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Introduction

In 2011, France passed a law prohibiting Muslim women from wearing a burqa or niqab. Even though many around the world were quick to condemn such a law labelling it Islamophobic, today that law is still place. Media coverage has been now recently outlining France's growing hostility towards the hijab. With conservatives gaining majority voting power in the French senate, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to expect an even harsher stance against the hijab. Which begs the question: does France's animosity towards the hijab leave French Muslim women at odds between their religion and lifestyle. And if so, how? Being the son of a Muslim American woman who by her own good conscious, chooses to wear a burqa and niqab in a country with no ramifications for doing so, I don't feel as though my own qualifications give me enough merit to answer this question. But it doesn't take a genius to predict a collision between one's religious identity and their lifestyle given they live in a secular state. Even I get second-hand anxiety at the airport when my mother goes through TSA. In the eyes of French conservatives, policies against the hijab can seem like an effective tactic to pressure Muslim women to integrate into French society. However, it is perhaps more likely that France's decade long antagonization of the hijab is directly to blame for the systematical exclusion of Muslim women from French society.

Citation #1

"French Soccer Team Fights Back on League Hijab Ban." *YouTube*, ABC News, 12 Aug. 2021, <https://youtu.be/Br8ZyzYaLr0>. Accessed 11 Apr. 2022.

Summary

Despite FIFA, the international governing body of soccer, ruling that the hijab poses no threat to safety to its Muslim players, the French Football Federation or the FFF maintains a strict policy against the hijab citing safety concerns and the need to impose secular ideals both on and off the field. The bid to ban the hijab in sports was originally championed by France's right-wing Republican party and later adopted by the upper-house Senate by a vote of 160 to 143 in favor of the amendment. An activist group of young female footballers who call themselves 'Les Hijabeuses' protest the incited ban and call a bluff on the FFF's safety concerns arguing that the ban is unconstitutional and Islamophobic. ABC News reporter Ibtissem Guenfoud interviews members of Les Hijabeuses on their fight to overturn the ban and how the ban has affected them.

Reflection

France's hijab ban in sports is supposedly justified by the need to embody 'laïcité' or secularism and to uphold safety concerns. The latter of the two reasons argued by the FFF is, according to many members of Les Hijabeuses, an illegitimate defense of an Islamophobic amendment. Especially since the global governing body of soccer, FIFA, came to a different conclusion regarding to the safety of the hijab. The main line of defense for policies aimed against Muslims is the nation's need to preserve secular values above all else. However, members of Les Hijabeuses and opponents of the ban believe the actual reason for such targeted policies is embedded in the growing fear of the spread of radicalized Islam in France, a sentiment exacerbated by French conservatives who have a seat at parliament like Éric Ciotti. An advisor to Valérie Pécresse: the party's presidential candidate, Ciotti chastised the rest of parliament for their negligence to the spread of Islamism in French society. "Islamism is spreading in prayer rooms, mosques, homes and now in sports clubs!" he said. For the young members of Les Hijabeuses such animosity towards how they dress doesn't strike a new chord. Even though behind the veil they are just girls who don't wish to make a tradeoff between their passion and their faith, they know to people like Ciotti their choice to wear a headscarf will always make them a threat. Despite this, many of the girls in Les Hijabeuses play anyways, refusing to allow the conservative voices of France corner them into a choice between their passion and their faith. Finding parks in more lowkey suburbs, the members hold their games in secret. And while it's easy to applaud the young women for their defiance to pick between their passion and their religion, there are many young talents that have endured the reality of making such a choice. When Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir, an African American Muslim basketball talent in France, was met with exclusion over her choice to wear a hijab she put aside the basketball for a career in advocacy to help ensure that one day the tradeoff between passion and faith isn't necessary.

Quotation

In an interview with ABC News, Bilqis said the following on her personal account with France's hijab ban in sports. "It ended up me having to choose between my passion and my faith, so it was a rough part of my journey...I lost my shot."

Citation #2

Lang, Cady. "Where France's Possible New Hijab Ban Fits into History." *Time*, Time, 19 May 2021, <https://time.com/6049226/france-hijab-ban/>.

Summary

On the tenth of May 2021, a prominent French politician by the name of Stanislas Guerini took to twitter to publicly condemn Sarah Zehmmahi, an engineer running for her local council, for sporting a hijab on her own campaign flyer. Guerini, one of the founders of sitting president Emmanuel Macron's political party LREM, holds an implicit title of one of France's most influential voices. Guerini used this voice to ridicule and attack a young woman running for local

council who identifies with France's marginalized Muslim minority. In his tweet Guerini stated that wearing a hijab on a campaign document is not compatible with the values of LREM. Many questioned the motive behind the tweet while others pondered whether it was appropriate for him to tell an adult woman how she should dress. Guerini later doubled down on his stance against Zehmmahi and the hijab with a tweet declaring that "this woman will not be an En Marche candidate."

Reflection

Although many members of LREM stood in defense of Zehmmahi's right to wear what she pleases, like LREM lawmaker Naima Moutchou and LREM politician Caroline Janvier, it would be negligent to dismiss such discriminant behavior as that of a lone acting right-wing politician. It is more likely the issue stems from a gray area between the need to preserve secular ideals and blatant islamophobia. Sadly, it isn't a coincidence that a prominent politician like Guerini suddenly feels the need to speak his mind about the hijab. Guerini's tweets are preceded by a bid by the French Senate to bar all females eighteen and under from wearing the hijab in public. Although the senate maintains that such a procedure is necessary to effectively carry out the nation's "anti-separatism" bill, it wouldn't be far-fetched to argue that such a bill singles out France's female Muslim demographic. To put things into perspective the legal age to consent to sex in France is 15 whereas the legal age to consent to wear a hijab in France is now 18. This decade long furlough with France and its Muslim population have left many French Muslims wondering whether the agenda behind such scrutiny over the hijab is pro-secularism or just anti-Islam. Even if the motives for such harsh legal repercussions against an article of clothing are made obscure there is one undisputed truth the likes of Sarah Zemmahi have attested to firsthand. France has systematically made the hijab a barrier towards social mobility for an already marginalized religious minority.

Quotation

Alia Al-Saji, an associate professor of philosophy at McGill University argues that French antagonization of the hijab is rooted in colonialism. Al-Saji tells TIME magazine: "French colonization of Muslim countries was often about controlling and managing populations that were of diverse religions... The hijab is a way of clearly showing that you are Muslim, which is colonially constructed as being opposed to colonialism. But it's also a site of potential resistance."

Citation #3

Peltier, Elian, and Aurelien Breeden. "A Sports Hijab Has France Debating the Muslim Veil, Again." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 Feb. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/world/europe/france-sports-hijab-decathlon.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Summary

The Decathlon controversy outlines the division in France between the desire to preserve secularism and basic religious freedom. Decathlon, a French retail company, undertook massive backlash for manufacturing a sports hijab catered towards France's Muslim female demographic. While initially standing their ground and arguing that the purpose of the sports hijab was to democratize sports pointing out that Muslim females often ran with ill-adapted hijabs. Unfortunately, the overwhelming criticism led the retail giant to pull the product from shelves before it was ever sold.

Reflection

The criticism comes from French secularists and women's rights activist who argue that companies native to France like Decathlon should take a vigilant stance against such "oppressive clothing". Unlike the niqab and burka, wearing the hijab in France does not usher legal ramifications. While the hijab is not fundamentally banned, public displays of one's religious affiliation puts a good enough majority of the French population at unease. Here is what Aurore Bergé, a spokeswoman for Republic on the Move, President Emmanuel Macron's party had to say on the hijab "Those who tolerate women in the public space only when they are hiding are not lovers of freedom." And similarly, the Observatory of Secularism, an agency that assists the French government in enforcing "laïcité", uses the same rhetoric in their stance against the head scarf. But many can be left wondering where the real origins of this anti-hijab sentiment stems from. Does it really stem from the need to uphold the nation's secular ideals or is the reason much grimmer than that? Many see this attack on the hijab on the grounds of secularism as a front for an anti-Islamic agenda and believe the issue to be much more one-sided. Italian Imam Izzedin Elzir's image of nuns on the beach in their religious outlines the double standard with the recently imposed banned on the burkini. The image, appearing across social media and in outlets as prominent as the New York Times, implied the hypocrisy of a ban targeting Muslims and ignoring Christians.

Quotation

Sylvie Eberena, 38, a Muslim entrepreneur and coach who runs a fitness website uploads workout tutorials in which she wears her hijab. She remarks that it is sad to see Decathlon not be able to withstand external pressure in a fight to democratize fitness especially with the growing number of veiled women practicing sports. It is evident how France's stance against the Hijab is pushing Muslim women to a crossroads between faith and integration. Sylvie reminds us that their fight to "not have to choose between the two" is far from over stating "But we didn't wait for Decathlon to sell a runner's hijab to work out with our head scarves. And we will keep working out without them."

Conclusion

It is not unusual for a Muslim French woman to find themselves at a crossroads between their lifestyle and religious identity. It is not our job to study which path they choose, but rather asl why they are forced to make the decision between the two in the first place. The laws in France purposefully antagonize religious symbols like the hijab to exclude an already marginalized group from the rest of society. Girls wearing hijabs wishing to play sports competitively in

France are left having to choose between their faith and their passion. Political candidates who wear hijabs are sent a message that in order to achieve their political ambitions they must omit their headscarf to avoid ridicule. Muslim women wanting to enjoy the beach while adhering to their faith face a double standard that bars them from entering a beach but allows catholic nuns to enter wearing their habit. It seems that while the French government, when questioned, maintains that such measures are necessary to enforce laïcité, the real reason for such policies is the fear of the spread of Islamism, a fear that has plagued the government of France. It is this type of fear that victimizes the French Muslim Female demographic. To implement any sort of change, it is imperative that the ordinary French citizen make themselves aware to the situation of all French Muslim women who are denied their basic liberties and furthermore desensitize themselves to the irrational fear of the spread of Islam. Only when the injustices faced by Muslim French women are empathized by the rest of France and the religion of Islam isn't compared to that of a spreadable disease can we hope for change.