imposition. Thus, the relationship between the hijab/the burkini and the mentioned politico-religious interests appears to be very strong.

The war metaphor evident in such statements is expanded by repeatedly calling for characteristics that are important in combat, especially courage and determination. This becomes evident, among others, in the following statements:<sup>34</sup>

- (42) Pour cela, il faut du **courage**. Il faut, pour une fois, avoir **le courage** d'entendre ce que disent les Français<sup>35</sup> et comprendre ceux qui voient leur quartier et leur commune s'enfoncer peu à peu dans le communautarisme, leur environnement se transformer et les propos se radicaliser. 'For this, **courage** is needed. It is necessary, for once, to have **the courage** to hear what the French are saying and to understand those who see their district and community gradually sinking into communitarianism, their environment transforming, and the rhetoric radicalizing.' (Philippe Pemezec, groupe Les Républicains, 10/29/2019)
- (43) Alors, agissons **sans avoir peur** et interdisons-le [= le voile] ! [...] Ayons **le courage** de la [= la liberté] protéger à l'heure où les

islamistes la remettent en cause ! Accepter le voile à l'université, c'est laisser le champ libre aux revendications islamiques de tous ordres; c'est la première reculade avant la capitulation ! [...] Tout accepter, c'est concéder la victoire à nos ennemis, c'est-à-dire les islamistes !<sup>36</sup>

'So let's act **without fear** and let's ban it [= the veil]! Let's have **the courage** to protect it [= freedom] in a moment when Islamists are challenging it! To accept the veil in university is to leave the field to Islamic demands of all kinds; it is the first step back before capitulation! To accept everything is to concede the victory to our enemies, that is to say, the Islamists!' (Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 03/30/2021a)

- (44) Face aux extrémistes, **nous ne pouvons pas avoir la main tremblante** !  
'In the face of the extremists, **we cannot have trembling hands**!' (Jérôme Bascher, groupe Les Républicains, 10/29/2019)

As a result, those not in favor of stricter laws against the hijab or the burkini are accused of being cowardly and hypocritical, or even of fostering a division within French society and making Islam – or rather Islamism, the distinction, as mentioned above, not always being clear – stronger through their inaction. This emphasizes again the impression of an imminent danger posed by Islamism that must

<sup>34</sup> Cf. also "sans faiblesse" and "sans merci" in (39).

<sup>35</sup> Note the use of "les Français" here, which creates, once again, the impression that all French citizens hold the same opinion.

<sup>36</sup> In this quote, the war metaphor is particularly evident by referring to the *battlefield* and to the danger of *retreat* and *surrender* to the *enemy*.

be fought with all available means, like in the following examples:<sup>37</sup>

- (45) [S]top à l'**hypocrisie** et au **manque de courage politique** de ce gouvernement face à la radicalisation de certaines organisations et à la multiplication de ces dérives religieuses !  
'Stop the **hypocrisy** and the **lack of political courage** of this government in the face of the radicalization of certain organizations and of the proliferation of these religious deviations!' (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 06/28/2023)
- (46) Sans cela, vous **laissez perdurer**, malheureusement avec une **lâche complicité**, un flou qui accentue les tensions dans notre pays.  
'Without this, you will **allow**, unfortunately with a **cowardly complicity**, tensions **to persist** in our country.' (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 07/09/2019)
- (47) Vous ne voulez donc pas combattre ce totalitarisme, et finalement **vous en êtes complices** !  
'You do not want to fight this totalitarianism, and in the end, **you are complicit**!' (Max Brisson, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)

The idea evident in some of these comments according to which a reluctance to legally restrict the wearing of the hijab or the burkini automatically strengthens what are perceived to be Islamic goals once again highlights the notion that wearing a hijab/a burkini is tan-

amount to imposing particular politico-religious interests.

In summary, these comments create the impression that there exist two internally homogeneous but externally distinct groups – one consisting of the adherents of “French” values, and the other of the adherents of Islam (or rather of Islamism) – which stand in opposition. The war metaphor suggests that France – a united nation whose citizens share and uphold common values – is in an ongoing war against an outside community which is actively trying to impose “its” values, which are incompatible with “French” values, onto French society. In addition, the wearing of a hijab or burkini is equated to active participation in this “war.” To this end, anyone who wears a hijab or a burkini, or who does not wish to restrict their use, is portrayed as an enemy to “French” values. This suggests further that Muslims who choose to openly show their religious belonging are conceptually separated from French society, and are instead seen as members of an ideological Other, namely Islamists. Apparently, the axis of differentiation does not allow for an intermediary position. Given that wearing a hijab or a burkini is interpreted as an act of displaying one’s religion, this is, of course, particularly relevant for Muslim women. For this reason, it is crucial to investigate what kind of images of “the Muslim woman” emerge from such statements. This will be exposed in the following.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. also the following statement: “Si Mahsa Amini a été tuée, ce n’est pas pour un simple bout de tissu. Accepter cette prétendue mode, c’est conforter le communautarisme dans notre pays.” ‘If Mahsa Amini was killed, it is not because of a simple piece of fabric. To accept this alleged fashion is to reinforce communitarianism in our country.’ (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)

## 5.2 The images of “the Muslim woman”

### The passive victim

As described above, the hijab and the burkini are framed as inherently negative. They are portrayed as instruments for imposing Islamic, or rather Islamist, interests, and therefore as a threat to French society in general. The danger seems to emanate not from the women wearing a hijab/burkini, but rather from the garments themselves, or else from the men allegedly forcing these women to wear them. This creates the impression that Muslim women who wear a hijab or a burkini are instrumentalized and rather act as some kind of puppets. As such, they appear as passive victims of male (Muslim men's) dominance. This is evident in the following comments:

- (48) Chez nous aussi, **la pression** des quartiers et des familles ne laisse en réalité que **peu de choix** aux femmes voilées, en particulier aux plus jeunes d'entre elles.  
'Here, too, **the pressure** from communities and from families actually leaves only **little choice** to the veiled women, especially to the youngest ones amongst them.' (Céline Boulay-Espéronnier, groupe Les Républicains, 03/07/2019)
- (49) **La pression** qui est exercée sur les femmes est insupportable, et c'est à nous de les **défendre**. [in reference to the burkini]  
'**The pressure** which is exerted on women is unbearable, and it is up to us to **defend** them.' (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)
- (50) Par défaut, le voile serait un rempart contre la violence : plus d'une musulmane sur quatre le porte pour se sentir en sécu-

rité. Il s'agit non plus de séparatisme, mais d'une véritable **domination** exercée par les islamistes. Ceux-ci ne veulent pas vivre en dehors de la République, ils veulent que la charia supplante nos lois, en commençant par **l'asservissement des femmes**.

'By default, the veil would be a shield against violence: more than one in four Muslim women wear it to feel safe. This is no longer about separatism, but about a real **domination** exerted by the Islamists. They do not want to live outside the French Republic, they want Sharia to replace our laws, starting with **the subjugation of women**.' (Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 03/30/2021b)

- (51) Je peux vous dire, chers collègues de gauche, que, dans leurs quartiers, dans leur vie, certaines d'entre elles **subissent des pressions** pour porter ce type de vêtement. [in reference to the burkini]  
'I can tell you, dear colleagues of the left, that in their communities, in their lives, some of them **face pressures** to wear this type of clothing.' (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021c)
- (52) Que comptez-vous faire pour **protéger** toutes ces femmes qui, sur le territoire français, **sont contraintes** de le porter ? [in reference to the hijab]  
'What do you intend to do to **protect** all these women who, on French territory, **are forced** to wear it?' (Céline Boulay-Espéronnier, groupe Les Républicains, 03/07/2019)

In such statements, women who wear a hijab or a burkini are often not in an agent, but in a patient semantic role: They have been forced

into something and are not given a choice; therefore, they are in need of protection.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the speakers repeatedly mention the *pression* 'pressure' put upon Muslim women. All this indicates that Muslim women do not wear a hijab or a burkini voluntarily; consequently, women who do wear them are assumed to do so under coercion.

In the debates about the hijab particularly, this impression is further strengthened by comments that depict the wearing of a hijab as a limitation of women's individual freedom. This becomes evident through verbs such as *être libérée* 'be freed,' *se libérer* 'free oneself,' or *se débarrasser* 'get rid of' when talking about women who do not wear or do not wish to wear a hijab, like in the following examples:

- (53) Nous devons tendre la main à toutes celles qui ne rêvent que d'une chose : **être libérées** et **s'affranchir** du voile.  
'We must reach out to all those [fem.] who only dream of one thing: **to be liberated** and **to free themselves** from the veil.'  
(Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 03/30/2021b)

- (54) [...] qui a vu les jeunes femmes se mettre à porter le voile sous la pression, alors que leurs mères s'en **étaient libérées**.

'who has seen young women start wearing the veil under pressure, whereas their mothers **had liberated themselves** from it.' (Jacqueline Eustache-Brinio, groupe Les Républicains, 10/16/2019)

- (55) En Iran, des femmes risquent leur vie pour **se débarrasser** du voile.

'In Iran, women risk their lives **to get rid** of the veil.' (Claude Malhuret, groupe Les Indépendants - République et Territoires, 10/05/2022)

It is especially important to notice that these statements homogenize Muslim women. When speaking about them, speakers often use demonstrative or definite articles or pronouns (cf. "aux femmes voilées" in (48), "toutes ces femmes" in (52), or "les jeunes femmes" in (54)). Concerning the hijab, it is not taken into consideration that women associate various meanings to the hijab (cf. section 2). The reasons why women wear a hijab can, for example, be dependent on the legal circumstances in a country (i.e., whether it is compulsory, optional, or forbidden to wear a hijab); however, no differentiation is made between

<sup>38</sup> Some speakers do criticize this image of passive and suffering Muslim women, for example in the following comment: "Ce sont des femmes libres, pour la plupart, de choisir. Il ne faut pas les infantiliser ainsi !" 'These are women who are, for the most part, free to choose. They should not be infantilized like this!' (Sophie Taillé-Polian, Groupe Écologiste - Solidarité et Territoires, 10/29/2019)

women from countries which differ in this regard (e.g., France and Iran) – instead, they are all part of a seemingly homogeneous group of women who wear hijabs against their will.<sup>39</sup> In the same vein, with regard to the burkini, the idea that women might wear a burkini because they want to do so is not even mentioned. For instance, Evolvi (2019: 475) describes in her study on narratives about the burkini ban that Muslim women “frame the burkini as a garment that allows them to enjoy public life rather than excludes them from society.” Hence, the perspectives of Muslim women themselves are ignored; rather, the burkini, as

well as the hijab, are interpreted from a specific Western perspective.

Paradoxically, these speakers frame a hijab or burkini ban as a way to ensure freedom for Muslim women, overlooking the fact that such a ban actually limits their freedom of choice<sup>40</sup> – another instance of ‘erasure’ –, like in the following comment:<sup>41</sup>

(56) [U]ne très grande majorité des femmes est très heureuse d'**avoir la liberté** de se vêtir dans les piscines d'une manière qui correspond aux conquêtes des libertés féminines accomplies au vingtième siècle.

<sup>39</sup> Cf., e.g., the comment “Nous devons aux femmes iraniennes de ne pas laisser se répandre chez nous ce qu’elles veulent tant voir disparaître chez elles.” ‘We owe it to the Iranian women to no let what they so desperately want to see disappear in their countries spread in ours.’ (Hugues Saury, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022) and the comment quoted in footnote 37 “Si Mahsa Amini a été tuée, ce n’est pas pour un simple bout de tissu. Accepter cette prétendue mode, c’est conforter le communautarisme dans notre pays. C’est choisir le camp des oppresseurs. C’est choisir le camp des islamistes. C’est abandonner les femmes d’Iran, d’Afghanistan et d’Arabie, qui sont obligées de se voiler, mais aussi celles d’Algérie, de Tunisie, de Syrie ou d’ailleurs, qui cèdent à la pression sociale, comme celles de nos quartiers !” ‘If Mahsa Amini was killed, it is not because of a simple piece of fabric. To accept this alleged fashion is to reinforce communitarianism in our country. It is to choose the side of the oppressors. It is to choose the side of the Islamists. It is to abandon the women from Iran, from Afghanistan, and from Saudi Arabia, who are forced to veil, but also those from Algeria, from Tunisia, from Syria, or from elsewhere, who yield to social pressure, like those from our communities!’ (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)

<sup>40</sup> Lyon and Spini (2004: 341) make this contradiction explicit: “However, and crucially, the answer to one constraint (the religious obligation to wear the *foulard*) cannot be another constraint (the obligation not to wear it): *an effective process of liberation cannot be based on a prohibition.*” (emphasis in the original) Cf. also Zine (2006: 244): “Whether the veil and burqa is a mandated form of dress for women in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan, or if it is outlawed in secular public institutions in countries like Turkey, the effect is essentially the same; namely that these practices of disciplining and regulating women’s bodies are imposed by state authorities and thereby challenge the political and spiritual autonomy of Muslim women to make reasoned choices about their bodies.” This position is reflected in one comment in the corpus as well: “Je crois, madame Boyer, que, pour protéger ou faire avancer l’égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, il y a beaucoup de choses extrêmement urgentes à faire. La mesure proposée ne me semble pas en faire partie. Pourquoi ? Parce que le sexisme consiste, aussi, à dire aux femmes ce qu’elles doivent porter ou non.” ‘I believe, Mrs. Boyer, that, in order to protect or advance gender equality, there are many extremely urgent things to do. The proposed measure does not seem to be part of them. Why? Because sexism also consists of telling women what they should or should not wear.’ (Sophie Taillé-Polian, Groupe Écologiste - Solidarité et Territoires, 03/30/2021c)

<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, some of the speakers do argue that women should be free to decide whether they want to wear a hijab or not, for example in the following statements: “Je crois que nous devons respecter également la volonté de chacun de porter ou non les attributs vestimentaires qu’il souhaite dans l’espace public.” ‘I believe that we must also respect everyone’s will to wear or not to wear the clothing items they wish in public spaces.’ (Geneviève Darrieussecq, Secretary of State, 03/07/2019) and “Quant à la question du voile à l’université, je considère que des adultes – les étudiants à l’université sont bien des adultes – ont leur libre conscience et peuvent assumer leur libre choix.” ‘Regarding the question of the veil at university, I consider that adults – university students are indeed adults – have their own free conscience and can make their own free choice.’ (Christophe Castaner, Minister of the Interior, 01/08/2020) However, these comments are significantly less numerous than those in favor of limiting the wearing of the hijab and the burkini.



'A vast majority of women are very happy to **have the freedom** to dress in swimming pools in a way that corresponds to the achievements of women's freedom accomplished in the twentieth century.' (Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education, Youth and Sports, 06/30/2021)

[I]f the Muslim woman is oppressed and a victim of patriarchal power, the western woman is liberated and free from gender constraints. [...] The construction of liberated vs oppressed women is central to the production of an empowered western self through its non-western other. (Scharff 2011: 130)

Considering that a hijab/burkini ban is presented as a necessary measure to ensure women's freedom, it can also be argued that women's rights are instrumentalized for political purposes<sup>42</sup> and from a specifically Western perspective – a strategy Crosby (2014: 47) labels as “faux feminism” and defines as “the specious, ‘faux’, appropriation of feminist sentiment by Westerners to promote Orientalist policies.” This portrayal of the oppressed Muslim woman as a countermodel to the supposedly progressive and liberated Western woman is a narrative often found in Western discourses about Islam (cf. Bullock & Jafri 2000: 35). Such statements clearly aim for self-affirmation by representing Western societies as societies that have achieved gender equality, as Scharff (2011) argues (cf. also Shooman 2014: 87):

In addition to this, implying that Muslim women are in need of saving reinforces the image of weak women in general. Such statements are echoes of a paternalist colonialist ideology, as they suggest that Muslim women need Western men to liberate them from the constraints of their male social environment (cf. Spivak 1988: 296, mentioned in section 2).<sup>43</sup>

### The militant extremist

The second image drawn of the Muslim woman stands in contrast to the above-mentioned image of the passive woman. This is the woman who supposedly wears a hijab or a burkini by her own choice. She is still depicted in a negative way and also attributed with the intention to threaten French society. The combativeness represented in the word choice is particularly pronounced in the debate about

<sup>42</sup> Cf. also the following comments in the corpus: “Vous instrumentalisez la cause des femmes pour parler du burkini !” ‘You are instrumentalizing the women's cause to talk about the burkini!’ (Esther Benbassa, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 03/30/2021c) and “En vous arc-boutant sur cette mesure, c'est vous qui incarnez la police des vêtements. C'est vous qui dites aux femmes ce qu'elles doivent porter ou non. Vous vous moquez de l'émancipation de ces femmes. Ce qui vous intéresse, c'est de mettre au ban une religion et ses pratiquantes.” ‘By stubbornly holding to this measure, you are the ones who embody clothing police. You are the ones who tell women what they should or should not wear. You disregard the emancipation of these women. What interests you is to ban a religion and its practitioners [fem.].’ (Thomas Dossus, groupe Écologiste - Solidarité et Territoires, 02/16/2022)

<sup>43</sup> Neocolonialism is also called out by a member of the Senate who expresses her views as follows: “Voilà donc une droite faisant mine de lutter contre l'islamisme en enlevant leur voile aux mères accompagnatrices, quand d'autres, dignes héritiers de la vision paternaliste des colonisateurs d'antan, prétendent les émanciper des chaînes de l'oppression masculine musulmane.” ‘So here we have a right-wing group pretending to fight against Islamism by removing their veils from accompanying mothers, while others, worthy inheritors of the paternalistic vision of the colonialists of yesterday, claim to emancipate them from the chains of the Muslim male oppression.’ (Esther Benbassa, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figurant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique, 10/29/2019)



the burkini. Here, these women are often labeled as *militantes* ‘militant,’ and their acts as a *provocation* ‘provocation’. This image of “the Muslim woman” is evident, among others, in the following statements:

- (57) Si le Conseil d’État suit l’avis du rapporteur public, ne soyons pas naïfs, cela se traduira par une victoire pour **celles qui souhaitent fragiliser, avec cette offensive religieuse, l’un des piliers de notre société** et, par là même, par une défaite politique pour notre République.

‘If the Council of State follows the opinion of the public reporter, let’s not be naïve, this will result in a victory for **those [fem.] who wish to weaken, with this religious offensive, one of the pillars of our society**, and consequently, in a political defeat for our Republic.’ (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 06/28/2023)

- (58) A-t-on jamais forcé un parent d’élève à accompagner une sortie scolaire ? Si, pour une mère de famille, retirer son voile et montrer ses cheveux est insupportable, **elle peut rester chez elle, mais qu’elle ne prétende pas collaborer à un service public laïque et démocratique sans en accepter les règles**. Car il faut être lucide, **c’est un véritable bras de fer qui est engagé par ces femmes brandissant le voile comme un étendard**, appuyées par un communautarisme islamiste, politique [...].<sup>44</sup>
- ‘Has one ever forced a student’s parent to accompany a school trip? If, for a mother, removing her veil and showing her hair is unbearable, **she can stay at home, but she**

**should not pretend to be collaborating with a secular and democratic public service without accepting its rules**. Because one must be clear, **these women wielding the veil as a banner are engaged in a real power struggle**, supported by an Islamic, political communitarianism.’ (Philippe Pemezec, groupe Les Républicains, 10/29/2019)

- (59) À deux reprises, **des femmes militantes**, qui ont la volonté d’**aller contre les interdits**, ont fait le choix de **défier l’autorité publique** en venant se baigner en burkini dans les piscines municipales, ce qui est pourtant interdit par les règlements intérieurs.

‘On two occasions, **militant women**, who are determined to **challenge prohibitions**, have made the choice to **defy public authority** by swimming in municipal swimming pools wearing burkinis, which is, however, prohibited by the internal regulations.’ (Michel Savin, groupe Les Républicains, 07/09/2019)

- (60) Toutefois, vous avez raison de le souligner, ne soyons pas naïfs, cette action est d’abord **un acte militant** à grand renfort de communications de presse. C’est aussi **une provocation**, pour voir jusqu’où vont les limites de notre République, jusqu’où nous sommes capables de résister.

‘However, you are right to emphasize it, let’s not be naïve, this action is primarily **a militant act** with extensive press coverage. It is also **a provocation** to see where the limits of our Republic are, to see how far we can resist.’ (Laurent Nunez, Secre-

<sup>44</sup> Here, once again, the accusation against Muslim women of imposing their interests only by wearing a hijab, discussed in section 5.1, is remarkable.

tary of State to the Minister of the Interior,  
07/09/2019)

Such statements clearly show that these women are presented as an enemy. They are depicted as aiming at provoking public authorities or French society by violating the laws and as seeking to impose their values on their fellow human beings (cf. also the accusation of ostentation described in section 5.1). Again, alternative forms of conjecturing (i.e., alternative explanations for donning a hijab or a burkini) are not taken into consideration.<sup>45</sup> Hence, women who take initiative but do not follow French norms and French or Western ideas of women's emancipation are not accepted.

Consequently, wearing a hijab or a burkini for personal reasons without making a political statement, and even imposing one's values on others, is held as something impossible. In some comments, this is made even more explicit:

(61) Par **son essence même**, arborer un voile est **un acte séparatiste**.

'By **its very nature**, displaying a veil is a **separatist act**.' (Stéphane Ravier, réunion administrative des Sénateurs ne figu-

rant sur la liste d'aucun groupe politique,  
03/30/2021b)

(62) J'estime que le port de certains vêtements, quels qu'ils soient, par les parents accompagnant les sorties scolaires peut être considéré comme relevant d'**une forme de prosélytisme passif**.

'I think that wearing certain clothing, whatever it may be, by the parents accompanying the school trips can be considered a **form of passive proselytism**.' (Françoise Laborde, Groupe du Rassemblement Démocratique et Social Européen, 05/15/2019)

This, once again, demonstrates the extent to which the hijab and the burkini are not perceived as mere indices for the Islamic faith or specific politico-religious interests anymore, but rather as a means for imposing them, and imposing them is even interpreted as their only purpose.<sup>46</sup>

### The positive counterexample: The emancipated woman

As illustrated above, women wearing a hijab or a burkini are portrayed in a negative way.

<sup>45</sup> More moderate positions in this debate are rare. However, some speakers do call into question this image of the burkini-wearing "militant extremist," for example: "Comment définir un burkini ? Doit-on le définir exclusivement selon la personne qui le porte ? Et sous-entend-on que cette personne, dès lors qu'elle le porte, a nécessairement et obligatoirement des arrière-pensées ?" 'How to define a burkini? Should it exclusively be defined according to the person who is wearing it? And does one imply that this person, as soon as she wears it, necessarily and inevitably has ulterior motives?' (Didier Marie, groupe Socialiste, Écologiste et Républicain, 03/30/2021c) A bit later, the speaker makes his position even more evident by adding: "Ce n'est pas la manifestation de convictions au travers d'un vêtement ou de tout autre signe qui permet de définir la radicalité." 'It is not the expression of conviction through clothing or through any other sign that allows to define radicalism.'

<sup>46</sup> However, some speakers do take a counter position, for example in the following statement: "Il est caricatural de penser que la totalité de ces Françaises musulmanes utilisent le foulard comme l'étendard d'un projet islamique. Plus simplement, elles veulent vivre dans une société ouverte, tolérante, respectueuse de toutes les religions, en préservant des traditions familiales." 'It is caricatural to think that all these Muslim French women use the headscarf as a banner of an Islamist project. More simply, they want to live in an open, tolerant society that respects all religions while preserving family traditions.' (Colette Mélot, groupe Les Indépendants - République et Territoires, 10/29/2019) Here, it is also noticeable that Muslim women – unlike in most of the other statements in the corpus – are described as 'Françaises,' hence, as part of the French society.

Either they are passive victims of Muslim men who coerce them into wearing it, or they willingly choose to wear it, and, with this, assertively seek to impose their interests on others. A counterexample to these images appears in particular in the debates about the hijab: the Muslim woman who rejects wearing it. This becomes evident through descriptions of women rebelling against either their regime or their social environment that (actually or supposedly) impose wearing a hijab. They are characterized by adjectives denoting positive qualities, like *courageuse* 'brave,' *héroïque* 'heroic,' or *admirable* 'admirable':

- (63) Nous le devons à toutes ces femmes à travers le monde qui risquent leur vie **avec courage** en refusant de porter le voile.  
'We owe it to all these women around the world who risk their lives **courageously** by refusing to wear the veil.' (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)
- (64) Derrière, il y a des femmes **courageuses** qui dénoncent le voile comme un instrument d'oppression.  
'Behind this, there are **courageous** women who denounce the veil as an instrument of oppression.' (Céline Boulay-Espéronnier, groupe Les Républicains, 03/07/2019)

(65) D'ailleurs, pendant que des Iraniennes **héroïques** arrachent leur voile pour sentir le vent dans leurs cheveux,<sup>47</sup> des adolescents revêtent des tenues islamistes dans nos écoles.

'Moreover, while **heroic** Iranian women are tearing off their veil to feel the wind in their hair, adolescents put on Islamist clothing in our schools.' (Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 10/05/2022)

(66) Puissent les **admirables** femmes iraniennes, les héroïques soldats ukrainiens et les courageux dissidents chinois nous convaincre de nous rallier à leur cri : «Liberté !»  
'May the **admirable** Iranian women, the heroic Ukrainian soldiers, and the courageous Chinese dissidents convince us to join their cry: "Freedom!"' (Claude Malhuret, groupe Les Indépendants - République et Territoires, 10/05/2022)

Hence, not wearing a hijab is equated with being free, and women who make this decision seem to be presented as role models to women who don a hijab (cf. also Bilge 2010: 16). Consequently, wearing or not wearing a hijab comes with clear judgement. Muslim women who wear it (whether under compulsion or by their own choice) are cast in a negative light, and those who do not wear it are positively

<sup>47</sup> Note how feeling the wind in the hair is stylized here as a symbol of freedom. This image is also drawn elsewhere by the same speaker ("Nous devons le dire aux Français, à ces jeunes filles et même à toutes ces femmes qui, à travers le monde, risquent avec courage leur vie en refusant de porter un voile, afin de sentir le vent dans leurs cheveux." 'We must say it to the French, to these young girls and even to all those women who, around the word, courageously risk their lives by refusing to wear a veil, in order to feel the wind in their hair.', Valérie Boyer, groupe Les Républicains, 03/30/2021b) and once again highlights that wearing a hijab is depicted as extremely unpleasant.

appraised.<sup>48</sup> It is also remarkable that in these examples, the women are not characterized as being Muslim. Instead, they are characterized either only as women (like in (63) and (64)) or by their nationality (like in (65) and (66)). This indicates that those who do not wear a hijab are not perceived as Muslim women at all; this once again confirms the direct link established between these garments and the Muslim faith. Hence, if a woman decides not to wear a hijab, she is considered to be emancipated:

(67) [...] quand on sait le combat que mènent les femmes musulmanes dans leurs pays pour **s'émanciper**, on ne peut pas éluder le débat sur le voile.

'when one knows the struggle that the Muslim women are waging in their country to **emancipate**, we cannot avoid the debate on the veil.' (Philippe Pemezec, groupe Les Républicains, 04/19/2018)

(68) L'interdiction pour les mineurs de porter dans l'espace public tout signe religieux ostensible aurait pu constituer un signal fort envoyé à notre jeunesse. Celle-ci aurait pu y voir une garantie de la préservation de son insouciance et de **sa liberté**. Dans quelle mesure une République laïque peut-elle tolérer que des enfants manifestent des signes religieux au su et au vu de tous ? Ce n'est pas aux parents d'imposer des dogmes aux enfants. Aussi, il est essentiel qu'exis-

tent **des espaces protecteurs, vecteurs d'émancipation**, pour ces derniers. Le présent amendement vise à interdire, dans l'espace public, le port par des mineurs de signes ou de tenues manifestant ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse. Dans cette perspective, il est indispensable d'empêcher **tout moyen d'inférioriser l'enfant, notamment la jeune fille, au travers d'un vêtement qu'on lui impose**.<sup>49</sup>

'The prohibition of minors to wear in public spaces any ostentatious religious symbol could have constituted a strong signal sent to our adolescents. They could have seen it as a guarantee of preserving their insouciance and **their freedom**. To what extent can a secular Republic tolerate that children display religious symbols for all to see? It is not for parents to impose dogmas on children. Also, it is essential that **protective spaces, vectors of emancipation**, exist for these children. This amendment aims to prohibit, in public spaces, the wearing by minors of symbols or clothing that conspicuously manifest a religious affiliation. In this perspective, it is indispensable to prevent **any means of subjugating the child, particularly the young girl, through clothing that is imposed upon her**.' (Christian Billhac, groupe du Rassemblement Démocratique et Social Européen, 03/30/2021b)

<sup>48</sup> According to Freedman (2007: 38), "[t]his type of response is typical of a post-colonial discourse current in France which divides women of Muslim (mainly North African) origin into two types: those that have assimilated into French society and adopted French modes of dress, behaviour and so on, and those that remain faithful to their traditional, Islamic cultures." Cf. also the following comment in the corpus, which explicitly juxtaposes women in Iran fighting against the obligation to wear a hijab and women in France fighting for their right to wear it: "Alors qu'en Iran des femmes risquent leur vie pour vivre sans le voile, en France, certaines se battent pour pouvoir l'imposer sur un terrain de football." 'While in Iran, women are risking their lives to live without the veil, in France, some are fighting so that they can impose it on a football field.' (Dany Wattebled, groupe Les Indépendants - République et Territoires, 06/28/2023)

<sup>49</sup> Note here that, once more, the visibility of the hijab is problematized repeatedly (cf. "tout signe religieux ostensible," "des signes religieux au su et au vu de tous," and "de tenues manifestant ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse").

These comments underscore the axis of differentiation between France and Islam as described in section 5.1.2: French/Western women are emancipated; Muslim women are not. However, Muslim women who do not wear a hijab are an exception to this: In the analyzed debates, they do not appear to represent the prototypical image of “the Muslim woman,” hence are seemingly perceived as being emancipated as well (cf. especially (64) and (67)). This shows that the differentiation between ‘emancipated’ and ‘oppressed’ is, in a sense, re-enacted within the group of Muslims here – a process Gal & Irvine (2019: 73) describe as ‘fractal recursivity.’ Consequently, emancipation is closely linked to obeying Western conventions of clothing and it appears to be impossible for an emancipated woman to wear a hijab.<sup>50</sup>

## 6 Conclusion: “The Muslim woman” as a deviation from Western norms

In the Senate’s debates analyzed in this paper, both the hijab and the burkini are constructed as socially meaningful signs. This process of “conjecturing” (Gal & Irvine 2019: 85) unfolds through several steps that lead to the specific depiction of these garments. Firstly, the hijab/the burkini are conjectured to Islamic or even Islamist beliefs, due to a (perceived) contiguity between them. Hence, they are constructed as indices in the Peircean sense, and this construction is ‘erased’ (cf. Gal & Irvine 2019: 107) by presenting them as “natural” signs. Based

on a supposed contiguity between Islam and specific politico-religious interests, particularly the subjugation of women and the establishment of a totalitarian regime, the hijab and the burkini are perceived as directly indexing these interests, which constitutes a form of secondary conjecture. Once again, the process of conjecturing is erased, resulting in the impression that the hijab and the burkini objectively index this ideology. However, the hijab and the burkini are described as more than a mere index: Ultimately, they are ascribed a performative potential, insofar as they are depicted as an instrument to impose this ideology. The repeated accusation of flaunting their religious beliefs when wearing a hijab or a burkini shows that imposing “Islamic” interests is even suggested to be the only purpose of these garments.

The interests or values attributed to the hijab and the burkini are juxtaposed with those deemed as specifically French, notably gender equality and *laïcité*. This sets up an “axis of differentiation” (Gal & Irvine 2019: 118) between France and Islam, where “French” values are positively evaluated, while “Islamic” values are portrayed negatively. As the latter are depicted as a danger for French society, the need to fight for the former is emphasized, highlighted by the frequent use of war-related lexemes. Furthermore, the reasoning that limiting the wearing of the hijab and the burkini means fighting for “French” values underscores the remarkably strong relationship established between the hijab/the burkini and “Islamic”

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<sup>50</sup> While the hijab appears to be the most prominent marker of difference in these debates, Western perceptions of Muslim women likely do not rely solely on the hijab but also take into account other visible markers, such as phenotypic traits. Hence, the binary distinction between ‘wearing a hijab = oppressed’ and ‘not wearing a hijab = emancipated’ is an oversimplification that emerges from the debates analyzed here. This oversimplification, however, might not accurately reflect broader societal discussions on the topic.

values, insofar as these garments are even presented as a condition for imposing them. Hence, the relationship between the hijab/burkini and the mentioned interests or values is no longer recognized as a mere indexical one.

This specific interpretation of the hijab and the burkini helps to understand the portrayal of Muslim women in this debate. On the one hand, as both hijab and burkini are depicted as garments that women usually do not wear by personal choice, Muslim women are portrayed as “passive victims” who wear a hijab or a burkini because they are allegedly forced to do so by Muslim men or by their Muslim social environment. On the other hand, from the equation of wearing a hijab or a burkini with imposing “Islamic” values results the portrayal of Muslim women as “militant extremists” who don a hijab or a burkini to provoke and to threaten French society. The counterexample to these negative images is the seemingly emancipated woman who has “freed” herself from the hijab, which indicates that she has also freed herself from the negative values associated with Islam. Against the backdrop of this intense politicization of both the hijab and the burkini, it appears to be impossible for a Muslim woman to wear or not to wear a hijab/burkini without making a political statement. Either she embodies (or even imposes) what is associated with Islam and/or Islamism, particularly gender inequality, communitarianism, and terrorism, by wearing a hijab or a burkini in public spaces, or she stands up for “French” values, notably gender equality and religious neutrality, by not wearing them. This shows very clearly that “the Muslim woman” – more specifically, her body – is at the heart of these debates.

Considering that the debates are embedded in discussions about integration and

social cohesion in an immigration country, it becomes evident that the role of Muslim women is deemed to be crucial to this endeavor. The extent to which Muslims must adapt to French norms is thus finally negotiated through Muslim women’s ways of dressing, which comes down to the question whether they cover or reveal their hair and body. Importantly, women who are discernible as being Muslim are depicted in a negative way, whether they are taking proactive steps (by deciding on their own to wear a hijab or a burkini) or seemingly adopting a passive stance (by not refusing to wear a hijab or a burkini). In both cases, these women are portrayed to represent and pass on characteristics associated with Muslim society or, more specifically, with radical Muslim men.

Ultimately, “the Muslim woman” is othered because she does not conform to specific norms or conventions that are valid in French society (or, more generally, in Western societies). The woman supposedly forced to wear a hijab or a burkini – the “passive victim” – is in sharp contrast to Western ideals of women’s emancipation because she seems to follow Muslim men’s orders and wears what is considered to be a sign of her oppression. However, the woman who decides to wear a hijab or a burkini against the will of (parts of the) French society – the “militant extremist” – does not follow Western ideals of good female behavior, like reserve, modesty, and politeness. One could even go one step further and argue that she then actually challenges the Western man’s notion of a good woman. Hence, the way “the Muslim woman” is described is a result of her being both female and Muslim. Neither a non-Muslim woman nor a Muslim man could be depicted under this perspective.



The positively connoted image of the Muslim woman who has “freed” herself from the hijab/the burkini is also revealing in this regard. She is positively evaluated, even glorified, because she conforms to Western conventions of dressing. Only women who do not want to wear a hijab or a burkini are thus perceived as emancipated individuals. Paradoxically, according to this reasoning, French politics can contribute to or achieve Muslim women’s emancipation through a form of coercion (more precisely, a ban), which demonstrates that colonial paternalism persists in society, and this paradox is overlooked – ‘erased’ – by many of those who participate in this debate. In contrast to this, one could argue that true emancipation will only be achieved when Muslim women are actually free to decide whether they want to wear a hijab/burkini or not – free from both Muslim men and Western norms.

These findings show that the image of “the Muslim woman” is discursively constructed along Western norms, resulting in an effect of Othering of those who do not conform to these norms. They also hint at the necessity of an intersectional approach in research on discrimination in general and on discrimination of Muslim women in particular. Since the discursive construction of “the Muslim woman” could only be unraveled when considering the dimensions ‘Muslim’ and ‘female’ together, the analysis clearly shows the usefulness of the notion of ‘gendered islamophobia’ (cf. section 2) and suggests that it should even be extended by not only examining phenomena of discrimination, but also phenomena of Othering, like in the cases analyzed here. In order to fully understand the mechanisms behind Othering under an intersectional perspective, more research is needed, both on discursive strategies of Oth-

ering in general and on the particularities of the phenomenon when two or more dimensions by which Othering can take place (e.g., disability, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) are involved.

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## Appendix: Information on the corpus

As described in section 4, the transcripts available on the French Senate’s website were used to compile the corpus. The transcripts sometimes deviate from the actual spoken words (as evident in the video records) because they do not include hesitation phenomena, slip-ups, self-corrections, etc., and the text has obviously been “smoothed” for readability. However, for practical reasons and considering that these adjustments do not significantly modify the core content, the analysis is solely based on the transcripts. Below, the topics of the debates analyzed in this paper are indicated, along with the date when they took place (in the MM/DD/YYYY format), the timestamps of the relevant segments, and the hyperlink to the respective video recordings and transcripts. The descriptions of the topics in the first column are taken from the Senate’s protocols (available on the Senate’s website).

## A Debates on the hijab

TOPIC	DATE	TIMESTAMP	HYPERLINK
Accompagnatrices voilées en sortie scolaire	04/19/2018	15:39:14 – 15:43:24	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.638461_5ad88b1e0e80b.seance-publique-du-19-avril-2018-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.638461_5ad88b1e0e80b.seance-publique-du-19-avril-2018-apres-midi</a>
Communautarisme et respect de la laïcité	05/24/2018	15:56:58 – 16:01:36	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.662898_5b06a3d25f606.seance-publique-du-24-mai-2018-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.662898_5b06a3d25f606.seance-publique-du-24-mai-2018-apres-midi</a>

Journée de la femme	03/07/2019	15:43:13 – 15:48:05	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1069249_5c81174fd2d6f.seance-publique-du-7-mars-2019-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1069249_5c81174fd2d6f.seance-publique-du-7-mars-2019-apres-midi</a>
Projet de loi « Pour une école de la confiance » [extract: Amendement n° 100, voile pendant les sorties scolaires]	05/15/2019	17:30:15 – 18:09:54	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1153266_5cdbf9c79bd0f.seance-publique-du-15-mai-2019-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1153266_5cdbf9c79bd0f.seance-publique-du-15-mai-2019-apres-midi</a>
Port du voile & Politique gouvernemental	10/16/2019	15:39:25 – 15:44:35 & 16:18:23 – 16:23:05	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/video.1334952_5da708064ccbf.seance-publique-du-16-octobre-2019-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/video.1334952_5da708064ccbf.seance-publique-du-16-octobre-2019-apres-midi</a>
Proposition de loi « Service public de l'éducation et neutralité religieuse » [extract: motion n° 13, neutralité religieuse des personnes concourant au service public de l'éducation]	10/29/2019	15:06:47 – 15:22:26	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1356117_5db832bcc5b14.seance-publique-du-29-octobre-2019-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1356117_5db832bcc5b14.seance-publique-du-29-octobre-2019-apres-midi</a>
Débat sur le thème : « La laïcité, garante de l'unité nationale » [extracts]	01/08/2020	18:20:21 – 18:30:32 & 18:53:32 – 18:57:39 & 19:11:41 – 19:20:42	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1477010_5e15d30a55ca3.seance-publique-du-8-janvier-2020-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1477010_5e15d30a55ca3.seance-publique-du-8-janvier-2020-apres-midi</a>
Élections municipales et communautarismes	07/08/2020	15:58:29 – 16:03:01	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1699808_5f05b571787b4.seance-publique-du-8-juillet-2020-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.1699808_5f05b571787b4.seance-publique-du-8-juillet-2020-apres-midi</a>
Projet de loi « Respect des principes de la République », Discussion des articles [Débat de l'après-midi, extract]	03/30/2021a	18:54:36 – 20:29:54	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2208683_60630d4944d02.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2208683_60630d4944d02.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-apres-midi</a>



Projet de loi « Respect des principes de la République », Discussion des articles (suite) [Débat du soir, extract]	03/30/2021b	23:53:32 – 00:09:43	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2211457_60637a6773649.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-soir">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2211457_60637a6773649.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-soir</a>
Campagne du Conseil de l'Europe sur le voile	11/03/2021	15:50:15 – 15:54:59	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2573410_61828ee2ae06a.seance-publique-du-3-novembre-2021-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2573410_61828ee2ae06a.seance-publique-du-3-novembre-2021-apres-midi</a>
Application aux fédérations sportives de la loi confortant les principes de la République	12/01/2021	16:11:23 – 16:16:09	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2633088_61a7756c4a87e.seance-publique-du-1-decembre-2021-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2633088_61a7756c4a87e.seance-publique-du-1-decembre-2021-apres-midi</a>
Port de signes religieux dans les compétitions sportives & Nouvelle lecture Proposition de loi « Démocratiser le sport en France »	02/16/2022	15:11:09 – 15:16:11 & 17:32:22 – 19:13:47	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2816524_620cfdee3c3a5.seance-publique-du-16-fevrier-2022-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.2816524_620cfdee3c3a5.seance-publique-du-16-fevrier-2022-apres-midi</a>
Port du voile à l'école & Débat d'actualité sur le thème : « Atteintes aux droits des femmes et aux droits de l'homme en Iran »	10/05/2022	15:42:44 – 15:46:40 & 16:31:33 – 17:43:15	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.3012603_633d6fe2e24ef.seance-publique-du-5-octobre-2022-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.3012603_633d6fe2e24ef.seance-publique-du-5-octobre-2022-apres-midi</a>
Hijab dans le sport	06/28/2023	15:27:39 – 15:36:27	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.4011095_649c1f7021980.seance-publique-du-28-juin-2023-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/vid-eo.4011095_649c1f7021980.seance-publique-du-28-juin-2023-apres-midi</a>

## B Debates on the burkini

TOPIC	DATE	TIMESTAMP	HYPERLINK
Burkini	07/09/2019	17:04:51 – 17:09:32	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.1253659_5d247f862c6cc.seance-publique-du-9-juillet-2019-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.1253659_5d247f862c6cc.seance-publique-du-9-juillet-2019-apres-midi</a>
Projet de loi « Respect des principes de la République » [extract: Amendement n° 236, burkini dans les piscines]	03/30/2021c	22:50:17 – 23:50:30	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.2211457_60637a6773649.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-soir">https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.2211457_60637a6773649.seance-publique-du-30-mars-2021-soir</a>
Port du burkini dans les piscines	06/30/2021	15:52:46 – 15:56:44	<a href="https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.2396449_60dc5c8d6c208.seance-publique-du-30-juin-2021-apres-midi">https://videos.senat.fr/video/eo.2396449_60dc5c8d6c208.seance-publique-du-30-juin-2021-apres-midi</a>