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The Hijab And Secularism In France And Belgium:

is stigmatising discourse more accepted when it comes from native informants?

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Over the past summer and early fall, the question of the hijab has returned in full-force to the Belgian public debate – even as the country is still in the middle of a pandemic. In July, the Belgian Constitutional court allowed higher education institutions to ban religious symbols; namely the hijab; while in September, the passing of a motion by the Molenbeek communal council allowing town hall employees to wear religious symbols caused quite a stir, many opposing the decision to allow Muslim employees to wear the hijab in a government office.

Amid the brouhaha of media coverage and political reactions, a few voices have been particularly vocal and aggressive in expressing their opposition to the visibility in the public space, of Muslim women who wear the hijab.

The Collectif Laïcité Yallah, a collective of individuals of “Muslim culture” launched several attacks on the hijab through multiple opinion pieces. These op-eds denounced the motion for inclusion as an attack on Belgian neutrality, while applauding the decision of the Belgian Constitutional Court to exclude a segment of the population based on their religious and sartorial choices. The collective then continues to explain to the reader all the different ways in which the hijab is dangerous and a threat to our democratic societies.

The arguments brought forward are not new and have been used and abused by all those who will continuously vilify Muslim women for choosing what they want to cover their heads with. These include: the hijab as a tool to silence Muslim women, while at the same time to impose the visibility of a mythical political Islam; the ban on the hijab isn't a form of discrimination while Muslim women who claim so aren't really victims to such discriminations and exclusions but rather are seeking to impose their religious laws over others; the hijab is a symbol of oppression and the women who wear it are submitting to the men's will, etc. This one-sided view of Muslim women as individuals who are either submissive or oppressed, or activists pursuing a hidden political agenda, is at best an uninformed view of the diversity of the group and at worst sexist and simplistic. This perspective also suggests that Muslim women lack the capacity to engage, as individuals, with the social structures, and have no right to strive to achieve full inclusion within their societies, including in the labor market and through education. Not only that, this process of homogenisation strips Muslim women of their agency to make conscious choices for themselves; Muslim women have relentlessly claimed the choice to wear the hijab as a spiritual and religious one, and have only demanded to achieve rights equal to those of their co-citizens. Yet their claims have been brushed aside by those like the Collectif Laïcité Yallah, who have a clear agenda to exclude and narrow the understandings of diversity, and want to ban the visibility of Muslim women and their presence in public spaces.

First, the term "Muslim culture" raises eyebrows. Being of Muslim culture does not grant more or less legitimacy in demonising and vilifying Muslim groups. The argument of authority used by the collective is void and it will only serve in normalising discrimination, hate speech and exclusion. The term "Muslim culture" in itself is worth discussing, as belonging to a faith group and coming from a given culture are two distinctive things. Culturalising a set of belief is in a sense stripping it from its status as a protected fundamental right. One can also wonder if the op-eds wouldn't have been more critically considered by their media editors had they been written by individuals not from a "Muslim background". Is stigmatising discourse more accepted when it comes from native informants? Will it then not only serve to normalise such speech but also allow it to be picked up by other groups to justify discrimination?

It is important to highlight the fact that this discourse, denouncing the hijab and consequently denying Muslim women's freedom of conscience and belief – a constitutional right in any democratic society – builds on a dangerous trend; one in which public debate and ultimately policy-making isn't grounded in the rule of law or in fundamental rights but rather is exclusively discussed on the basis of values.

Groups such as Collectif Laïcité Yallah, but even in a broader sense many anti-hijab militants, political groups and policymakers that claim to defend democracy and citizenship have deserted a debate centered around rights and are steering our societies towards a debate on values and principles as soon as it is about the visibility of Muslims. It is baffling that the rule of law and basic notions of fundamental rights, namely the freedom of belief, are completely disregarded while "shared values" are brought forth to normalise the silencing of a segment of the population. While it is common in diverse societies to have diverging values, opinions and perceptions, it is also the norm for the law to settle those divergences. The rule of law is the fundamental basis of democracies; ones in which all are equal in front of the law and which are built to protect those

fundamental rights. When this foundation is disregarded, our democracies steer easily into an authoritarianism of values in which some are accepted and others not. When Collectif Laïcité Yallah wants to ban the hijab, and asserts that it is not racist to claim so, they are not rooting their argument within any legal frame. On the contrary, they are seeking for the state to legislate based on their subjective perceptions and values. When they claim the hijab is not simply a religious symbol, they are trying to impose their own interpretation of a religious practice, but in doing so are stripping other's of their own fundamental rights. Opening the door to having our societies being shaped by values rather than law is akin to opening the door to a hierarchisation of values where ultimately, the views and perceptions of the majority will be enforced on minorities.

Further, the language and content of these op-eds not only contribute to exacerbate the stigma and discrimination faced by Muslim women – discrimination documented through multiple reports and academic research. It also creates a dangerous narrative which, under the pretense that the collective members hail from Muslim culture, would give more legitimacy and credibility to these claims. That the Collectif Laïcité Yallah have their own take on what it means to be a believer or a Muslim is one thing, that it seeks to impose their notion of the hijab and what it represents for the women that wear it and claim otherwise is another. The native informant claims are dangerous in more than one way; not only do they infantilise Muslim women wearing the headscarf – they surely can't know what the hijab represents, we (Collectif Laïcité Yallah) will tell you – but it also tokenises Muslim groups, setting a narrative of good and bad Muslims.

This practice goes back to colonial times, when colonising powers used the natives' knowledge of the country and culture to enable their colonial agendas. It also shaped a monolithic and exoticised cultural representation of the colonised and built the basis of orientalism. In modern times, groups that claim to have Muslim origins have replaced the colonial native informants but their role has remained the same. They are as much tools for the enabling of racist and discriminatory practices and narratives as their predecessors were.

The ultimate issue with claims such as Collectif Laïcité Yallah, is that their stance is used by policymakers to justify racist and Islamophobic policies. Having racialised individuals speak out against the hijab for instance, would de facto justify policies and law banning it and rid such laws from their racist nature. The use of native informants can go to even more extremes, as seen more recently in France. In its massive crackdown and open persecution of Muslim communities, the French government has heavily relied on individuals and groups who claim to represent or speak for Muslims to justify its actions. Policies denouncing religious trends such as Salafism or Muslim Brotherhood had been backed by research by the Institut Montaigne, led by Hakim el Karoui, who had been doing the rounds on TV explaining how his own interpretation of Islam was the one France needed – an “Islam des Lumieres” that would lead other French Muslims “out of the Dark”. The French Council of Muslim Cult, an organisation created by the (secular!) state, was also instrumental in justifying and legitimising the recent Law on Separatism; a law set specifically targeting the religious practice of orthodox Muslims. We can also anecdotal mention Imam Chalghoumi, an Imam with no parish, relentlessly denounced by French Muslims and who is time and time again sought by policymakers and TV channels alike to participate in debates on Muslim issues. Now while these examples are definitely not representative of the vast majority of French Muslims, they are the privileged interlocutor

of the state and media alike. They are the perfect example of token Muslims, used to serve political agendas or other times to serve their own personal agenda but who have an impact on already stigmatised and discriminated communities.

Tokenising Muslims, or more simply the dynamics of “Good Muslims, Bad Muslims”, is a process in which Muslim groups are politicised and placed into categories. The religious beliefs, but also the political and societal stances of Muslims are categorised as being either acceptable or not; and because discussing the Muslim presence and visibility in the public debate has become acceptable, many different stakeholders can set the threshold for those dichotomic categories. Even more so, stakeholders such as Collectif Laïcité Yallah, who hold a clearly racist political agenda.

But what the collective and other similar voices cleverly do is set the threshold that establishes them as the token good Muslims based on their subjective values and beliefs and are then free to categorise other Muslims as bad. Within this binary opposition, the “good Muslims”, those who reject visible or religious symbols, such as the hijab, are upholding state neutrality and gender equality, while “the bad ones”, those who continue to wear religious attire, are perceived to be standing against the above principles. The Collective goes even further by implying that those that do not reject the hijab are in fact plotting to take over the state as such, amplifying further the narrative of good and bad Muslims, framing the bad Muslims as the enemy from within.

Native informants, individuals and groups that claim to belong to Muslim culture, or the Muslim faith and their instrumentalisation lending credibility to racist stances isn't new, but is becoming more and more common. The logic is quite simple, in our societies faced with structural and systemic racism, Islamophobia and the weakening rule of law; policymakers still need to confront civil society and collective awareness denouncing racist policies. Using racialised individuals and groups is the most efficient way to push their agenda forward, leaving minority groups having to defend themselves. Bringing the public debate out of the realm of the law but into one of values, allows those in power to freely set the benchmark for who is “with us or against us” as Bush Jr. so famously said.

Minority groups thus have to pledge their allegiance and prove their belonging instead of being in a critical position towards legislators and holding them accountable. These voices are meant to drown out legitimate voices from within minority groups as they are co-opted by the authorities, regardless of their actual legitimacy and acceptance within minority groups.

Ultimately they are sending out the inaccurate message that those standing up for their fundamental rights and against discriminations are subversive and dangerous elements of these minority groups. In these times of heightened tension, when Muslim communities are under intense scrutiny, it is even more important that this type of discourse, which is contributing to a real shift in media narrative, be assessed for what it is: divisive, stigmatising and inaccurate.