

AT HOME IN
EUROPE



Unveiling the Truth

Why 32 Muslim Women Wear
the Full-face Veil in France



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Wear the Full-face Veil in France

At Home in Europe Project



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Open Society Foundations

400 West 59th Street
New York, NY 10019 USA
www.soros.org

Október 6 Street 12
H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

100 Cambridge Grove
W6 0LE London, United Kingdom

At Home in Europe Project
Open Society Foundations

Website
www.soros.org/initiatives/home

Cover design by Dennis Ahlgrim | Ahlgrim Design Group

Cover photograph by Naima Bouteldja

Layout by Judit Kovács | Createch Ltd. | Hungary

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Foreword

Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Women Wear the Full-face Veil in France examines an issue causing considerable debate and controversy throughout Europe: the relationship between religion and European identity or, more succinctly, Islam's compatibility with European values. The report offers the views of 32 women across France who wear the full-face veil, their reasons for doing so, and their experiences in public before and after the debate over banning the veil. It is an attempt to distinguish the real-life experiences and perspectives of the women who wear the veil from the popular myths and misperceptions promulgated by the media and national figures.

A central belief of the Open Society Foundations is that all people in an open society count equally and should enjoy equal opportunities. The Foundations work to mitigate discrimination, in particular harm done to minorities through discriminatory treatment, and to ensure that access to equal opportunities for all is an integral part of government social inclusion policies.

The At Home in Europe project of the Open Society Foundations focuses on research and advocacy activities that examine the position of minority and marginalised groups in a changing Europe. Through its research and engagement with policymakers, civil society, and communities, the project explores issues involving the political, social, economic, and cultural participation of Muslims and other groups at the local, national, and European levels.

Whether citizens or migrants, native born or newly arrived, Muslims are a growing and varied population that presents Europe with one of its greatest challenges: how to ensure equal opportunities and demonstrate its principles of religious plurality and liberal

values in an environment of rapidly expanding diversity. Europe is no longer—if it ever was—a mono-cultural and mono-faith continent: its emerging minority groups and their identities as Europeans are an essential part of the political agenda and discourse.

Since 2009, the project has issued a series of reports, entitled “Muslims in EU cities”, that examine city and municipal policies in 11 European Union cities that have actively sought to understand their Muslim communities. The aim of the At Home in Europe research is to contribute to better informed policies and debate on diversity and equality in Europe.

The At Home in Europe project builds upon the Open Society Foundations’ earlier work on minority protection, in particular the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program reports on the situation of minorities, including Muslims, in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Previous and current studies make it clear that further research is needed. The limited data currently available on Europe’s Muslim and other minority groups limits the possibilities for creating nuanced, specific policies that address social integration and other relevant issues for minority groups in Europe.

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Fatima Ali transcribed the interviews in French and Robin Virgin reviewed drafts of the report and offered comments. Sincere thanks are offered to both.

Thanks are offered to our colleagues at the Office of Communications in New York who have been extremely supportive in their editorial and communications capacity.

Finally, this report would not have been possible without the 32 women who agreed to be interviewed across France, including in Paris, Marseille, Lyon, and the smaller towns of Avignon and Rennes. Their personal stories, told with determination and openness, offer a rarely seen view and insight into their daily lives and experiences. Their names in the report are pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy and safety.

The At Home in Europe project bears sole responsibility for the content of this report, including any errors or misrepresentations.

Definitions

Burqa/burkha, is a loose outer garment that covers the entire body, including the face and eyes. It has a mesh screen covering the eyes and is similar to the *seetar/sitar*; the purpose of both is to veil a woman's entire body and face in public. Respondents in this report associated the *burqa/burkha* with Afghanistan and the *seetar/sitar* with the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Hijab is the Arabic word for curtain or cover. It is a piece of cloth worn by observant Muslim women to cover the hair, ears, and neck, leaving the face uncovered.

Khimar/keemar is similar to the hijab but can also be a covering that starts from the head and stops at the waist.

Jilbab/jelbab (sometimes know as an *abaya*) has the appearance of a long loose-fitting coat that covers the whole body except the face.

Niqab is a veil that covers a woman's hair and face, leaving only the eyes clearly visible. There are different ways of wearing the *niqab* but the great majority of the women interviewed for this report wear a black *jilbab* with a black *niqab* to cover their faces. One interviewee wore a long, loose outer coat with a *hijab* and a white *niqab* covering her face.

Quran, also written as Koran and Qur'an, is the religious text of Islam.

Salafism is a form of Islam whose followers advocate a literal interpretation of the Quran. Wahabbism, which was developed by the 18th-century theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab in current Saudi Arabia is one of the most well-known forms of Salafism. In the current context, followers of Salafism have been portrayed as anti-Western extremists.

Seetar/sitar, a similar garment to the *burqa/burkha*, includes a *niqab* with a second tier screening the eyes with mesh. It covers the woman's whole body and is usually black in colour.

Sunna, also spelled *sunnah*, means "habit" or "practice" and refers to the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammed. Reports and narrations about the *sunna* are known as the hadith.

Touareg, or Tuareg are a nomadic people inhabiting the Saharan region of North Africa who speak a Berber language.

Ummah is an Arabic word meaning "community" or "nation". In the context of Islam, it refers to all Muslims in the world under the umbrella of the *umma* or "community of believers".

1. Key Findings

The aim of this report is to distinguish myths and misrepresentations surrounding women who wear the full-face veil from the actual experiences and testimonies of the women themselves. *Unveiling the Truth* reports on women's backgrounds, their decisions to wear the veil, their daily experiences in public, and their views on legislation banning the face veil in France, which comes into effect on 11 April 2011.

The study is based on the testimonies of 32 women who live in Paris and its environs (Région Île-de-France), Marseille, Lyon, Avignon, Rennes, and smaller provincial towns. These locations were chosen in an effort to draw a sample that represented a diverse cross-section of France from the north to the south, from the large urban areas to smaller villages, and from places with large established Muslim communities to ones with very few. Regardless of the limited size of the sample, the individual experiences recorded in this report are important for a better understanding of why some Muslim women choose to wear the full-face veil—in France a subject of much public debate that, until now, has marginalised the voices of Muslim women who actually wear the veil.

Ascertaining the number of women who wear the full-face veil in France is problematic. If one accepts an official estimate of 1,900 women, the report's sample would represent 1.7 percent of the total. The official statistic, however, should be treated with some caution as the only two figures produced by government sources and circulated in the press range from less than 400 to fewer than 2,000.¹ Given the highly contentious political nature of

1. The second figure includes women in French overseas territories (estimated at 300). But despite this, the disparity between the two figures remains substantial.

the issue, any assessment of this group will be open to interpretation. It is hard to establish how representative this research's sample is in terms of numbers, geographical distribution, age, ethnicity, and marital and social status.

Despite these difficulties, a number of experiences were so prevalent among respondents that they appeared to represent definite trends, and the responses were so removed from the images publicly circulated in the media about women wearing the niqab, that a number of conclusions formed during the debates over banning the veil were thrown into serious doubt.

1.1 Profile of the Interviewees

Twenty-nine of the respondents were born in France and 30 are French citizens. This figure of more than 90 per cent is higher than the official figure quoted in the parliamentary report, according to which two-thirds of the women concerned are French.

Eight women who wear the veil (a quarter of the total) are converts, which corresponds to the figure supplied by the French interior minister to the Parliamentary Commission. Twenty respondents (more than 60 percent) have an Arab (predominantly North-African) background and four women (12.5 percent) are of West African descent.

Twenty-one of the respondents are under 30 years of age, and 27 (nearly 85 percent) are under 40, close to the official figure of 90 percent.

Fourteen of the women interviewed hold at least the equivalent of A-levels or a baccalauréat (secondary school diploma) while eight respondents do not hold a degree. A significant number of interviewees left, or said they had to leave, school after they started wearing the headscarf.

Ten of the respondents were working full-time or part-time. Only two respondents said that they were not willing to work, preferring instead to stay at home. By contrast, the great majority of those unemployed stated their desire to find a job in the future as long as it would not prevent them from practising their religion.

1.2 The Practice of Wearing the Full-face Veil

The wearing of the full-face veil is not a permanent practice for every woman. Nine respondents do not wear the veil on a regular basis for three main reasons: the general socio-political climate, work regulations, or family tensions. Some women, when interviewed, had stopped wearing the veil for what they believed would be a temporary period. Even among

those who always wear it, some had begun by only putting it on for certain occasions, such as going to the mosque.

The adoption of the full-face veil is not a rejection of socialisation. In the majority of cases, the women interviewed had active social lives (eating out, meeting friends, window shopping, attending classes, working, etc.). Many who avoided going outdoors since they started wearing the veil did so only to avoid the abuse levelled at them in public. Only two women said they believed a woman should stay at home as much as possible. On the other hand, two women said they devoted more time to their social lives since adopting the veil.

1.3 Reasons for Wearing the Full-face Veil

For most respondents, the decision to wear the full-face veil occurred through a gradual evolution from the hijab or jilbab to the niqab. The reasons why the women took to the veil are not easy to quantify.

The public debates over wearing the veil attempted to delegitimize its spiritual significance. Yet in most cases, the women interviewed said they adopted the full-face veil as part of a spiritual journey. Many desired to deepen their relationship with God and draw on the actions of the Prophet Mohammed's wives for guidance. They recalled their feelings of extreme joy and well-being on the first day of wearing a niqab/seetar.

Other factors also influenced the interviewees' decisions. A couple of women explained their attraction to the aesthetic nature of the veil. Another cited the onset of puberty and unwanted male attention as playing a role. One young woman, a convert to Islam, in an attempt to conceal her conversion from her parents and their friends chose the niqab rather than a hijab to avoid recognition in public.

Perhaps the controversy itself encouraged a number of interviewees, especially younger ones, to adopt the full-face veil, about which they may have had little knowledge before politicians and the mass media made it a "hot topic". Ten of the 32 women started wearing the niqab after the controversy broke out in April 2009. More research would be needed to fully establish a conclusion on these broader effects of the controversy.

During the debates, much was made of the security challenges that wearing the veil posed to civil servants and employees in hospitals, banks, post offices, and other public places. All of the women interviewed responded positively and without hesitation when asked whether they would identify themselves by unveiling their faces. Only three women said that they would ask for a woman to identify them.

1.4 The Full-face Veil, a Contemporary Practice?

Twenty-five of the women in the sample initially adopted the niqab after 2005 compared to four who did so in the 1990s.

The full-face veil is not, as it has often been claimed, a new phenomenon in France. In the Open Society Foundations sample, a number of women have been wearing it for more than 10 years without causing any upheaval. For example, Eliza, a 31-year-old entrepreneur, explained that she passed all her baccalauréat exams in the late 1990s wearing her niqab, without facing any attempts to thwart her.

Although the sample is too small to draw definitive conclusions, it appears certain that the number of women wearing the full-face veil has increased since 2005. A full exploration of the reasons for this rise, however, goes beyond the scope of this research. These figures are likely to be interpreted widely as evidence of the increasing hold a Salafist ideology has on the French Muslim population.² If a Salafist ideology has really gained ground in France, any attempt to analyse it should include socioeconomic factors as well as the impact of the adoption of the law banning religious signs in school in 2004, the 15-year-long national hysteria surrounding the hijab, the endless and often aberrant media controversies around Muslims, and the discrimination faced by ethnic and religious minorities in France in general and Muslims and people of African descent in particular. The purpose here is not to reduce the possible rise of the Salafist ideology simply to social disempowerment, the demonization of Islam and racism, but to highlight the need to take into consideration a number of factors that are most often ignored in the French public debates.

1.5 Pressure from Family Members or Radical Groups/Preachers?

Testimonies from the women clearly indicate that none of the respondents were forced into wearing the full-face veil.

2. The growing Salafist threat was cited as a key factor in acting against the full-face veil by a deputy in the National Assembly in France, and French Communist Party MP, André Gérin, in his letter to the French prime minister, François Fillon, in April 2009.

Parents

The adoption of a full-face veil in the great majority of cases is the result of personal choice, without any pressure from family members.³ In fact, the decision to wear the niqab/seetar was at odds regularly with the opinions of other family members, in particular mothers, often resulting in cases of open conflict.

Thirty respondents were the first members of their family to have adopted the full-face veil. Most interviewees of Arab or West African descent grew up in what they considered traditional Muslim households and wearing the full-face veil was in most cases alien to their family. One interviewee said her parents had never heard of a niqab before she started wearing it and genuinely believed that it was a religious innovation.

Twenty mothers initially disagreed, sometimes vehemently, with their daughters' decision to wear the full-face veil. To avoid tensions within their families many young women started wearing the niqab/seetar secretly. Only five fathers and four mothers supported their daughters' decisions to wear the niqab.

Many parents considered the full-face veil as an extremist, radical practice, something unrelated to religion. In this sense, Muslim parents' perceptions of the full-face veil seemed not to vary much from the view promoted by the mass media.

Many parents also rejected their daughters' full-face veil because they wanted their children to pursue a professional career. Finally, some parents were not necessarily opposed to the full-face veil *per se* but rather were concerned about their daughters' safety in public places.

Husbands

Among the 21 married women in the sample, 10 respondents were wearing the niqab prior to marrying, while at least two respondents used the opportunity of their marriage to wear it. In one case a respondent actually had to remove her niqab after her marriage so as not to inconvenience her in-laws. A few respondents who were single also saw marriage as a solution to their parents' opposition to the full-face veil, arguing that once married they would be able to do as they wanted.

Only one woman was directly encouraged by her husband, a local imam, to wear the niqab. All the other wives made their decisions independently, often in the face of deep reservations from their husbands. In the sample, six of the husbands concerned supported

3. In only one case a woman related that her husband, a local imam, had advocated she wear the full-face veil, but she did so only after four years of marriage and strongly denied that she had been pressured in any way.

their wives' decision to wear the veil, while four disagreed and three were indifferent. As in the case of the parents, many husbands also feared for their wives' safety.

Mosques, Radical Preachers/Groups

The interviews also explored the influence of mosques, imams, and Islamic organisations on the women's decision to wear the full-face veil.

High profile cases such as that of Imam Abdelkader Bouziane, deported from France for his controversial views on a number of issues including women, have helped shaped public perception of imams, mosques, and Muslim organisations as highly influential and potentially harmful agents. The interviewees, however, were overwhelmingly unaffiliated with any Muslim bodies (31, with just one woman on the board of her local mosque). Moreover 18 women attended their mosque infrequently, less than once a month.

The great majority of the respondents were dismissive of Muslim organisations and representatives, strongly criticizing their stance over the veil issue. Respondents kept referring to their dismay when they heard Muslim representatives saying that the full-face veil was “not part of the religion.”

Although many respondents indicated they had received no support at all from the Muslim population, many also stressed that at a local level, they were satisfied with the support they had received from fellow Muslims.

Twenty-two of the women interviewed did not have any friends who were wearing the full-face veil before they adopted it themselves.

None of the women started wearing the full-face veil as a result of hearing or directly encountering a “radical” preacher in a mosque or in a Muslim group. Therefore, wearing the niqab/seetar was not symptomatic of the activities of a particular radical group operating on French soil as often claimed by politicians and commentators.

1.6 A Disturbing Level of Verbal Abuse

Thirty women stated that they had suffered some form of verbal abuse from members of the public, with 19 women out of 30 experiencing abuse “often” or “every time they left their house”.⁴

4. The question was not relevant for two women who only wore the full-face veil on rare occasions.

The high levels of verbal abuse most of the women suffered cannot be underestimated or stressed enough. A few respondents related that they could not understand why people saw them as oppressed victims or terrorists while at the same time verbally assaulting them in public places. Only two women in the entire sample said that they had never been abused. The women were called everything from the names of fictional characters like Batman, Darth Vader, and Fantomas to offensive words like whore or slut. Remarks made by members of the public also referred to women's rights, to the ban of the full-face veil ("But this is forbidden!" or "It's a €150 penalty") Often passers-by would shout: "Go back to your country" or "We are in France here!"

A minority of cases involved physical abuse, such as passers-by spitting on the woman or attempting to tear off her veil. At least five women also reported that members of the public had photographed them without permission as if they were animals in a zoo.

Interviewees who wore the niqab before and after the controversy were adamant that they had noticed a shift in people's attitudes illustrated by an increase in the level of abuse the women had received since the full-face veil became a matter for national debate. One woman said the niqab controversy had had a greater impact on the level of abuse she had directed at her than either the Paris Metro bombings of the mid-1990s or the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. The day following President Sarkozy's main speech on the full-face veil in June 2009, members of the public tried to physically assault two interviewees. One of them, who had been wearing the niqab for over 10 years, was confronted by a man who threatened her with a knife.⁵

Respondents explained that not all experiences with members of the public were negative. Sometimes they were approached by people who were just curious to find out their motivations for wearing the full-face veil, and some women on rare occasions also received unexpected messages of support from strangers they met in public. In both cases, the interviewees were eager to engage with the people who were curious or supportive.

Most of the respondents described the typical abuser as more often female than male, between the ages of 30 and 50, and white French. The abuser was very rarely a young person.

More unexpectedly, a significant proportion of the respondents had been verbally abused by either Muslims or people of Arab descent. Many interviewees were told by Arabs and/or Muslims that people "like them" gave Muslims a bad reputation in France and that they were shaming the Muslim community and Islam.

5. The latter was later arrested and convicted, according to the interviewee.

The women's reactions to abuse were extremely mixed. Some said they would never react to verbal abuse, either because it was pointless or because Islamic teachings were clear that you should never react in this way. Other women, however, said they would respond, with one justifying her stand by claiming that an insult over the niqab was not personal but rather a slur against Islam. A couple of women were prepared to resort to physical retaliation in response to physical attacks.

A widespread distrust of the police (fearing the possibility of further abuse) and the judicial system was evident among the women sampled. About half of the women were not prepared to report a physical assault to the police. As for reporting verbal abuse, a large number of women felt that it was not worth pursuing since it would be difficult to prove and the police would not take them seriously. A small minority of women would not report any crime, believing in the supremacy of God's jurisdiction over that of a non-Islamic state.

Yet, it is also worth pointing out that some of the women who did press charges against their abusers said that they had won their cases.

1.7 After the Ban

Many women felt strongly that politicians were attempting to gain votes by scapegoating Muslims at a time when France was beset by social, political, and financial crises. A few also believed that the government was fearful of the rise of Islam while others argued that both the French government and its people have not come to terms with the fact of a multicultural France.

The women face a difficult dilemma when the legislation banning the full-face veil goes into effect on 11 April 2011. Very few openly acknowledged that they would remove their full-face veil in April with younger interviewees adamant that they would resist. However, already two of those who reported that they would not remove the veil have subsequently done so. In the long run, the majority of respondents ideally would like to settle in a Muslim country, particularly Saudi Arabia or their parents' country of birth. A small number cited the United Kingdom as more tolerant toward Muslims than France. A few thought that they would retreat further inside their homes. Others suggested more inventive solutions such as wearing surgical masks or helmets.

On the question of identity, some women perceived no difficulty in defining themselves as French, thinking it perfectly natural, while others clearly showed that their feelings of belonging had recently been overtaken by those of alienation. A minority of respondents expressed that they had never felt at home in France.

2. Introduction

“The burqa is not welcome on the territory of France”.

—Nicolas Sarkozy, address to the members of the Senate and
National Assembly, Versailles, 22 June 2009.

“By its very existence, the full veil flouts the principle of gender equality as
much as that of an equal dignity between all human beings”.

*Parliamentary report on the wearing of the full-face veil.*⁶

A new chapter in the complex relationship between France’s political elite and its Muslim population was opened in June 2009 with the establishment of the cross-party Parliamentary Commission to Study the Wearing of the Full Veil in France. The Commission was charged with assessing the practice of the full-face veil “while setting out to understand the

6. National Assembly, *Rapport d’information fait en application de l’article 145 du règlement au nom de la mission d’information sur la pratique du port du voile intégral sur le territoire national* (National Assembly, Information Report under Section 45 of the rules in the enquiry on the practice of the use of the full-face veil on national territory (hereafter known as Parliamentary Report on the wearing of the Full-face Veil, 26 January 2010, p. 87, available at <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/pdf/rap-info/i2262.pdf> (accessed April 2011)).

origins of the phenomenon, its scale and its evolution”.⁷ Its purview included investigating whether the wearing of the full veil was compatible “with the principles of the French Republic, in particular, those of women’s freedom and dignity”⁸. There is a certain irony, quipped Jean Beaubérot, a renowned French historian and sociologist, during one of the parliamentary sessions in “a national assembly comprising 80 per cent of men [...] to lecture Islam” about gender equality.

During a six-month period, the Parliamentary Commission heard testimonies from some 211 people: feminists, politicians of all persuasions, representatives of Muslim organisations, secularists, women’s and human rights groups, academics, intellectuals, and journalists. It travelled to several French cities and also ventured into Belgium,⁹ and questionnaires were even sent to French embassies in Europe, Canada, the United States, Turkey, and several Arab countries to gather information and evaluate each national situation.

Towards the very end of its mandate, in late 2009, the Commission’s members had the novel idea to interview a Muslim woman who wore a full-face veil, but not before demanding she unveil her face during her hearing.¹⁰ André Gérin, a French Communist MP and the Commission’s president, explained that in order “to perfect our judgment, we absolutely wanted to listen to at least one woman who wears the full veil.”¹¹ Kenza Drider, the Muslim woman heard by the Commission, was also interviewed for this Open Society Foundations report. According to Drider, she had sent several letters to Gérin asking if she could appear before the Commission and that it was only through her persistence and thanks to her media contacts that she was eventually invited as one of the last guests to be heard. A mere 10-line paragraph in the 658-page Parliamentary report is dedicated to her testimony.

The Open Society Foundations report shares some of the official objectives of the French Parliamentary Commission, although on a smaller scale and with a radically different approach. Instead of engaging with experts and politicians, the report gives voice

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Some members of the commission related that while in Brussels they heard the testimony of Karima, a 33-year-old Belgian citizen of Moroccan descent and author of *Unsubdued and Unveiled*. She has never worn the full veil but she testified how for many years she had suffered oppression by family members and had been forced by her father to wear a hijab when she was a teenager. National Assembly, *Rapport d’information*, pp. 50–51.

10. “The commission is keen to specify that Mrs Kenza Drider has accepted to testify with a bare face”, National Assembly, *Rapport d’information*, p. 44.

11. AFP, “Une femme portant le niqab auditionnée”, 9 December 2009.

to the experiences of 32 women who live in France and who have adopted the full-face veil. Although the primary objects of the controversy that engulfed France for a year and a half, Muslim women's voices were rarely heard. Given the scarce and scattered amount of primary data available surrounding the wearing of the full-face veil in France, this report seeks to develop a better understanding of the wearers' religious practices, the *raison d'être* behind the veil, and the women's sense of belonging and identity.

This report also aims to assess the dual impact of the media discourse and the legislation on the women wearing the full veil in France; the impact was of seemingly little concern to many French legislators and commentators, despite the excessive media coverage of an issue that, by all accounts, including those of the Commission members themselves, affects a marginal proportion of Muslim women living in the country. Indeed, in July 2009, an article published in *Le Monde* reported that, according to intelligence sources, 367 women wear the full veil in France while another article published by *Le Figaro* two months later put the number at less than 2,000.¹²

During the author's first field trip to Paris in October 2010 to meet two young women wearing the niqab at the Gare du Nord, the women and the author were approached by a middle-aged woman who shouted at the women that soon they would no longer be able to wear the veil. The fierce hostility of the incident was indicative of countless others occurring in mundane circumstances. This report therefore also hopes to open a window into the lives of 32 women who welcomed and eagerly shared their little-known and never reported daily experiences. The use of pseudonyms protects their identities for reasons of privacy and personal safety.

12. The journalist from *Le Figaro* explained that the figure, 2,000, appears in a memo from the Ministry of Interior and that the intelligence assessment was made on the basis of Salafist places of worship. Quoting the authors of the report, she writes, "the number of less than 2000 women seems credible". This figure is also confirmed by the then minister of interior, Brice Hortefeux, during his testimony before the commission.

See "Selon les services de la police nationale 367 femmes portent la burqa en France" (According to the National Police Services 367 women wear the burqa in France), *Le Monde*, 30 July 2009; Cécilia Gabizon, "Deux mille femmes portent la burqa en France" (Two thousand women wear the burqa in France), *Le Figaro*, 9 September 2009.

3. Methodology

This study is primarily qualitative research. The findings are based on interviews with 32 women who wear the full-face veil. Interviews were carried out in the major urban centres of Paris, Marseille, and Lyon as well as the smaller provincial centres of Avignon and Rennes. Eighteen interviews were conducted in person and 14 over the phone.

The first batch of interviews was secured through pre-existing contacts in the different cities particularly in Paris, Lyon and Marseille. The interviewees were either indirect contacts or women approached by contacts in Islamic institutes, mosques, and, on one occasion, in the street. The second batch was secured through the first interviewees introducing the researcher to their contacts and friends.

The survey questionnaire used in all 32 interviews asked for basic demographic information; religious background; the use of the veil; family reactions; the frequency and nature of any abuse experienced. More in-depth interviews with 28 interviewees enquired into the background of the interviewee and her reason(s) for wearing the niqab; her daily experiences while wearing the niqab; the interviewee's perception of the political and media controversy surrounding the niqab; and how she envisaged her future. After the first interviews, questions were added concerning the issue of reporting abuse to the police and/or to Muslim and antiracist organisations. The average duration of the in-depth interviews was approximately an hour (the shortest being 35 minutes and the longest two hours).

TABLE 1.

Sample profile—Open Society Foundation interviewees

		Number of interviewees
Location of interviewee	Avignon	3
	Lyon	4
	Macon	1
	Marseille	3
	Paris	18
	Rennes	1
	Vitrolles	1
	Village in northwest France ¹³	1
Country of Birth	Born in France	29
	Born outside France	3
Ethnic Background	North African ¹⁴	20
	West African ¹⁵	4
	White European	7
	Mixed background ¹⁶	1
Religious Background	Born into a Muslim family	24
	Converted to Islam	8
Age	18-30 years old	22
	31-44 years old	6
	Over 45 years old	4
Marital Status	Divorced	4
	Married	21
	Single	7
Highest level of education	Baccalauréat	14
	Vocational qualification ¹⁷	10
	Undergraduate degree	2
	Postgraduate degree	3
Employment Status	Employee	7
	Self employed	3
	On maternity leave	2
	Looking for work	8

13. The name of the village has not been disclosed to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee.

14. Amongst those 20 interviewees, two women had one parent of North African descent with the other parent from Yemen.

15. Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Conakry.

16. Spanish and Zairian.

17. CAP (Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle), BEP (Brevet d’Etudes Professionnelles).

At the time of the study, the youngest interviewee was 18 years old and the oldest 46.¹⁸ A large majority of the interviewees were young women, some still in their late teens.

In terms of educational qualification, the largest group were respondents who had a baccalaureate. Some of the respondents were either excluded from schools when they started wearing a hijab or forewent school knowing that they would be expelled. For example, one 19-year-old interviewee decided to wear a jilbab in her final year of high school. She complied with the ban on wearing the hijab in school by removing it in front of the school gates each morning. She continued to wear the long fitted covering over her clothes from the neck down but was constantly challenged by the school about her clothing.

[I was] summoned [by the school authorities who] asked if I had been forced to wear it, given that previously I was supposedly the trendiest girl in the school. Each time, there were several teachers who came to ask me why I was wearing this [long dress], that it was strange. I could see that they were giving me dirty looks and pointing their fingers at me. I was respecting [the law] but the problem was that they were never happy, and each time they were going further and further. They were telling me I was dressing like an Arab. One could clearly see that there was hate in them, that they were really unhappy. After a while I left. I gave up. I could no longer stay. It's impossible to bear constant criticism.

—Farah, 19, Paris

An older interviewee reported that she was unlawfully expelled from school in 1994 when she was 14. She continued her education through a correspondence course and managed to obtain her baccalauréat a few years later. However, the experience of studying in isolation, missing friends, and lacking the support of teachers left her feeling alienated and dissuaded her from further studies. In addition to formal state education, at least seven women attend regular Arabic and Islamic classes, some of them on a full-time basis either at universities or special private institutes.

Contrary to the charge that women who wear the niqab want to exclude themselves from society, a significant number of the respondents either work in a salaried job or are looking for work. Three respondents are self-employed: two started their own company making and selling Islamic clothing; the other is a hairdresser who receives her female clients at her home. Only two interviewees clearly stated that they were not looking for a job because they believed they should stay at home.

18. One interviewee indicated that she was over 46 but didn't want to be more specific about her parents' place of birth and her nationality. Being a foreign resident she feared being deported and didn't want to provide any information that could have betrayed her identity.

4. French Political Context and History of Legislation on the Full-face Veil

Since the late 1980s, controversies surrounding the dress code of French Muslim women have shaken French society, initiating a new political trend that has left few European countries unaffected. The first “*affaire du foulard*”, also dubbed the “affair of the chadors”,¹⁹ erupted on French TV screens in October 1989 and was followed in the 1990s and 2000s by ongoing media and political discussions. Until the early 2000s, most of the debates focused on whether or not girls had the right to wear the headscarf in schools. The adoption of a law by the French government in March 2004, which proscribed the wearing of “ostentatious” religious signs²⁰ in state schools, marked a watershed for both the partisans of the hijab ban and the minority who had bitterly fought against it.

19. In his book, *L'islam imaginaire : La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France, 1975–2005* (Paris, Editions La Découverte, 2007) Thomas Deltombe argues that the term “chador” used by journalists and commentators illustrates the direct influence played by the Rushdie Affair, which occurred in the UK six months earlier, on the first headscarf affair in France. “Chador” is a Persian term while an overwhelming number of French Muslims are Sunni and of North African descent and refer to the headscarf they wear as “hijab” or “keemari”.

20. The ban not only affected Muslim schoolgirls, but also, as France discovered during the following school terms, the little known Sikh community where a number of Sikh schoolboys were prevented from wearing their turbans. See BBC, “Sikh schoolboys lose French case”, 19 April 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4461905.stm> (accessed April 2011).

Although the scope of the 2004 law exclusively addresses pupils and their teachers in state schools, and excludes for example, university students or women wearing a hijab in public or on private premises, during and after the law's adoption period this demarcation line was often blurred. Reports compiled by organisations such as the *Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France* (CCIF) described a number of incidents: schools preventing Muslim mothers from participating in school activities with other parents because of their headscarves; a civil servant refusing a woman entry into a town hall to attend a ceremonial event; a bank requesting its Muslim client take off her headscarf before entering its premises and so on. But although the debates around the headscarf reverberated after 2004 they never reached the levels of previous years.

In contrast to the headscarf controversies, the debate on the full veil in France is highly current. One piece of research which studied the articles published on the burqa between 1993 and 2009 by the French newspaper *Le Monde* reveals that prior to 2003 the articles related to the issue were about Afghanistan or other "Muslim countries" and not about women who wore the burqa in France.²¹

The first controversial affair concerning a French resident wearing the full-face veil to hit the headlines took place in July 2008 after *Le Monde* reported that the Council of State had upheld an initial decision to refuse French citizenship to Faiza Silmi, a 32-year-old Moroccan resident, on the grounds of a "deficiency of assimilation" and her alleged "radical practice" of Islam which "was incompatible with the essential values of the French community, in particular gender equality".²² While some Muslim representatives were reported to be uneasy, wondering what the "radical practice" of Islam entailed, the Council of State's decision was greeted enthusiastically by many French politicians, including right-wing MP Jacques Myard, who announced his intention to propose a bill outlawing the full-face veil.²³

21. National Assembly, *Rapport d'information*, p. 31.

22. For more details about the story, see Katrin Bennhold, "A Veil Closes France's Door to Citizenship," *The New York Times*, 19 July 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/19/world/europe/19france.html> (accessed April 2011); and Tracy Clark-Flory "The veil vs. French values", *Salon*, 23 July 2011, available at <http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/2008/07/23/veil/> (accessed April 2011).

23. Myard executed his plan two months later with bill 1121 which proposed to outlaw the concealing of one's face in public spaces for "religious or cultural" reasons and to deport any foreign national guilty of the offence. The bill didn't gather any political or public momentum.

But the media and political furore over the full-face veil only properly started in April 2009²⁴ after the issue was reignited by the Communist Party mayor of Vénissieux,²⁵ André Gérin. In a highly charged open letter²⁶ to the French Prime Minister François Fillon, Gérin asserted that it was time for the government to act on the “hot topic” of the burqa, which “preoccupies thousands of our citizens”. In a call to defend French values, he asked: “Should we give allegiance to a doctrine of radical fundamentalism, Salafism, which is leading an anti-French and anti-white struggle?” Gérin would repeat several times over the following months that he considered the burqa to only be the “the tip of the iceberg”, describing the spread of Islamism and Salafism in France as his greatest fear. His letter to the prime minister concluded by calling for the creation of a parliamentary commission to deal with the issue.

On the 9 June 2009, Gérin and 57 fellow MPs across the political spectrum²⁷ introduced draft resolution 1725²⁸ aimed at creating a parliamentary commission to deal with the practice of the full-face veil in France. The resolution asserted that when *laïcité* (secularism) is threatened, new legislation needs to be enacted, as in March 2004 with the adoption of the law banning conspicuous religious symbols in state schools. Referring to examples including that of Faiza Silmi, the niqab-wearing woman who was refused French citizenship one year earlier, the MPs argued that existing legislation was not robust enough to tackle “these practices which we cannot tolerate in France”. It was therefore the duty of the National Assembly to create a “commission of enquiry” along the lines of the “Stasi Commission”.²⁹

24. See Alice Géraud, “Burqa, petite histoire d’un grand emballement” (Burqa, a small tale of a big boom), *Liberation*, 26 January 2010.

25. A predominantly working class town in the south of Lyon noted particularly for its high proportion of North African migrants.

26. The full letter has been reproduced on the website Réveil Communiste, see <http://reveil-communiste.over-blog.fr/article-30144822-6.html> (accessed April 2011).

27. The resolution was signed by 43 right-wing MPs from the ruling UMP; 3 Communist MPs (including André Gérin); 7 MPs from the PS (Socialist Party); 2 from a centrist party and 3 independent MPs.

28. Text available at <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/propositions/pion1725.asp> (accessed April 2011).

29. The Stasi Commission was established in July 2003 by President Chirac to investigate how the principle of secularism (*laïcité*) should be applied, notably in schools. In its recommendations published several months later the Commission argued for a law banning the wearing of “conspicuous religious signs” in state schools.

Shortly thereafter, addressing the assembled members of the two chambers of Parliament at the Palace of Versailles, President Sarkozy gave his blessing to the call for a parliamentary commission:

The problem of the burqa is not a religious one. It is an issue of freedom and dignity of the woman [applause]. The burqa is not a religious sign; it is a sign of subservience, a sign of debasement. I want to solemnly say [applause] it will not be welcome on the territory of the French Republic! [...] Parliament has expressed its will to address this question. This is the best way to proceed. There needs to be a debate and all viewpoints must be expressed. Where, outside of parliament, could they be better expressed? But I say to you; let us not be ashamed of our values, let us not be afraid of defending them.³⁰

The Parliamentary Commission to Study the Wearing of the Full Veil in France was thus created the day following Sarkozy's speech. Composed of 32 MPs from all mainstream political groups, it appointed André Gérin as its president.

In parallel to what had by then become a frenzied debate on the niqab/burqa, Éric Besson, the minister of immigration and national identity, in early November announced a "great debate" on national identity, initially expected to end in late February, a few weeks before the regional elections.³¹ A website inaugurated for the occasion, alongside a series of public forums, encouraged people to add their contribution and reflect on "what it means to be French" in order to respond to "the preoccupations triggered by the resurgence of certain communitarianisms, as the affair of the burqa has illustrated".³² But after a series of racist

30. The full speech is available at <http://www.elysee.fr/president/les-dossiers/etat/institutions/discours-devant-le-parlement-reuni-en-congres/discours-devant-le-parlement-reuni-en-congres.8463.html> (accessed April 2011).

31. The results of a number of surveys conducted between October 2010 and February 2011 reinforce the notion held by many commentators and politicians as well as a majority of French people that the great debate on national identity was a cynical vote-catching initiative. See AFP, "Débat sur l'identité nationale: une opération électorale pour 64 % des Français" (Debate on national identity: an electoral process for 64% of the French), 29 October 2009.

32. "Identité nationale: pourquoi le débat dérape-t-il sur l'Islam?" (National Identity: Why did this debate skid into Islam?, 16 December 2010, available at <http://www.20minutes.fr/article/371548/France-Identite-nationale-pourquoi-le-debat-derape-t-il-sur-l-Islam.php> (accessed April 2011).

blunders by politicians and Internet users,³³ the debate, which had fixated on immigration and Islam, soon became an embarrassment to the government and quietly ended without anything concrete resulting from it.

Many Muslim commentators and personalities felt that in both the debates on the veil and on national identity they had been used as vote-catching bait and to divert the public from high-profile political scandals and the economic crises.³⁴ Although representatives from Muslim organisations generally advocated a conciliatory tone, claiming for example that the full veil was not a Quranic prescription, many opposed a possible ban.³⁵ During his testimony before the Parliamentary Commission, Mohammed Moussaoui, president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), warned: “the turn taken by the debates contributes to the stigmatising of the Muslim religion and gives birth to a feeling of injustice, even among those who are hostile to the wearing of the full-face veil.”³⁶ Most likely reflecting an opinion shared by many French Arab youths, the popular humorist and actor Jamel Debbouze put it in blunter terms: “the burqa is not even an epiphenomenon, it concerns 250 people. Why are they pissing us off with this thing?”

On 26 January 2010, seven months after its establishment, the Commission released the *Parliamentary Report on the Wearing of the Full Veil*. In its findings, the report reiterated that the full veil contradicted French values and made eighteen recommendations, the most important of which was the adoption of a law banning the wearing of the full veil in all public services (hospitals, schools, post offices, public transport). But the report fell short of demanding a law prohibiting the veil in all public spaces, as advocated by many members of the Parliamentary Commission. There was a concern among MPs that a total prohibition

33. See Soren Seelow, “Sur le site d’Eric Besson: le pire du débat sur l’identité nationale” (On the site of Eric Besson, the worst of the debate on national identity), *Le Monde*, 4 December 2009; Nabila Ramdani, “Language still a barrier in the banlieue”, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2009.

34. See, Bruce Crumley, “Berets and Baguettes? France Rethinks Its Identity”, *Time*, 4 November 2009, available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1934193,00.html> (accessed April 2011); Stefan Simons, The man who launched the burqa debate, *Der Spiegel*, 2 January 2010, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,675164,00.html> (accessed April 2011); see also Faïza Guène, “In Search of Frenchness”, *The Guardian*, 28 January 2010, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/28/france-national-identity-muslim> (accessed April 2011); Nabila Ramdani, “French burqa debate is a smokescreen”, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2010, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/08/france-burqa-ban-sarkozy-political-distractio> (accessed April 2011).

35. With a few noticeable exceptions such as that of Hassen Chalghoumi, the Imam of the Drancy Mosque (in Paris).

36. Parliamentary report, page 392.

could either be deemed unconstitutional by the Council of State and/or condemned by the European Court of Human Rights.

A few days after the publication of the report, Prime Minister François Fillon addressed the question of the legality of a total ban by seeking the opinion of the Council of State. The latter announcement, delivered on 30 March, represented a blow for the supporters of a general ban. It asserted that a “ban limited to the full-face veil would be fragile as regards to the principle of non-discrimination” and could not be based on “any indisputable legal foundation.”³⁷ But despite the reservations of the Council of State and encouraged by several of his MPs, among whom was Jean-François Copé,³⁸ President Sarkozy, one month later, announced that his government would nonetheless defend a law to ban the full-face veil in all public spaces.³⁹

With the exception of André Gérin, Communist and Green MPs had from an early stage expressed their opposition to the adoption of a law banning the veil. While some strongly condemned the practice of the burqa, the majority considered the debate to be a political manoeuvre; a few expressed the view that the law would stigmatise the entire Muslim population. The PS (Socialist Party) was more divided on the issue; some of its MPs had been active supporters of a total ban. But a few days before the vote on the bill in the National Assembly, most Socialist MPs eventually agreed not to participate, arguing that the risk of the law being overturned by the Council of State and/or the European Court of Human Rights would represent “a priceless gift for the fundamentalists”.⁴⁰

Finally after 15 months of debate, on 13 July 2010 the National Assembly overwhelmingly voted in favour of the bill to ban all clothing concealing the face in public places with

37. *L'Express*, “Le Conseil d'Etat opposé à l'interdiction absolue du voile intégral” (The Council of State opposed the total ban on veils), 30 March 2010.

38. Jean-François Copé, the president of the ruling party in the National Assembly, is a key figure in the full-face veil saga. Along with MP Eric Raoult, the rapporteur of the Parliamentary Commission, and two other UMP MPs, he signed an open letter in December 2009, published in *Le Figaro*, calling for the banning of the full veil. Five days before the publication of the full Parliamentary Commission's report, he also introduced a bill demanding a ban on the full veil in all public places. See Jean-François Copé, “Voile intégral : une loi indispensable” (The full-face veil: an essential law), *Le Figaro*, 15 December 2009 and France 24, “Copé présente son texte visant à interdire le voile intégral” (Copé presents his text to ban the full-face veil), 21 January 2010.

39. Patrick Roger, “Nicolas Sarkozy a tranché en faveur d'une interdiction générale de la burqa” (Nicolas Sarkozy has ruled in favor of a general ban on burqas), *Le Monde*, 22 April 2010.

40. Marwan Chahine, “Le voile intégral se glisse dans un hémicycle échauffé” (The full-face veil slips into a heated chamber), *Libération*, 7 July 2010.

335 votes for the bill, one against, and most of the opposition boycotting the vote.⁴¹ On 14 September 2010 the bill also sailed through the Senate, and more surprisingly the Council of State ratified the law in October despite its previous warnings to the government.⁴² The Council of State did however provide one exemption, stating that the law cannot be applied “in open places of worship at the risk of violating religious freedom.”

For Jean Baubérot, the ratification by the Council was actually hardly a surprise given that “all the members of the Council have been appointed by the right”.⁴³ In an article published in the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps*, French historian Patrick Weil also argued that while the law only mentions clothing “aimed at concealing the face” in order to avoid openly targeting a religious practice and thus being invalidated by the European Court of Human Rights, the exemption provided by the Council reveals the real target of the law: “what is clothing which is banned in public places but authorised in places of worship, if not clothing in which one recognises a religious dimension?”⁴⁴ For Bauberot and Weil, the Council of State’s stance, which is confused and contradictory, is likely to lead to the future challenges to the law in the European Court of Human Rights.

For now, however, the wearing of the full-face veil is prohibited in all public places with penalties for noncompliance of up to €150, which can be accompanied or replaced by compulsory citizenship classes. A clause in the law also states that any person forcing a woman to wear the full veil faces a year’s imprisonment and a fine of €30,000.⁴⁵ The law will enter into force on 11 April 2011, apparently after a six-month period of mediation.

41. There are 577 members of the National Assembly. Over 200 MPs chose to boycott the vote.

42. See full details of the law and its ratification at <http://www.vie-publique.fr/actualite/panorama/texte-vote/loi-du-11-octobre-2010-interdisant-dissimulation-du-visage-espace-public.html> (accessed April 2011).

43. <http://jeanbauberotlaicite.blogspot.com/archive/2010/10/07/voile-integral-petition-pour-stephane-hessel-et-a-boumediene.html> (accessed April 2011).

44. Patrick Weil, “Burqa: la France bientôt désavouée?” (The burqa: Will France soon disown it?), *Le Temps*, 1 December 2010.

45. If the woman concerned is under 18, the punishment is €60,000 and up to two years’ imprisonment.

5. Wearing the Full-face Veil

5.1 Frequency of Wearing the Niqab

In this report the terms “full-face veil”, “niqab”, and “seetar” are used to designate the garment at the centre of the controversy. All interviewees rejected the use of the term “burqa” to designate the veil they were wearing (see Definitions section). A significant proportion of the interviewees wore black gloves as well as a full-face veil.

The frequency with which the niqab was worn varied: 23 respondents said they always wore the niqab when they went outdoors, while the other nine respondents wore the niqab infrequently. Four respondents had “briefly” stopped wearing it when the interviews for this report were conducted.⁴⁶ The political atmosphere around the niqab made some respondents either fearful of being harassed while wearing the full-face veil or anxious about not finding a job. One interviewee explained that she only wore the niqab outdoors when she was being accompanied by her husband as she was less likely to be abused. Another woman related how after a series of hostile incidents with members of the public she decided to remove the niqab, wearing it only when she travels abroad. A couple of interviewees who work on a full- or part-time basis had to remove it in their workplaces. However, their employers allowed them to work wearing either a jilbab or hijab. In several cases as well,

⁴⁶ Although among those four, at least two were wearing it on very rare occasions.

fierce opposition from their families prevented women from wearing the niqab. In one particular case, the interviewee was wearing the niqab without her parents' knowledge.⁴⁷

Among the 21 married women, 10 were wearing the niqab prior to marrying, while at least 2 of them used the opportunity of their marriage to wear it:

I wanted to wear it but my mother asked me to wait a bit. Al hamdullilah [Praise God], a few months later, God made it easy for me [as] I got married. I had to work on my husband. He asked me whether I was sure [of my decision] because some women are insulted, are spat on, beaten up; some people try to pull off their seetar, but after a month he said, "bismilleh [In the name of God], well, if you really feel ready then wear it."

—Nabila, 18, Marseille

Around a third of the interviewees are either in full- or part-time employment. Two interviewees work for a telemarketing company, which allows them to wear the niqab; the other interviewees are nannies, a youth worker, and a tele-sales person who must remove their full-face veil when they are at work.⁴⁸

I work with tolerant colleagues who value my work. They don't stop at the cloth I'm wearing; on the contrary it has disappeared. They have learnt to discover me. It's not a hindrance communicating with people. Even when the controversy really started, their reaction surprised me. They were saying it was nonsense! In fact, they had a concrete example [before their eyes] and beyond the cloth they learnt to see the person, to see that there was no difference. I had abilities like them. I could express myself well. I was not somebody who was reclusive, submissive, who could not laugh or think for herself.

—Wafa, 23, Paris

47. Many young interviewees adopted this strategy when they first wore the niqab. In one case, another young woman had removed it after she was given the choice of taking it off or leaving the family home. Furthermore, over the duration of the study (a three-month period of time), the interviewer has learnt that another two young interviewees were pressured into removing their niqab.

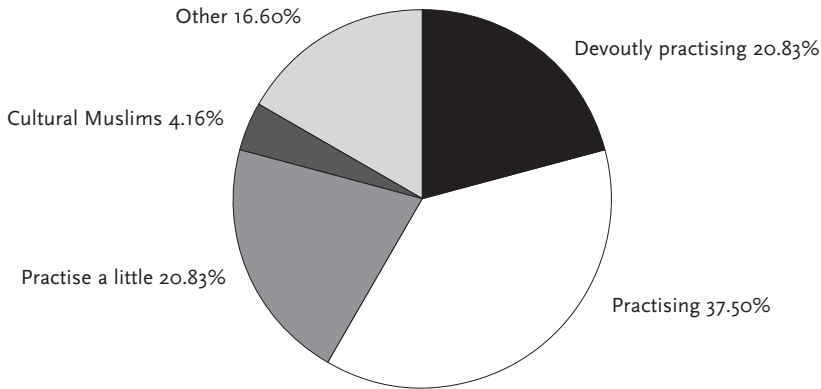
48. In four out of five cases, the employees were still able to work with a hijab or jelbab. In the case of the youth worker, her employers permitted her to wear a small headscarf.

5.2 Religious Background

The majority of interviewees were brought up in Muslim households. In most cases, parents instilled in them the basic tenets of Islam, mixed with certain ethnic cultural traditions. The interviewees also undertook their own personal research, which led them to broaden their knowledge of Islam and adopt a practice, which—in most, if not all, cases—was alien to that of their families.

Respondents who were born into a Muslim household were asked to choose from four categories to define the religious background of the families they grew up in.⁴⁹

FIGURE 1.
Religious background of interviewees



49. The four categories were:

[1] Devoutly practising (both parents/guardians pray and fast; at least one parent/guardian attends mosque regularly; both parents/guardians read the Quran regularly; both parents/guardians often fast outside the month of Ramadan unless health prevents them from doing so);

[2] Practising (both parents/guardians pray five times a day; both parents/guardians fast during Ramadan month unless health prevents them from doing so);

[3] Practise a little (both parents/guardians fast during Ramadan and don't consume alcohol/pork; one parent/guardian might pray);

[4] Nonreligious/cultural Muslims (neither parent/guardian prays or fasts; they may or may not drink alcohol or eat pork but they identify themselves as Muslims culturally).

Out of the 24 women who were born into a Muslim household, five respondents said that their parents were “devoutly practising”, nine said their parents were “practising”, and five said their parents “practise a little.” Four interviewees said that their parents’ levels of practise differed one from another; in one case, the father was identified as “not religious” (a cultural Muslim), while her mother was “practising”. A few interviewees said that their parents rarely practised their faith, and two women stated, sometimes in harsh terms, that one or both of their parents were cultural Muslims.

For a start, al hamdullilah, my family is practising. But at the beginning I was just like any other youth; I didn’t pray—it was all about music. I used to enjoy having fun. One day, I sat down and I started reflecting. When I looked at all the things around me, many deaths, many youngsters who had died, and many things like that, it made me think. I told myself I wasn’t happy. I was happy [in the sense] I had food to eat. I had everything I needed, but that wasn’t enough. Then, I started questioning myself. And one morning I awoke, I put on my headscarf and I went out. I was with a friend at secondary school. We had started talking more and more about religion. [Initially] we didn’t wear the headscarf, we didn’t pray, but we were reading a lot, we were researching a lot, and actually we [both started wearing it] at almost the same time in fact.

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

I journeyed alone to Islam. I didn’t wait for the message to come to me. I therefore made my own effort because I wasn’t feeling satisfied with my life. I felt that there was something missing, so I looked for what was missing. I wasn’t automatically thinking about Islam: I was looking to have a good job, money. I searched for my happiness through many doors, which is when I found Islam. My parents practise, in their spare time. They enrolled me for Arabic classes when I was a child but they were not very involved and they didn’t pass down religion [to me].

—Parveen, 19, South of France

I started praying secretly from my parents, because they would tell me off, [saying] that it was a waste of time. I was 16, and I managed to get hold of a book with a phonetic [alphabet], so I was doing my salat [prayers] secretly. Once I was married I was going to Muslim bookshops while my husband was at work. I was educating myself as much as possible. I really wanted to know what this religion was about and where it would take me to, because I could easily have chosen Christianity. My parents didn’t give a damn: Their hope was not that their daughter would become a

practising Muslim and wear a hijab; rather that she should study, find a job and live her life as she pleased.

—Omera, 31, South of France

These categories are problematic since the religious background of one's parents can be hard to define; it evolves through time and the children's assessment is liable to contain a fair amount of subjectivity. A couple of respondents initially refused to answer the question, arguing that Islamic ethics prevented them from judging their family's level of religiosity. Other respondents, especially younger ones who were in conflict with their parents over the issue of the niqab, were somewhat critical of their parents' degree of religious practice. An example of the difficulties is provided by two sisters interviewed on different dates. The first one, who was strongly criticized by her parents for wearing the niqab and who had to struggle to have it accepted, considered that her parents practised a little, while her sister who did not have to fight with her parents over the niqab because the family had already accepted the older sister's decision, thought that one of her parents was devoutly practising and the other was practising. When later asked about the difference between the two assessments, the older sister explained that her younger sibling had a more idealised perception of her parents.

Out of the eight converts, four of them came from families who they defined as nonreligious, while the other four grew up in Catholic households. One respondent had a particularly devout upbringing.

5.2.1 Adopting the Full-face Veil

Twenty-five respondents adopted the niqab for the first time after 2005: 13 between 2006 and 2008; and 12 between 2009 and 2010. Only four of the women interviewed adopted the niqab in the 1990s and three interviewees started wearing the niqab between 2000 and 2005. Almost all the women wore the hijab before they adopted the niqab. For the majority, approximately two-thirds, there was a period of a year or more between first wearing the hijab and then adopting the niqab, while a sizeable minority of women moved from wearing a hijab to a niqab in a matter of a few months.

Many interviewees could recall their emotions and thoughts on the first day they wore the niqab; for some, feelings of great happiness were mixed with the recognition that they were being perceived differently by other members of the public. For a few other interviewees, their first day wearing a niqab left no particular indelible memories.

In all my life, I have never felt as well as with the niqab. I was somebody who would go out wearing high heels. I was putting on [nice] clothes. I was a girl. I liked fashion. I would go out frequently and all, but I never felt as good as with the niqab. For me it represents everything. I couldn't take it off.

—Farah, 19, Paris

I don't know why, subhan Allah [Glory to God], I felt [a sense of] well-being with it, but I can't explain: I felt protected, I felt well, and I felt at ease. [The niqab] is my attachment to my religion. Quite simply, it's adoration.

—Haifa, 19, Paris

[The first day] I felt really, really well. When I was walking it felt as if I was floating on a little cloud. I was so elated that I felt like crying. Things like that you have to experience. It's hard to express them but, al hamdullilah, it was a great sensation, a sensation I know I won't forget.

—Qubila, 20, Paris

5.2.2 Reasons for Wearing the Full-face Veil

Interviewees provided a diverse range of motives for wearing the niqab. In most cases, the adoption of the full-face veil was inspired by a spiritual journey. Many interviewees expressed a desire to deepen their relationship with God, to be in perpetual contact with God; in their search for perfection, they wanted to imitate the example of the Prophet Mohammed's wives. However, various other factors also influenced the interviewees' decisions to adopt the veil. One woman, for example, recalled how she once saw a niqab and found it extremely beautiful and that since childhood she had always been attracted by people, such as the Touareg, who covered their faces.⁵⁰ Another interviewee, who has worn the niqab since she became a teenager, cited the onset of puberty as playing a role in her decision. In another case, a young convert who had not informed her parents about her conversion revealed that when she went to profess her faith in a local mosque (the day of her conversion) she wanted to make sure that her friends' parents would not recognize her

50. The Touareg or Tuareg are a nomadic people inhabiting the Saharan region of North Africa who speak a Berber language.

when she left. So instead of wearing a hijab, which would have made her easily identifiable, she adopted the niqab to avoid recognition. A few interviewees also explicitly said that they considered the full-face veil as protection against men.

I had the feeling that the headscarf and the jilbab were not enough. I felt the need to develop spiritually. For me it was one of the paths. In fact there are several paths to be nearer to God. For some it's prayer. So it was one of the ways that could bring me closer to God. And spiritually I yearned for something stronger in fact. But I didn't consider it an obligation. For me it was something extra, it was good.

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

In fact, I always wanted [to wear] it. Since I've been wearing the headscarf I always held the sisters who wear [the niqab] in esteem, because it's the highest degree, the highest level for a woman. In other words, it's just your Lord and yourself with no mediation. You live for your Lord. You are in perpetual adoration or at least you are trying to be in perpetual adoration.

—Duniya, 29, Paris

[It was something] mustahab [advisable], something good. And because I usually want to do things well, not by half measures, I'll do it correctly. Then I did it, without telling myself that it was an obligation or a constraint—not something placed on my shoulders, but just something that would get me closer to modesty and therefore I decided to wear it.”

—Latifah, 27, Marseille

Honestly, it's because I found it so beautiful. But at the beginning I didn't say to myself: “I'm wearing it.” I was wearing it only because I thought it was really beautiful. You know, today we live in a society where everything is based on the physical [appearance], but when you have a seetar nobody pays attention. If I meet you outdoors, and you are a sister, we will say Salam to each other and so on. We are going to talk to each other but I wouldn't know whether you are French or Chinese, but I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you whoever you are; I don't need to know what you look like. While today, if you observe society it's all just about that; it's your physical appearance, and you must fit the norms that they have created.

—Roukia, 25, Paris

5.2.3 The Impact of the Full-face Veil Controversy

Of the 32 women interviewed, 10 respondents had started to wear the niqab after the beginning of the controversy in April 2009; many of these women confirmed that it was the controversy that had made them consider the pertinence of the niqab. In some cases, the attention to the niqab created by the political controversy motivated the women to research and try to understand it better. Although it is impossible to assess how much the controversy encouraged some women to adopt the niqab, the testimonies suggest that it did play a role in some cases.

It was the [niqab] controversy that put a flea in my ear. Once again, they tried to make it appear negative, through their own mouths, the mouths of disbelievers. I asked myself why? It's already unfair in relation to my community and my religion. And then I tried to understand what it represented, where it was really coming from. Then I read the Quran and I bought books. And afterwards I told myself, I'm a Muslim, and if I'm a Muslim and one attacks a part of my religion, then as a Muslim I must be part of the struggle. I'm not killing anyone. The minimum that I can do as a Muslim woman is to wear the niqab, given that they are attacking this little bit of my religion. I looked at myself and said: "What? You claim you are a Muslim. I wear jeans. I wear my hair loose. In fact, I'm like them!" No, I have no right. If I want to be a Muslim I must fight for my sisters, for my brothers, for my ummah. That's how I saw it.

—Bushra, 24, Paris

As they often spoke about it on TV I started researching because there were plenty of people who were saying that in reality it wasn't true, that it was [a form of] extremism, that it didn't exist in Islam. In the end, I found that yes, it had a place in Islam.

—Haifa, 19 Paris

Actually, this controversy led me to ask myself questions about the niqab. I can't even remember when it started [but when it did] I began my research again, becoming more interested [in it] and then to liking it even more as I could see it more and hear about it. Therefore it heavily contributed [to my decision]!

—Qubila, 20, Paris

5.2.4 What Does the Wearing of the Full-face Veil Mean to You?

In the public discourse, the full-face veil is often equated with gender inequality and the oppression of women and their relegation to second-class status by patriarchal elements in Islamic communities. The interviewees saw the veil differently. For many, it represented a deeper affinity to God, an affinity described with words such as “piety” and “modesty”. Some talked about a sense of “pride” or “elation” and “ecstasy”. Others referred to the veil’s role in providing protection from the unwanted attention of men or from temptation. A number of interviewees also saw it as a challenge to dominant social values and perceptions of women in society.

The niqab is a way of coming closer to Allah. It means that every day I carry my religion with me: even though I have it in my heart, even if I have it in my head, even if I have it in my bag as I carry the Quran with me, I also carry it on my face, right up to my face because I’m looking for the face of Allah.

—Bushra, 24, Paris

[The niqab] represents the Sunna. It’s a [form of] protection. My mother was very, very beautiful and she was often accosted in the street. I saw these things when I was a little girl and it was very embarrassing for me. I know that when I showed her the niqab, I told her, “Mum, you see, nobody is going to know whether I’m beautiful or ugly, black or white. They will see nothing.” I think that gender separation is a solution to a huge number of problems. As I told you, I was frequently chatted up. It was happening everyday; it was that common! My parents have divorced. I also think that with the niqab, one sees one’s own true value and not through the eyes of others. I’m talking about my experiences, but there are similar ones in all families.

—Safa, 37, Paris

For us it’s a way of saying that we are not a piece of meat in a stall, we are not a commodity. The use of a woman’s image for commercial and pornographic gains is also unbearable to me, so by being veiled you take away this image. In the end, we are more a heart and spirituality than a piece of meat. It’s also a way for me to feel rehabilitated as a woman. A woman is precious, really. Allah has enabled us to carry children; it’s something magnificent. He didn’t give man the possibility of feeling life inside himself and I think we have devalued the woman hugely over the last decades. She no longer has any femininity, no maternity, nothing at all.

—Vivi, 39, South of France

Opinions were divided on the issue of whether the full-face veil was, from an Islamic perspective, compulsory or not. Among the 27 women who were asked the question, 14 women did not think it was compulsory, 10 thought it was compulsory, and 3 provided ambivalent answers.

5.2.5 Activities Before and After the Full-face Veil

For some women who adopted the full-face veil, life continued as before while for others the veil marked a radical change in their way of life, either because they considered their previous actions incompatible with Islamic tenets, or because they now felt endangered once they left their homes. For a number of women, the veil marked a mixture of change and continuity. In a few cases, the interviewees became more active after adopting the full-face veil.

I don't go out as often as before; I try to go out as seldom as possible. Whereas before, wearing a *jelbab* or a *hijab*, I didn't mind at all. It's true that previously I used to take liberties and speak with brothers outside, or when I had a question would ask a male passerby. Nowadays I don't do this anymore. It has nothing to do with the controversy; it's religious. I think the most appropriate behaviour for a Muslim woman is first and foremost, modesty. That's why I started wearing the *niqab*. I wanted to improve my behaviour so I ended all these things.

—Parveen, 19, South of France

Before [I began] wearing the *hijab* I was not at all engaged, but now with the *niqab* I've become much more involved in society [particularly] at a local level. As regards to my social activities, I'm a volunteer in an association which provides housing advice. I also interpret for North African mothers who can't speak French. I help them fill out forms, paperwork. I speak on their behalf, on the phone.

—Omera, 31, South of France

I particularly miss going out; the possibility of going out without having to worry. Now you have to think twice before going out and I've really withdrawn into myself a lot because when you go out people are really very, very nasty. I'm scared of being assaulted. Nowadays people take liberties and do anything. And now when I go out, everything has to be carefully planned; even going shopping with my husband. We do it when we know there won't be many people around.

—Karima, 21, Rennes

No, I carry on going to the sea with my girl friends. [Previously] I'd go shopping with my friends; I'd go to the hairdresser and have some blond highlights, a haircut and blow-dry. I'd go to the cinema. This hasn't changed: it's my clothing which has changed, my religion which has changed, my heart which has changed, but with my friends I have stayed the same. And I carry on my activities as usual.

—Nabila, 18, Marseille

5.2.6 Identification for Security Reasons

All the interviewees were happy to unveil their faces for identification purposes whether asked by an official or employee. Only three women said that this needed to be done by another woman.

6 Influences and/or Coercion?

6.1 Role of Mosques and Muslim Organisations

We can say that it's the result of an instrumentalisation by radical groups who have used my religion to establish their male domination and make it credible.

—Siham Habchi, president of Neither Whores, Nor Submissives.
*Parliamentary report on the wearing of the full face veil.*⁵¹

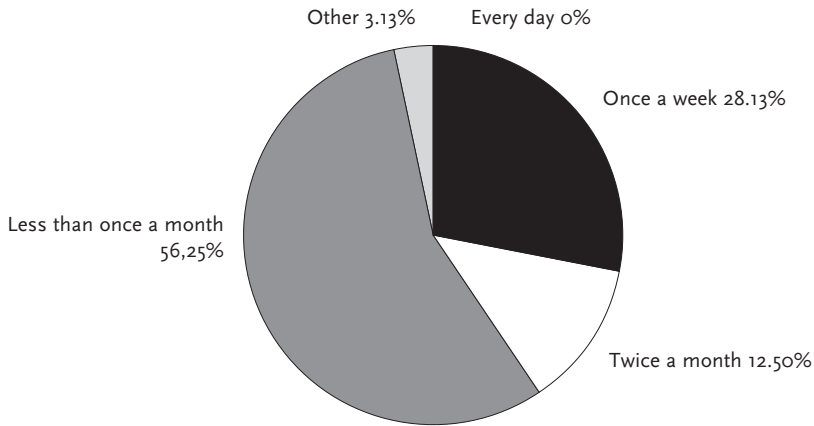
During the public controversy on the full-face veil, much was said about the influence of Salafist and radical groups on the population concerned. This highly controversial issue requires further research than this report can undertake. Nevertheless, the Open Society Foundations study did include a few questions that attempted to determine the influence of radical groups operating on French soil on the women's decision to wear the veil.

Out of the 32 women interviewed, only one of them belongs to a Muslim "organisation": she was a member of the board of her local mosque. None of the other respondents had ever been a member of any Islamic or Muslim group.

51. National Assembly, *Rapport d'information*, p. 320.

FIGURE 2.

Frequency of mosque attendance



Interviewees were asked about the frequency of their mosque attendance. None of the respondents went to a mosque on a daily basis. Only one interviewee, who was active at her local mosque, told us that she “often” goes to the mosque; nine women go to the mosque once a week, while 18 said that they attended the mosque less than once a month, preferring instead to pray at home. Several interviewees were quite dismissive of their local imams and more generally of French Muslim “representatives”.

Interviewees were also questioned on whether they were following specific scholars or local imams, or if they had been influenced in any way by specific readings from books or other sources such as the Internet. Several said they sought out the views of different schools of thought or scholars but did not feel they were influenced by them. Others were dismissive of imams. One interviewee talked about having her own reasoning, which “was innate, inside me, which was echoed in the books that I was reading”. Another said she was “against the allegiance to scholars” and did not attach herself to any of them: “It’s true they have knowledge. You take what is good from them, and what is not good you don’t take”.

A few interviewees explained that they had actually started researching and reading about the full-face veil only after adopting it. Some respondents said that reading the Quran and the Sunna had encouraged them to wear the veil. A few interviewees mentioned the names of classical Islamic scholars.

The most trustworthy scholars: I try to go back in time as much as possible to choose my scholars, because the more we advance through the ages the more the people go astray. That's why I try to search as widely as possible [to find my sources]. So there is Ibn Taymia and, amongst the contemporary ones, there is Ibn Baz, Al-Albani, and Fawzan.

—Parveen, 19, South of France

The first week that I put on the jelbab I immersed myself in books. I read quite a few books. I was choosing them in a random fashion. I picked the books with titles which I found attractive, such as *The Veil of the Muslim Woman* [*Le Voile de la femme Musulmane*]. Albani's book is the first one I read. I think that it's actually a very good book despite the fact that he is not an Imam who I would follow 200 percent.

—Qubila, 20, Paris

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the responses above is that the overwhelming majority of the women⁵² interviewed did not adopt the full-face veil as a result of any direct encounter or involvement with a Muslim organisation/group, local imam, or scholar. At best they were influenced by reading books and/or articles they found on the Internet. Interestingly, a few women had adopted the full-face veil without researching or knowing much about it.

6.2 Responses from Families

Interviewees were asked about their parents' and husbands' responses to wearing the full veil. The respondents could choose one of five answers: delighted; agreed; disagreed; strongly disagreed; indifferent. The results suggest that adopting the veil is generally a personal decision by the wearer. In a significant number of cases, the veil was worn against the wishes of family members, especially fathers and mothers. In many instances, involving in particular interviewees of Arabic or African descent, the adoption of the veil resulted in open conflict with parents. In several cases involving younger women, the interviewees initially avoided telling their parents about their decision altogether.

In five cases, the respondent was supported in her choice by her father (the combination of "delighted" and "agreed" segments) while twelve of the interviewees recalled their fathers reacting badly or very badly to their decision. However, 11 women could not provide

52. See the following section for Maha's story, the one exception identified in this research.

an answer to this question, because, in a few cases, the father was deceased but more often because the interviewees hadn't informed their fathers that they were wearing the niqab. The opposition to the full-face veil was strongest among the mothers, with the majority of mothers (20 of them) initially disagreeing with their daughter's decision to wear the niqab. In contrast six of the husbands concerned (the question affecting only those respondents married before wearing the full-face veil) were delighted by their spouse's decision (no respondent answered "agreed"), while four husbands disagreed or strongly disagreed.

FIGURE 3.
Fathers' reactions to the decision to wear the veil

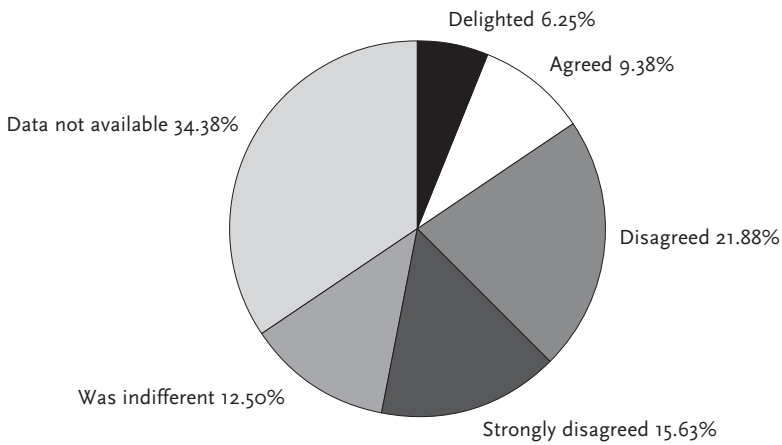


FIGURE 4.
Mothers' reactions to the decision to wear the veil

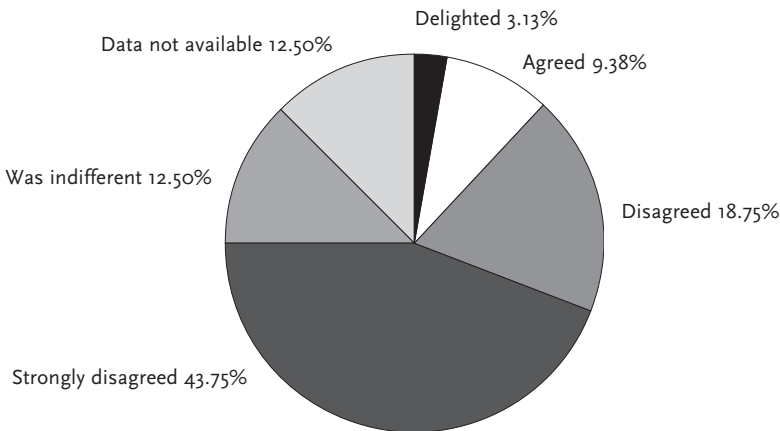
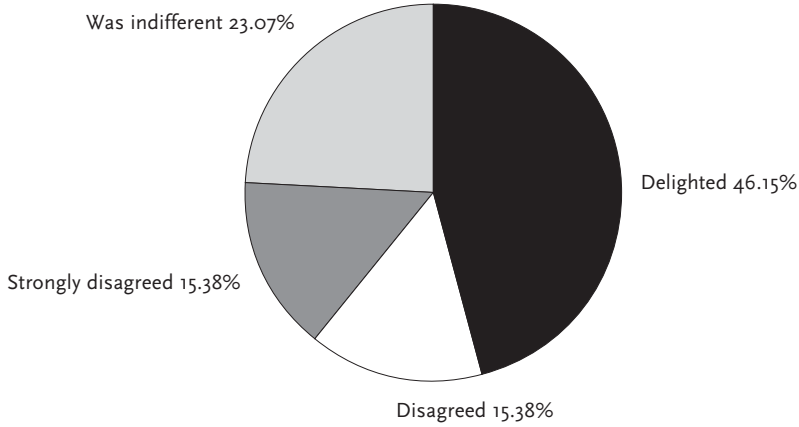


FIGURE 5.
Husbands' reactions to the decision to wear the veil



Conflicts inside families arising from the adoption of the niqab by a daughter are one of the most striking findings of the research. The testimonies from many interviewees, particularly the youngest, suggest they find themselves in open conflict with their families when they start wearing the niqab. Knowing that their parents would oppose it, many started wearing the niqab secretly. As with a number of husbands, some parents were not necessarily opposed to the full-face veil but mainly feared that their daughter would be assaulted for wearing it.

In fact [at first] I was wearing it secretly. My parents didn't know. So after I started having problems, the neighbours who saw me would report back to my mother. [My family would tell me]: "It's only a stage; it's a phase which you'll grow out of." "You're not normal." "You've got psychological problems." "You're unstable." You see, honestly you hear a bit of everything. And it's even more hurtful coming from your close relatives and your family.

—Aisha, 19, Paris

I wore it secretly for two years. Oh yes, it was particularly my father. As long as he didn't catch me with it, it was OK. For two years I wore it secretly. He had sworn that if he caught me. I think he would have cut my head off! One of my brothers knew about it and I always made sure that I would go with him when I went out.

—Eliza, 31, Paris

In relation to my father, up until today I still wear it secretly [from him]. In fact, he has already seen me with it, and he was not at all happy. My mother, al hamdullilah, used to strongly disagree with it. She thought it was excessive but nowadays she accepts it, al hamdullilah, because I explained to her the reasons why I was wearing it.

—Safa, 20, Paris

At first my parents didn't react badly because they thought that this would perhaps be short-lived. I think that's what they were hoping for. They were telling themselves that I was in the midst of self-discovery, following fashions, and that it would not last. But the years have passed. It's not that my mother doesn't accept it, [but] she hates going out with me in the streets. It's not me who disturbs her but it's people's glares, because my mother is someone who can't keep it to herself. In other words if she sees a person who is verbally abusing me or who makes a comment, she is going to respond. Nowadays she is even more worried. She tells herself that, "I'm alone with my daughter" [and] that I should take it off, that I'm going to be assaulted and that it's dangerous.

—Yasmina, 31, Paris

Actually she took [the hijab] very badly. She was telling me that I didn't need the hijab, that I could do the prayer without wearing the hijab, that it was not compulsory, that I was still young, that I was about to throw away my life. In fact, I told her, "Mum, if I wear the niqab, what are you going to do?" She told me, "I'm going to disown you" and things like that. So I didn't tell her. She only learned about it later. So I hid it from her. In the beginning, I was wearing it secretly [from] all my family as well; nobody knew about it initially. I was wearing it all the time. Maybe there were two or three occasions when I didn't wear it because my mother would ask me to go out with her. But later on, subhan Allah, as my mother was ashamed to go out with me wearing the jilbab, every time we had to go out together it was cancelled, al hamdullilah. So ultimately I was wearing it all the time.

—Haifa, 19, Paris

In the last case, the interviewee's mother eventually forced her to leave home because she was unable to accept her daughter's decision to wear the jilbab and her inability to find employment. Her mother, regretting her decision, looked through her daughter's personal belongings hoping to find out her whereabouts. Haifa had left her mobile phone behind. While reading the text messages, the mother discovered her daughter was not only wearing the jilbab but also the niqab. Three days after being thrown out of the family home, Haifa

returned and her mother no longer mentioned the jilbab or niqab. As for the rest of her family, Haifa said: “They call me a Salafist, a fundamentalist. They don’t understand my choice and they try to turn my mother against me.”

Interviewees were also asked whether they had any friends or close family relatives who had worn the full-face veil before them. The vast majority of respondents were the first members of their family to have adopted the full-face veil, and over two-thirds did not know any other Muslim women who were wearing the veil before they adopted it themselves.

The Role of the Husband

The role of husbands in persuading their wives to wear the full-face veil has also been much discussed publicly. The Open Society Foundations’ research shows, however, that among all the married women (or those who married when they started wearing the niqab) only one woman had been directly encouraged by her husband, a local imam, to wear it—she wore it four years after getting married. All the others wore it independently, sometimes in spite of the reservations of their husbands. Some young interviewees whose parents were against the full-face veil saw marriage as an opportunity to wear the veil. For one woman, marriage meant that she had to remove her niqab.

Maha, 29 years of age and from the South of France, was the exception, encouraged by her husband to wear the niqab when she got married:

He was practising. So I wanted to know more, to get into it. And then, that’s when I discovered religion. I realised that it was important, that it [the hijab] was an obligation for us, and therefore I wore it. It was automatic.

Two years later, she started wearing the jilbab and another two years later the niqab. Asked why she adopted the niqab, she replied:

For my husband it’s an obligation, but he never forced me to wear it. He has always been very patient with me. But through time, in fact, it became automatic to wear it. [He] showed me that it was an obligation, but he never told me that I had to wear it.

The other respondents said that their husbands had not encouraged them to wear the veil. In some cases, husbands were initially opposed to their wives wearing the niqab and only accepted their wives’ choices after persuasion. Some were concerned about their

wife's safety and security. In a couple of cases, women refused to marry men who would not accept them wearing the niqab.

When I bought my niqab, [my husband] didn't know about it. One morning I wanted to do my shopping and I decided to wear it. He was really surprised. He didn't have much choice because he knew that the niqab had been worn by certain wives of the Prophet, so he asked me, "Are you going to go out like this?" I told him, "Yes." He thought that I was about to carry on [with my studies], to maybe get a job and so carrying on along a path other than the spiritual path. He was surprised because he was not expecting it at all that his wife would wear the niqab. We had never spoken about it. So he was amazed, surprised, but he accepted it."

—Omera, 31, South of France

One day my husband didn't have his [nationality] papers and he had been served several deportation orders. Even after the birth of my son he received a deportation order and I started getting very frightened. I therefore did my udu [ablution] correctly, I did the salat [prayer] correctly, I prostrated myself for a long time before God, and I said: "If you want me to wear the niqab, then give my husband his papers." And less than a week afterwards they called us. He went [to his appointment]: he received his papers. So I said to my husband, "I've made an agreement with Allah; I must wear the niqab." He didn't agree, and I was really annoyed so I made duas [supplication to Allah] asking Allah to change the heart of my husband because I didn't want to do it without his consent. For us it's easy to live hidden [behind the veil] but with him he has to face all the stares that fall on his face. It's not easy to walk side by side with us. I didn't want to impose it on him so I waited until he was ready. Then finally he said ok.

—Safa, 20, Paris

My husband was a bit scared. He told me to think carefully before [wearing it]. [He asked me] whether I would really be able to handle wearing it in France. My husband agreed to the idea. For him it was very good, but he was scared I would not be able to bear it. And he met brothers who had told him to be careful because many sisters hadn't been able to bear the weight of it.

—Latifah, 27, Marseille

6.3 Response from the Public

The first day I felt joy but also fear, because it was the first time that I saw people reacting in this way. It's true that [I had] already [experienced it] to some degree with the jilbab and the headscarf. But what I really felt in people's eyes was that I was a monster. Deep down, yes, there was a joy, a feeling of well-being. But at the same time I saw reactions from people that I had never seen before. That's what I felt at that moment, maybe fear but, first and foremost, astonishment as well as shock.

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

Jameelah, who is of West African descent, was extremely mild-mannered and soft spoken. She was no longer wearing the niqab when this interview took place but had worn it for three years prior to getting married. Her experiences of verbal abuse were common to many of the respondents. During outdoor meetings in Paris with the above interviewee and others for this report, members of the public verbally abused them. The majority of respondents told the Open Society Foundations that they suffered harassment either daily or frequently.

Verbal Abuse; A Common Experience

The vast majority of respondents stated that they had suffered from verbal abuse. Interviewees, asked about the frequency of the abuse they faced, were told to choose between the following options: every time I leave the house; often; sometimes; rarely; never. Several factors can affect the response to this question. For example, to avoid being abused, one interviewee only wore the niqab when she was accompanied by her husband.⁵³ In Paris, two interviewees said that the level of abuse depended on whether they were going out locally or whether they were taking the tube or train to go to central Paris. Both said they faced abuse “every time” they travel around central Paris but “rarely” or “sometimes” when going out locally. Furthermore, the frequency of the abuse is also likely to vary in relation to the frequency with which the respondent ventured outdoors; the option “every time I leave the house” rather than “always” partially addressed the issue and many interviewees were also asked how often they went out.

53. Many respondents pointed out that they were generally left alone when they were walking with a male relative.

The majority of respondents reported being abused “every time they leave the house” or “often”. Two respondents said they had never been abused. One said she was often abused when she was in public while the other said she rarely left her house.

Once in Carrefour [a large supermarket], I was walking in the shop with another sister and suddenly [what felt] like a small stone, a little object, whizzed past me. I thought it was something which had fallen from a [shelf] or something like that so I really didn't pay attention. But just a little bit later I got hit by a ball. Someone had thrown a ball at me. Once a [white] man [said] he wanted to teach me about life. He thought I was a poor woman and he wanted to demonstrate [what] sexuality [was]. Starkh firAllah [God forgives], so he asked me not to conceal myself and he would teach me the pleasures of life. We often get these types.

—Habiba, 41, Lyon

Yes, after discussions about the law to ban the veil, there were many more reactions. I think it encouraged people even more. Each day I couldn't even go out without receiving some sort of comment or insult. I couldn't avoid it. I would leave the house and I knew what to expect. One time a woman came up [to me]. She insulted me with words like w[hore]⁵⁴, rude words like that. Sometimes, though, it wasn't crude words; throughout one entire journey in the metro, there was someone behind me who was saying, “I don't understand why you do this”, “you're scary”, “your place is not here”, and “go back to your country”. In one instance, there was a man in the same carriage as me who was banging the wall close to me. He was screaming and insulting me, the same kind of insults that I've just mentioned. He was banging the carriage wall really violently and you could feel the carriage moving and he was screaming and insulting me further. He was a big tall white man. At first I was a bit scared, but later I made the dhikh [remembrance of God]. He carried on insulting me, but he didn't touch me. It was really violent. I knew there were issues with racism, but I didn't realise people could insult [a person] like that. I had the feeling that I was no longer human, that I was a monster; while they should have respected me because at least I was a human being like them and at least for that reason I wanted some respect. When the person cannot comprehend this, then he or she has nothing in her heart, [and there is no need to respond] because respecting a person is one of the most important things [in the world], whatever your religion, whoever you are, whether you wear the headscarf

54. The interviewee did not want to pronounce the word.

or not, whether you wear the niqab or not. Respect must be there; it's what is going to allow us to all live together. If there is no respect, there is nothing.

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

Interviewees said they found themselves not only being stared at but also followed around when they are in shops. Another unpleasant experience arose from people taking photographs of them, sometimes up close, but without asking their permission, “as if I was a statue or a circus freak”.

Once, I remember, it made me feel a bit strange. I was going to a conference and I had an appointment with some sisters, so I was waiting on the platform of a metro. There was a tourist who was passing by and she took a picture of me and then she carried on walking. I ran after her because I didn't like her taking my picture and wanted her to delete it. I felt that there was no longer any respect, as if we were no longer human beings. You don't take a picture like that; you go and ask the person first. But here the person took a picture of me as if I had no say in it and it deeply shocked me.

—Xena, 26, Paris

The overwhelming majority of interviewees felt that they had never been physically assaulted, though many report being pushed on the metro, or encountering people who tried to tear off their niqab. Some interviewees report being spat at. A few interviewees also said that they had to avoid certain places, notably shopping centres.

Many interviewees pointed out that not all public reaction had been negative. Some people were just inquisitive and eager to find out about the respondents' motivations for wearing a niqab. All the women who were approached by people in the street asking questions about their full-face veil were extremely happy to answer them.⁵⁵

In fact, there are some gazes which are inquisitive, but that are not disturbing. And then you have gazes which are wicked, where, I don't know, it's as if they were undressing you. The other day, I was in the market with another sister. I was wearing my seetar and a teenager passed by and said to her father: “But how is she able to see?” It amused me, in the sense that if I hadn't seen a sister before I would have

55. This consensual attitude from the respondents, who often spoke about their happiness at answering questions, should not be underestimated.

[also] asked, “how can she see, how does it work?” So when you get some comments like that you shouldn’t take them wrongly. Now it’s true that when you hear comments such as, “Go back to your country”, if the person knew that I was born in Neuilly-sur-seine [one of the wealthiest districts of Paris], that I was living in a house, that my parents hold certain professional positions, I think they [wouldn’t] have a clue. For them we all live in social housing, we are all Arabs, we are all migrants, we have no culture, we are uneducated. It staggers me, “Go back to your country”; you hear it all the time.

—Geraldine, 20, Paris

If [only] they came to speak to us and they didn’t [come to] insult us in the street, [or] sideline us, because we don’t feel like women. We feel like a piece of garbage [that] people would prefer not to see again. If [only] they came to speak to us, and behaved towards us in the same way as they behave towards everyone else, maybe then we would open up more to them. In any case, anyone who came to speak to me was somewhat shocked to realise that I could speak, that I could laugh, that there were no issues at all with me.

—Farah, 18, Paris

Some interviewees also had positive experiences at the hands of strangers who unexpectedly offered their support to them.

I was surprised that some people would come and sit near me in the Metro and say: “I think that what you are doing is beautiful. You probably have your own reasons.” So, I was surprised to be supported by people who were not necessarily Muslims. It was a woman, a French woman. She was old, maybe in her 40s. So she came to see me. She was very warm with a big smile, telling me that if I could find my happiness this way then there was no reason that I wouldn’t bloom. She was wishing me well. It was someone who was really pleasant; [the kind of people] you don’t often meet.

—Xena, 26, Paris

One day I remember there was a black guy. I went to Auchan [a large supermarket]. Well, he had been drinking. He must have been between 20–25 years old, and he looked at me. I thought he was about to assault me but he told me: “It’s you! It’s you! It’s you who is the best!” I don’t know. It warmed my heart, subhan Allah.”

—Haifa, 19, Paris

But, al hamdullilah, where I live I don't have any problems. Initially when I moved in, yes, but they've adapted to it quickly. At the beginning, they were looking at me strangely, then they got used to the idea of seeing me often. Then [through time] you end up conversing with them. Sometimes people call you in the street to ask you some questions and as long as you respond, as long as you are open, not aggressive or cold, al hamdullilah, the people are less scared.

—Yasmina, 31, Paris

None of the interviewees who were parents encountered any issues in their children's schools. In several cases, however, women were reluctant to go out with their brothers or sons because they feared the men would be provoked into responding to abuse directed at the women because of their niqab.

Once I was near my house walking on the pavement to get into the house while my son had his head in the boot of his car taking the shopping out. It wasn't obvious that I was with him. A man passed by me on the pavement and he called me a whore. My son heard him, dropped his bags, and went berserk. He dropped everything and it ended up in a fight on the pavement. My son went towards him and told him, "Who are you talking to?" The guy was saying, "yes but, yes but." He didn't have the time to reflect that he received a blow. It's someone that I often meet because he lives near my street. It's often like this. So I avoid going out with my sons because I'm a bit scared for them. One of my sons even fought in the middle of Carrefour, the police came.

—Habiba, 41, Lyon

A couple of interviewees also related that some of their relatives didn't want to go out with them. A convert explained that her mother doesn't want to go out with her, unlike her grandmother:

My grandmother, the poor woman, is very elderly. She is 80 years old, and is someone who even if she doesn't accept [the niqab] loves me so much that in the end she accepts it. She doesn't mind going out with me, and for her it's natural. Once there was a woman who was giving me dirty looks and my grandmother told her: "What's wrong? Did [my grand-daughter] say something to you? You look at my granddaughter in this way but maybe yours will be even worse because at least my granddaughter has never hurt anyone!" I was amazed [at my grandmother]!

—Zara, 23, Paris

Respondents who had worn the niqab for many years felt that hostility towards them had increased significantly after the fierce public debate on the issue in 2009. Two respondents recalled being physically attacked the day after President Sarkozy's speech.

When the media covers the affair of the Islamic veil, then it's better not to go out. And it's not only me; everybody will tell you the same thing. You see, after the terrorist attacks in France during '95, I didn't feel anything in particular. And the same for the terrorist attacks in 2001; I didn't feel anything. But each time there's a controversy over the veil, then that's another issue. The last time [I was attacked] was the day after Nicolas Sarkozy's speech when he said that the burqa was not welcome in France. The day after! It was in the morning; I was commuting very, very early. I was still half asleep because it was on the day of my grandmother's death. So I was taking my mother to the airport. We had woken up at 4 am and there were people on the train. After a while at one station, a woman came up close to me. I was very near the door, and she said, "Sorry, are you getting off?" I thought she wanted me to move to let her pass by, but I wasn't completely blocking the door. She could have passed. But I kind of moved back a bit and she said, "all right, because in any case I'm going to tear that thing off you!" and just then I had the instinctive reaction to push her back and to try to protect myself as I wasn't expecting it at all. And then the other people, there were three of them trying to move her away, and she was coming back and they were pulling her away. She came back and a man managed to push her off the train, but she came back on board and was screaming exactly what Sarkozy had said! That it was in the name of the woman's dignity; that it was not in the Quran. She was screaming while I was not even responding to her. It was not as if the conversation had become heated, that there were insults being hurled back and forth. Not at all! She was screaming all by herself. She was in her 40s, a feminist . . . well, "feminist", that's what she claimed. The day after Sarkozy's speech! He made his statement at the end of June 2009. Voilà! Gérim launched the debate and Sarkozy pounced on it.

—Eliza, 31, Paris

I have been attacked, subhan Allah. I had [previously] never been attacked and I had been wearing it for the last 11 years. The first time [it happened] it was the day after our illustrious President of the Republic said before the National Assembly and on TV that the burqa was not welcome in France. I was leaving the school with my kids. There was a woman who didn't like it. She was sitting down with other old people and she pointed her finger at me saying, "What is that? We must tear it off of her." A man who was sitting down stood up and went to his car to get a large knife, Rambo-like.

He came towards me while I was with all the children. There were some mothers who live in my block and the district nearby. They came and told me to stay to one side. At that point the old man didn't know that my husband was getting out of the car so my husband jumped on him and disarmed him, and some youths came to separate them. When the old man saw that there were too many people, he went back to his car. He then took some petanque balls; he was not interested in my husband or any other person, he was interested in me. So he came towards me with the petanque balls, and once more everybody jumped on him. We called the police and when he saw the police he took his car and sped off.⁵⁶

—Omera, 31, South of France

Many interviewees felt that the media also played a role in intensifying the hostility towards them.

It's really the media which magnified it, because when I was wearing it at the beginning, it didn't go further than stares, and the insults were very, very rare. While nowadays people, are blowing their top [at us] more [and more]. I have the feeling that they are using this opportunity to spew out all the stuff they have inside themselves. It's as if this law had helped them to empty themselves.

—Talibah, 26, Paris

Several felt that the hostility towards them, which was high during the period of the public debate, had decreased with the passage of the law banning the niqab and the subsequent reduction in media coverage.

Who Insults Them?

Interviewees were asked whether there was a specific profile of the people who harass them in the streets. And while gender had some significance—since many interviewees pointed out that there was more abuse from women than men, or that women were nastier in their comments—age was definitely a key element. Most interviewees reported that, generally speaking, they were never or extremely rarely bothered by youngsters, aged 16 to late 20s, and that the great majority of people insulting them were middle-age men and particularly women.

56. The interviewee noted her assailant was later arrested and charged.

Many women also said they had been verbally abused, sometimes violently, by either Muslims or people of Arab descent.

Sometimes I met people, Muslims, who when they saw me, you know what they would say, “a’uzubileh min el cheytan el rajim” [I seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed]”. Yes, I heard it many times! Yes, they were Muslims because they could say, [that] Or else when they see me, they would say, “AstakhfiruAllah [God forgive me], astakhfiruAllah!” I can’t make any sense of it. Or they say, “bismilleh, bismilleh elrahman elrahim! [in the name of God the merciful, the compassionate]”! [Laughter] But in those cases, I honestly don’t react. I don’t respond because there is nothing to say. If you have mistaken me for Satan, what do you want me to do! If you can’t tell the difference between a wise man and a madman, there is nothing I can do, I don’t respond.

—Duniya, 29, Paris

Some interviewees analysed these outbursts as either a feeling of insecurity towards their own religious practice and/or an inferiority complex towards the mainstream population, explaining that many Muslims and/or Arabs felt ashamed and annoyed at gaining an even worse reputation due to the controversy.

The Muslim Community’s Response

“On the basis of the opinion of the great majority of Muslim theologians, the CFCM considers that the wearing of the full-face veil is not a religious prescription but rather a religious practice based on a minority opinion.”

Mohamed Moussaoui, president of the CFCM (French Council of the Muslim Faith), Parliamentary report on the wearing of the full-face veil.⁵⁷

“Firstly, from a religious perspective, neither the burqa, nor the niqab—or full-face veil—are religious prescriptions of Islam”.

Dalil Boubakeur, rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris,
Parliamentary report on the wearing of the full-face veil.⁵⁸

Interviewees mentioned their astonishment and even intense bitterness at what they

57. National Assembly, *Rapport d’information*, p. 391.

58. National Assembly, *Rapport d’information*, p. 448.

perceived as a lack of solidarity from fellow Muslims. Although responses on this issue were varied and often subtle, the great majority of interviewees were adamant that they were not receiving any support from Muslims, and particularly Muslim representatives. Only one interviewee told us that she was satisfied, at least at a local level, with the support she had received from the community.

What hurts me the most is the community. Because, you see, at the end of the day, when an unbeliever looks at you strangely you can understand as you can tell yourself, “He doesn’t know; he may never have even heard of it. It’s not his religion and at least he doesn’t claim to be Muslim. Or maybe it was just an inquisitive look.” The community hurts us more than the others. Wallah [I swear], that’s what disturbs me most, all the time. [It’s] the community, our own community, who hurt us. An Arab guy, not to say a Muslim, an Arab guy with a Muslim name, I asked him if it would be possible to pray on time [at work], and he answered in an arrogant and pompous tone, “No way. There is no praying here; it’s a workplace and blah blah blah”. And, subhanAllah, it has to be the one who is neither Arab nor Muslim who tells me, “Don’t worry, I’ll see what I can do for you!” You see what I mean? It’s our ummah [community] that is frankly rotten. Put it in your article, the ummah is disappointing us. Frankly, it’s an ignorant, pompous, and stupid ummah! When you look, the most successful of us are either comedians or singers, nothing else! Comedians or singers, we’re here to be the clowns! They are the court jesters! Or else they’re football players, waawh!! You can kick a ball! And then you are acclaimed and then France digs you. You see what I mean?”

—Aisha, 19, Paris

The fiercest and most widespread criticisms from interviewees were directed toward Muslim representatives and organisations such as the CFCM. However, several interviewees made a distinction between the support they have received at a grassroots level and the lack of support from the Muslim establishment.

I find the Muslim community as manipulated as the rest of the French population, except when they are particularly concerned by something. For example, during the headscarf affair in schools, apart from those who were wearing it or who had relatives and friends who were wearing it, the general feeling within the Muslim community was a bit like, “No, no, they are shaming us! They are fundamentalists. We don’t wear the headscarf!” Then, when they start talking about the niqab it is the same thing, except that the ranks of the defenders have shrunk as there are fewer niqabs around.

So apart from those who are wearing it, the rest of the community is reacting exactly the same way as in 2003, that is, “No, it’s not a religious prescription; it embarrasses us!” If I had to generalise, the official stance of the CFCM is one of embarrassment at the practice of the niqab. On the other hand, there is another category represented by the youth who were born in France, who religiously speaking are not necessarily very practising, but who recognise what racism is. In relation to this, their reaction is to demand freedom and equality, and they don’t see why the niqab should be forbidden. Amongst the youngsters who were born in France, they are a sizeable majority. I receive more support from them than from the official representative Islamic institutions. You can see this very well in way the CFCM was set up, not by youngsters but by the elders.

—Eliza, 31, Paris

No, clearly [we haven’t been supported]. You hear sisters who wear the hijab on TV saying “no, the niqab is not an obligation, it’s a complete innovation,” and that we do it to attract attention. That they don’t agree with the niqab is something I can understand. Everyone has their own opinion on it. This is not the problem. But now we aren’t even supportive [of each other] and frankly it’s distressing. When your community says that women who wear it are being provocative—that, yes, the law should be adopted—the worst [part of it] is that they say this to the media. It basically means that the women who dress like that are all extremists. Honestly, I find it astonishing.

—Geraldine, 20, Paris

7. How the Women Respond to Insults and Abuse

The attitude of the interviewees towards insults and abusers ranged from the passivity of one woman who not only refused to respond to taunting but also concealed it from her family to protect them from getting upset, to the fiery responses of some women interviewed in Marseille who refused to tolerate any abuse. For many women, the main response was to ignore any verbal abuse or insult by pretending they did not hear it. Many were determined not to be provoked because they felt that their reaction would be used to further judge and disgrace Muslims as a group. Restraint in the face of provocation by insults and abuse was also seen as a religious duty:

There is an actual hadith, which says that the Prophet was in the company of Abu Bakr when someone passed by and insulted them. The first time Abu Bakr didn't say anything. The second time round Abu Bakr got upset and the Prophet furiously stormed off. Abu Bakr was sad because he loved the Prophet deeply, so he asked him why he had left. The Prophet told him: "The first time the angels defended us, the second time when you got upset, it's Satan who was with us." I respect this hadith, [as I believe that] the one who [can control himself] is the one who will have the greatest reward. We know why we are doing it—we are doing it for Allah, to go to paradise. They are ignorant. Allah will suffice. I am not going to complain. I don't wish [the abuser] any harm, I just wish him to be guided."

—Roukia, 25, Paris

For others, a more direct and confrontational response was seen as appropriate:

Physically, you have the people who shove you. But, you know, [when] they shove you, you give them back a good dig with the elbow and they calm down quickly. Yes, we're no Christians because in the Bible if they slap you, you offer the other cheek. We are Muslims. If someone slaps you, you slap him back.

—Aisha, 19, Paris

It became starkly apparent whilst speaking with many of the Parisian interviewees that none of them had ever considered going to the police or even contacting an antiracist organisation. However, a large proportion of women interviewed from other regions of France, and a few in Paris, said that they would not hesitate to respond to abuse, and would also consider filing a complaint in the event of being physically attacked. Twenty-one respondents were asked whether they would report a physical attack to the police and the response was fairly evenly divided. Among women who would not report an attack, their answers reflected a lack of faith in the police and the fear of further abuse by police officers. For other respondents it was a mixture of mistrust towards the police and the judicial system, which they consider un-Islamic. And a minority of respondents also felt that the real issue for them was not the police force, but the entire legal system, as France was a country not under the jurisdiction of Islamic laws.

My trust is only in Allah and not in the government, and [also because] our government does everything possible to feed Islamophobia and racism. I'm not going to cry in front of them. So I'll go to the police station, great! I'll go there with my niqab or even [just] in a hijab, and I might encounter someone [there] who'll insult me even more. And what am I going to tell him [when] the law has been voted in? If someone slaps you hard, even if you end up in hospital, what would be the point of [complaining]? The problem is that any incidents that affect us never make the headlines, but when it's the reverse, it's always in the headlines. To tell you the truth [the only solution] is to leave. I am French and at first I would never have told you that. My country is France. My parents are in France. It would sadden me to leave, not to see my family every day. [But] it's clear that France is not for us. I think this affair has gone too far; it's really a shame!

—Geraldine, 20, Paris

I'd hide it even from my family, from my mother to avoid her getting worried and asking me to remove it. I was hiding a lot of what was going on outside. I'd often

return home in tears as people were so [nasty]. I knew there were issues with racism, but I didn't realise people could insult [a person] like that. Sometimes I would weep with sadness, but as soon as I got home I would have to smile. When you have the feeling that everyone is against you, you think that no help will come from anywhere. You tell yourself that if you say anything to the family you'll only upset them and they'll ask you to take it off despite your wishes. Others [family members] will say: "We told you so!" You tell yourself that you are alone against everyone. The only thing that enabled me to be strong was religion and faith, nothing else. Otherwise I would have become desperate!

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

One interviewee, responding quite differently from the women who felt legal action was un-Islamic or pointless, reported instances of abuse to the police on six occasions, and subsequently succeeded in winning all six court cases. She described several of the incidents. Once, for example, a man in a car shouted at her: "Hey Bin Laden's wife, go back to your country!" She noted the registration number and called the police.

Well, at the beginning it's true that it was a bit strange. One officer, for example, who I was standing near said to his colleague: "I'm not receiving her with her niqab!" I told him: "If you need to speak to someone, it's definitely me you should speak to. I'm like you, aren't I?" So it dampened their spirit. Now they know me, so they automatically send me to a woman."

—Omera, 31, South of France

Despite the deep-seated mistrust of the police and the French judicial system, another respondent filed a complaint after being verbally abused by a man in a doctor's surgery and also won her case. Still another interviewee, countering the prevailing antipathy toward the police, told a story in which an officer earned her admiration:

I was in Vénissieux [southeast of Lyon] with a female police community officer. The officer came out [of the police station] with me to check my car and suddenly a man of a certain age told her: "The law has been adopted! The law has been adopted!" The officer was looking at him without responding so the man carried on, saying: "She is no longer allowed to wear it! Hey, you are no longer allowed to wear it! I hope you are going to fine her!" The officer then approached the man and told him: "Firstly, sir, this is not your job, it's mine. And then no, I'm checking her car's tyres. And in any case, the law hasn't been adopted yet and if it was adopted, I wouldn't associate

myself with the people who agree with the criminalisation [of the veil].” The police female officer was shocked as she thought it was [out of order]. When we entered the police station, she recalled the incident to her colleagues; she thought it was [out of order].

—Habiba, 41, Lyon

Respondents viewed the controversy over the niqab in very negative terms. Some saw it as an attack on Islam and Muslims. Many wondered what will happen once the niqab is banned.

How far is France going to go? What will be the next issue because I don’t think this has finished?

—Safa, 20, Paris

I felt attacked. When I see the sisters in niqabs, who speak on TV, I feel concerned. When they speak about Salafist movements, when they filmed inside the mosque while I was attending [prayers] there. I really felt concerned. I think they really have achieved what they wanted: hatred between people. We were the sole object of the [public] debate. Now it has calmed down a bit, because the law has been adopted. But, subhanAllah, for a while it was all about us: the minarets, the halal fast food, the so and so and it will return. Why does it affect them so much? I’m struggling to understand. They have really manipulated the people because I have witnessed it myself. I was wearing it before the controversy and it wasn’t [as bad] as now. And when it concerns Islam, everyone gets interested in politics; everyone tells you: “the law has been adopted!” Yet [generally speaking] nobody is interested in laws.

—Iffat, 20, Paris

Many interviewees believed that the debate was only a pretext and that Muslims were being used as a scapegoat as France foundered in the midst of social, political, and financial crises. A few interviewees also felt that the government feared the rise of Islam as indicated by the increasing number of native French citizens converting to Islam and wearing the niqab. Some women also said that many French people and their elites seemed incapable of accepting that France was now a multicultural society.

They wanted to mask their greatest problems with something completely absurd. When you see the unemployment rate, the suicide rate, the number of people suffering from AIDS, how many people are homeless, how many are. . . . Honestly they

had nothing better to do? Voilà, they wanted French people to forget their genuine problems, quite simply by planting fear and aggression in [people's] hearts.

—Aisha, 19, Paris

Because they are racists! They fear Islam, they are Islamophobes as well! France today is Khadija, Aicha, Mohammed; that's what it is. And it's even Elodie who has now become a Muslim and there's nothing you can do about it. They don't accept what France has become. It's not the France of old where there were only French people. It's a France with Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Malians, Congolese, and Chinese. It's very mixed.

—Bushra, 24, Paris

It has always been like that anyway. As soon as France faces massive problems, a small minority is fed to the French citizens so that they can spit on them, have a go at them, and then everyone forgets. Nobody can remember thinking about unemployment, economic deficit. What is interesting them now is the niqab.

—Omera, 31, South of France

8. The Question of Identity

Asked whether they felt at home in France and/or French, the women gave a variety of answers, irrespective of their ethnicity. Some conveyed that they felt perfectly at home in France, while others said that since the controversy, or since they had been practising their religion more regularly, they no longer felt at home. Finally, a minority of women confided that at no point had they ever felt at home in France.

Of course, I'm at home [*laughter*]. Who else's [country] am I in? I feel at home. I have my family here. We live, we eat, we cry, we laugh, we suffer, we don't suffer. Some people are pleasant, some insult us. But truthfully, the day the law will be [implemented] I'll no longer feel at home.

—Camile, mid 40s, Paris

No. I no longer feel at home since I have returned to Allah. I would love to go back home.

—Duniya, 29, Paris

It's complicated. I have the feeling of being in love with a man who spits on me, who mistreats me all day long but who I dare not leave because I'm still madly in love with him.

—Eliza, 31, Paris

I think it's hard to be a French Muslim. It's not ethnicity—although ethnicity plays its part—but certainly the main [issue] is religion. To be a Muslim and to hold French nationality, it's hard to combine both, because you feel that you don't have the same rights as everyone else. I used to feel like everyone. Well, everyone used to accept me. I was dressed like everyone else and I didn't have many issues.

—Jameelah, 21, Paris

I travelled a lot when I was younger. I come from a middle-class background and we were always going on holidays. I've done everything: catamaran, climbing, hiking. I don't do that with my children. We [have to] leave France [to go on holidays]. Last summer we went to Morocco and it was great fun. It's a very beautiful country: we eat halal, there are no hassles, and nobody gives us a headache. But it's true that I have childhood memories: the magnificent French landscapes and all of these things that I'm attached to and don't want to separate myself from. I like France, but I increasingly dislike the French mindset. It looks as if they don't want to accept that France is now multicultural. When I converted some friends told me that I had disowned my race, as apparently Islam is a race!

—Safa, 20, Paris

9. Wearing the Full-face Veil Once the Law Is Implemented

Very few of the respondents openly confided that they would remove their full-face veil when the law is implemented. Many of the younger women, in particular, were adamant they would refuse to take it off irrespective of the personal cost to them. It is likely, however, that once the ban goes into effect in April 2011 the reality will be quite different: at least two interviewees who had been determined to defy the law have already removed their veils. A majority of respondents said that their ideal solution for the future was to leave France and settle in a Muslim country, particularly Saudi Arabia or their parents' country of birth. A couple of interviewees also mentioned the United Kingdom, which they consider to be more tolerant towards Muslims than France. Some women said that they would conceal their faces through other means, such as a surgical mask. Of more concern was the fact that many respondents said that they would avoid, as much as possible, going outside.

Why should I remove my niqab? I'm not an outlaw. I'm not a terrorist. I'm not a criminal. I'm not a thief. I, who today respect all the laws, the laws of God and the Republic's laws, will tomorrow become an outlaw. What I'm doing is a spiritual journey and not an act of provocation. One cannot prohibit someone just because of who he wants to be; one cannot prohibit someone from being a Muslim. [But] I can't speak about tomorrow. Only Allah knows the future.

—Camile, mid 40s, Paris

I'll wear a face mask to protect against flu. And honestly may Allah grant me my wish to be married so that I can stay at home, [so that] I no longer need to go out. And they say we are submissive, but they are the ones who are submitting us to these things.

—Iffat, 20, Paris

They say that it's our husbands who are locking us away but it's actually they who are locking us away. Now my husband doesn't want me to go out alone as he saw how people were abusing me when he was with me. So he thinks that on my own [the abuse] will multiply, and always insists I be accompanied. We shouldn't delude ourselves. There's no need to dream. I would end up taking it off. But what is clear is that I'm really going to restrict the number of times I go out to the bare minimum. I'll go out only when I need to do necessary things. In fact, I would love to settle in Medina. It would make things much easier with the niqab.

—Karima, 21, Rennes

Who is telling me that I have to stay at home? It's not my husband! [I'll stay inside] because I fear the cops, the €150 fine, the [compulsory] course on citizenship.

—Maha, 29, South of France

10. Conclusion

Legislation prohibiting the covering of faces in public spaces will come into effect in France on 11 April 2011. Some critics of this hotly debated discussion initially did not believe that the sharp rhetoric on the national level would lead to concrete legislation. They felt that in the unlikely event that the French National Assembly and Senate passed the law, the Council of State would rule it unconstitutional. This has not happened. Several European countries, including Belgium, Italy, and Spain, have joined France by introducing similar legislation. Despite being in the midst of a severe constitutional crisis and the subsequent collapse of the Belgian government, parliamentarians managed to vote through a law in the Lower House of Parliament prohibiting the use of the full-face veil in public places.

The French government and supporters of the prohibition on full-face coverings argue that the law is aimed at protecting those women who are forced by male family members and their religious communities into wearing the niqab and similar clothing. However, according to this research's findings, the majority of women interviewed freely chose to wear the full-face coverings. They made the decision despite strong family opposition, with only one woman encouraged to wear it. The role of religious organisations and individuals was in most cases not a factor in their decision-making. Most of the women reported that public verbal abuse increased after the controversy over the veil began, and felt that the law fails to advance the cause of women's rights or dignity.

The law encapsulates the growing anxiety and tensions in France, and indeed other European countries, over national identity and values and the reality and acceptance of increasingly diverse populations, in which Muslims play a large part. The integration of Muslim communities across western Europe is a legitimate concern for policymakers, but

in many countries the tone of the discussion and accompanying institutional responses have been counterproductive and contradict the principles of liberty, democracy, and a respect for human rights and equality. Notwithstanding the apparent neutrality of the law, the controversy over its adoption has further deepened the perceptions of Muslims living in France that state interference is targeted specifically at them.

The debate on the banning of the niqab took place without the voices of the women who actually wear the niqab. On 5 April 2011, a further national debate on secularism, initially labelled the debate on “secularism and Islam”, was officially launched in France. Whilst the use of the word Islam has been dropped following protests and criticism from a number of MPs and Muslim members of French society, this research underlines the requirement that the upcoming debate should include a myriad of French Muslim voices and views. Moreover, repetitious discussions on Islam and Muslims in France represent genuine danger for those who are the unwilling subjects of such debates.

Annex

This annex forms part of the Open Society Foundations study *Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Women Wear the Full-face Veil in France*. The report examines an issue causing considerable debate and controversy throughout Europe: the relationship between religion and European identity or, more succinctly, Islam's compatibility with European values. The report offers the views of 32 women across France who wear the full-face veil. It is an attempt to distinguish real-life experiences and perspectives of the women who wear the veil from the popular myths and misperceptions promulgated by the media and national figures.

The below excerpts have been structured to follow the above report. The names used in the following excerpts from interviews with the 32 Muslim women are pseudonyms for reasons of privacy and safety.

1. Wearing the Full-face Veil

Frequency of Wearing the Niqab

Four respondents had briefly stopped wearing the full-face veil when these interviews were conducted. A couple of interviewees who work on a full or part time basis had to remove it in their workplaces. Among the 21 married women, 10 were wearing the niqab prior to marrying while at least two of them used the opportunity of their marriage to wear it.

Vivi, a 39-year-old convert to Islam, lives in a small southern town and recently removed her niqab.

VIVI: At the moment, I try not to attract too much attention so I can find a job, because one needs to work; like everyone, we need money. Then once my situation is stable, I will restart my life with my niqab.

*

Yasmina, 31 year old, works as an interviewer in a consultancy firm run by non-Muslims.

YASMINA: No, they don't allow me to keep it [the seetar] on. They know I wear it because when I arrive at work I keep it on top of my head; I lift it up so I don't take it off completely. They know I wear the seetar and, alhamdulillah [praise be to God], it's not an issue for them. It's just an issue if I hide my face in the [office]. But afterwards, what I do outside is a private matter and they don't bother me about it. It doesn't prevent them from behaving normally with me.

Religious Background

CAMILE: [Our parents] taught us the obligations and that was about it. On reaching adulthood you grow up, you study, you do your own personal research. I studied and I informed myself. I told myself, "Did Allah really say that in the Quran?" So I deepened my research; I tried to understand. And, alhamdulillah, today I have found the answer to my questions.

*

DUNIYA: It was [my father] who taught us the basic elements of Islam, the uniqueness, the prayer . . . well, the pillars. Then, you reach a certain age; you mature, and you want to educate yourself, in the best sense of the term. I undertook my research and I began to like my religion because I understood it much better. Afterwards, it was an evolution. It started with the little headscarf, then the hijab, and after the hijab, the niqab.

*

IFFAT: Alhamdulillah, my father prays. My mother didn't pray, alhamdulillah, but she's into it now. But my father never told me about religion: he never told me to, "go

and pray”, he never told me about the headscarf, he never quoted verses from the Quran, ahadith [sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad or his companions] or anything else. But he prays, alhamdulillah, and that’s already something. All the things that I have learned up to now I’ve searched for them by myself. I’ve asked myself certain questions.

*

JAMEELAH: For a start, alhamdulillah, my family is practising. But at the beginning I was just like any other youth; I didn’t pray, it was all about music. I used to enjoy having fun. One day, I sat down and I started reflecting. When I looked at all the things around me, many deaths, many youngsters who had died, and many things like that, it made me think. I told myself I wasn’t happy. I was happy [in the sense that] I had food to eat. I had everything I needed, but that wasn’t enough. Then, I started questioning myself. And one morning I awoke, I put on my headscarf and I went out. I was with a friend at secondary school. We had started talking more and more about religion. [Initially] we didn’t wear the headscarf, we didn’t pray, but we were reading a lot, we were researching a lot, and actually we [both started wearing it] at almost the same time.

*

WAFER: I grew up in an environment which was favourable to Islam, but afterwards I progressed a little by educating myself: I read books, I accessed websites, in addition to some personal thinking combined with all of these things.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any readings in particular that have helped you deepen your knowledge of Islam?

WAFER: The book of Allah, the Quran, the words of our Prophet. Afterwards, there were other readings, but initially it was mainly that.

*

A few interviewees said that their parents practiced little, while others considered their parents “cultural” Muslims, sometimes making quite harsh comments about them.

OMERA: I started praying secretly from my parents, because they would tell me off, [saying] that it was a waste of time. I was 16, and I managed to get hold of a book with a phonetic [alphabet], so I was doing my salat [prayers] secretly. Once I was married I was going to Muslim bookshops while my husband was at work. I was educating myself as much as possible. I really wanted to know what this religion was about

and where it would take me to, because I could easily have chosen Christianity. My parents didn't give a damn. Their hope was not that their daughter would become a practising Muslim and wear a hijab; rather that she should study, find a job and live her life as she pleased.

I didn't wear the hijab for a long time. [From] reading the books and what had been translated from the Quran and the Sunna [historical accounts of the ways, teachings and activities of Prophet Muhammed] admittedly it's true that the hijab was fardh [compulsory]. It's an obligation and therefore, ultimately, the person makes her own choice. If, for example, your husband obliges you to wear it, then you place your husband on the same level as Allah and this can't be right at all. I started wearing the hijab, but only for two or three months because I was really attracted by the niqab. I had read stories, ahadith, about the wives of the Prophet who were wearing it, and other ahadith that really touched me. And for me, that's what I needed, that's what I wanted.

*

AISHA: I'm from a family from a North African background [who are] non-practising. I use this term because, even if there is no such thing as nonpractising Muslims, they are "moderate" in quotation marks. In my family nobody is veiled, nobody prays.

*

Parveen wore the niqab before getting married.

PARVEEN: I journeyed alone to Islam. I didn't wait for the message to come to me. I therefore made my own effort because I wasn't feeling satisfied with my life. I felt that there was something missing, so I looked for what was missing. I wasn't automatically thinking about Islam: I was looking to have a good job, money. I searched for my happiness through many doors, which is when I found Islam. My parents practise in their spare time. They enrolled me in Arabic classes when I was a child but they were not very involved and they didn't pass down religion [to me].

*

UZMA: As my parents are "Muslims" in quotation marks, I already had some notion of Islam within my family. But I decided to start taking classes in the Quran and Arabic. Therefore I tried to deepen [my knowledge of] religion. I sought truth rather than traditions and customs that are mixed with religion. In my family it's like that; one mixes traditions with religion, unfortunately.

*

Amina, a 46-year-old mother of three, lives in a small village in the northwest of France.

INTERVIEWER: Are your parents ardent believers?

AMINA: They've passed away but my mother was a devout believer. I think she would have listened [to me about the niqab]. There are many things, which were close to her way of thinking and the education that she gave us. We grew up with this awareness. My mother was veiled. She didn't veil her face, but she was veiling herself as a Christian. She had also been a nun for three years, not long before she married my father. But even after she was married she always wore the headscarf. We could only see her hands and her face, even during the summer when she wore a very long raincoat. She never left the house without the consent of my father. There was no gender mixing at home

Adopting the Veil

BUSHRA: The first day I wore the niqab I remember it very, very well. I was sitting on my sofa at home. I was meditating, thinking. I stood up abruptly. I said, "today I'm going to buy a niqab". I left, I went to Couronne [a district in Paris], I bought myself a niqab, and I wore it. I remember I took the train. I could see how people were looking at me. Racists. They were honestly racist looks. But it didn't hurt me. I told myself, "Why didn't you wear it earlier to fully understand what the disbelievers, what the West, what they have made us into".

*

DUNIYA: The day arrived and a sister gave me her niqab to wear. And then it was really . . . I won't say ecstasy but, anyway, I honestly felt great. I had the feeling that a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

*

FARAH: In all my life, I have never felt as well as with the niqab. But, really, all my life, and yet . . . well, I was somebody who would go out wearing high heels. I was putting on [nice] clothes. I was a girl, I liked fashion. I would go out frequently, but I never felt as good as with the niqab. For me it represents everything. I couldn't take it off.

*

TALIBAH: I remember more the sensation I felt when I wore the hijab. For me the niqab is just an accessory. It was really wearing the hijab that I felt the difference.

*

HAIFA: I don't know why, subhan'Allah [glory be to God], I felt [a sense of] well-being with it, but I can't explain: I felt protected, I felt well, and I felt at ease. [The niqab] is my attachment to my religion. Quite simply, it's adoration.

*

NABILA: Yes, I remember very well. That day I had to go out and do some shopping. I felt proud with my seetar. Honestly, I felt great. That day left a mark on me because I saw, I could feel what the sisters who had worn it before me could feel. Because frankly, people have no respect; they are incredibly impolite. It's amazing.

*

QUBILA: [The first day] I felt really, really well. When I was walking it felt as if I was floating on a little cloud. I was so elated that I felt like crying. Things like that you have to experience. It's hard to express them but, alhamdulillah, it was a great sensation, a sensation I know I won't forget.

*

ROUKIA: Yes, I felt great. I was on another planet. People couldn't see me and I couldn't see them, because as your view is blurred you pay much less attention to people so you don't dwell on so and so. It's as if you were alone in the world. It's hallucinatory! You must try it, try it and you'll see [*laughter*]! And in fact at that time people weren't making comments. You had some stares but you didn't dwell on them, and honestly I felt well. There were no difficulties.

Reasons for Wearing the Face Veil

CAMILE: And why did I decide, at that very moment to do it? Because I have always been a Muslim and I always wanted to please God. At a certain point, you tell yourself, "I don't want to die disobedient to Allah. I want to meet my Lord. I am practising, I am religious, I am Muslim and I want to die obedient to Allah while doing the best of deeds." I don't know which deed of faith will decide whether Allah will take mercy on

me so I try not to neglect anything. In other words, for me, everything is important. I have progressed very slowly, but at the end of the day I've finished with a flourish. I finish with a flourish and that's my approach, it's really a spiritual approach.

*

DUNIYA: In fact, I always wanted [to wear] it. Since I've been wearing the headscarf I have always held the sisters who wear [the niqab] in esteem, because it's the highest degree, the highest level for a woman. In other words, it's just your Lord and yourself with no mediation. You live for your Lord. You are in perpetual adoration or at least you are trying to be in perpetual adoration.

*

JAMEELAH: I had the feeling that the headscarf and the jelbab were not enough. I felt the need to develop spiritually. For me it was one of the paths. In fact there are several paths to be nearer to God. For some it's prayer. So it was one of the ways that could bring me closer to God. And spiritually I yearned for something stronger in fact. But I didn't consider it as an obligation. For me it was something extra, it was good.

*

IFFAT: Because of the face, masha'Allah [whatever God wills]¹, it's something very important in a woman. When a man sees the face of a woman it [signifies] a great deal. And the pious women, the women of the Prophet, the women of the past, were wearing [the veil] subhan'Allah. In fact, it's the cloth of chastity. It's like the jelbab, it's like the hijab.

*

Qubila, 20, from Paris, first started wearing the niqab on certain occasions before she adopted it consistently in October 2010, but she was forced to take it off two weeks before meeting with the interviewer. The interview had already been scheduled prior to the incident that led her to remove it.

QUBILA: I was already constantly thinking about it because it is well-established that the wives of the Prophet used to wear it, and they are my examples. I follow the

1. A saying often used on occasions where someone's good deeds or achievements are surprising.

Quran and the Sunnah, so for me the wives of the Prophet are examples to follow. I also believe it's something which reflects certain modesty and when I'm outside, when there are some brothers or when I find myself in mixed places, I feel more at ease wearing a niqab. So one day I broke the [psychological] barrier and I told myself I would never remove it again. I was [already] wearing it occasionally to go to the masjid [mosque], for example. So I started wearing it to go to the masjid on certain occasions when I knew that there would be a lot of people. Then, for Ramadan, I was wearing it every night to do the Taraweeh [special prayers conducted daily during the month of Ramadan], and from there [I had the] desire [to wear it permanently] because I really felt free when I was walking. I felt really well. It's something you can't explain.

*

ZARA: I think it goes with researching religion; knowledge increases and therefore our faith increases and from that point we don't see things in the same way. We say to ourselves that it's really a prescription of Allah, and since I have chosen Islam it's my duty to submit. And if it's prescribed, with even the Prophet advocating it to his wives, it's therefore inevitably a good thing for the woman. And anyway, if it was not an obligation, he would not have made his wives wear it knowing that he was an exemplar. It's something that goes with Islam, the idea of always protecting the woman from any temptation, whether she is the temptation or the tempted. It's also an issue of modesty, as modesty is part of the faith. When I felt like wearing it, I told myself that this new look would complicate matters because we are in France, but that at some point one must submit entirely to God and stop thinking about so and so. Admittedly, there is a difference [of opinion] on it. But I told myself that Allah would never punish someone who had done so much to please Him and anyway, it's impossible to do too much. But He might punish someone who hadn't done enough and who always took the [view] that best suited him or herself. People often take from the scholars what they want and neglect other scholars who they usually follow if the latter says something they don't want to hear. That's what I was doing at the beginning but, alhamdulillah, I realised that one must free oneself of the dunia [world], insha'Allah [God willing], to satisfy Allah and become a victor. So voilà, one must break the barrier and submit.

*

Latifah, 27, Marseille:

LATIFAH: When I became interested in the hijab, I started researching and realised that there was the hijab, the jelbab, the seetar, the niqab. So I wondered what it was all about. I started by going to the mosque and I saw that some women were wearing it there. I asked questions of the Imam so that he could explain the different viewpoints. Also I undertook some research relating to the differences of opinion: compulsory or not compulsory, Sunna or not Sunna. From there I adopted the argument that I thought was the most just: that [it was something] *mustahab* [advisable], something good. And because I usually want to do things well, not by half measures, I'll do it correctly. Then I did it, without telling myself that it was an obligation or a constraint, not something placed on my shoulders, but just something that would get me closer to modesty and therefore I decided to wear it.

*

Ghareebah is a young convert to Islam from a middle-class Parisian family. Her parents were unaware that she had become a Muslim². When she goes to the mosque, Ghareebah leaves her own house, goes to a nearby neighbour's home and once there she slips into her black dress and her niqab. Unlike any of the other respondents, Ghareebah wore the niqab before she had worn either the hijab or the jelbab. But the niqab is not only a way to hide her identity; she also considers it a religious obligation.

GHAREEBAH: The first day [I wore the niqab] was when I went to convert. I can remember it, because nobody was aware of it, not even my mother was aware that I was about to convert. So for me [wearing the niqab] was really [a means to] hide myself. I mainly wear it when I go to the mosque, because I don't want to be recognized in the streets wearing a jelbab. So I put the niqab on to respect my family's friends, well, actually so that they can't see me [*laughter*]."

*

A few interviewees also said that they felt attracted by the niqab when they saw a woman wearing it, even though they didn't necessarily know much about the niqab. Being attracted by it was not the only reason, but it played a significant role in at least triggering their urge to wear it.

2. She mentioned it to her mother, albeit in indirect terms.

NABILA: It goes back to when I was in primary school. I saw a woman in my district who was wearing it. I didn't know what it was at all and where it was coming from but, subhan'Allah, it was something which attracted me. I liked it a lot. And each time I saw one, and ever since the [number of] sisters wearing it multiplied, it intrigued me until I was deeply into religion. And from there I researched and concluded I had to [wear it].

*

PARVEEN: In fact, I had no [prior] knowledge about it. I had heard about it but I didn't know whether it was really part of the religion or if it was just an invention, until I met someone, a friend of mine, who wore it. From then on, I started asking myself questions. I went away and read about it, alhamdulillah, and it attracted me. Already wearing the jilbab, I didn't feel protected. I felt that there was something missing and when I studied the niqab, it was the answer to my questions.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know her well, this woman you are talking about?

PARVEEN: Yes, she was my neighbour.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ask her questions?

PARVEEN: No, because she started wearing it when she got married so I hardly saw her. And after that I never had any news from her because she left to live in Algeria. In fact, it was my sister who saw her and was very shocked. She ran up the stairs in a panic and said, "hey, the neighbour's wearing a niqab!" At that time we didn't even know that it was called a niqab; we were saying, "the black stuff on her face". My sister was against it. She was shocked whereas I told her, "but it's true, she is right. It protects her even more from men's gazes. It's even more modest and it can only be positive in her religion". And from then I started asking myself questions and researching it.

*

Roukia, whose mother is a fervent Catholic, was also brought up as a Catholic.

ROUKIA: Honestly, it's because I found it so beautiful. But at the beginning I didn't say to myself, "I'm wearing it". I was wearing it only because I thought it was really beautiful. I was living by myself and I was looking for a flatmate, and there was a girl who was pregnant. She was in trouble and she was looking for a flat, so I told her to share. She was wearing the seetar, and once while talking to her I tried it on and thought it was magnificent. So later I bought one for myself. I already knew it existed

in the religion in relation to the Prophet's wives, but I think it was the first time that I saw one that close up. When I saw the sister, I thought she was so beautiful. I even told her she was more beautiful with the seetar on than without; that did upset her [laughter]! In fact, it's Allah who made me love it. You see, sometimes you have something, like when I was a child I would see the Touaregs [a nomadic people inhabiting the Saharan region of North Africa who speak a Berber language] and I thought they were beautiful. I would say to my father that I wanted to marry a Touareg. In fact, I think I liked the hidden face. You know, today we live in a society where everything is based on the physical [appearance], but when you have a seetar nobody pays attention. If I meet you outdoors, and you are a sister, we will say Salam to each other and so on. We are going to talk to each other but I wouldn't know whether you are French or Chinese, but I'll talk to you. I'll talk to you whoever you are. I don't need to know what you look like. While today, if you observe society it's all just about that; it's your physical appearance, and you must fit the norms that they have created. It's almost as if we were under a dictatorship: everybody eats the same thing, everyone wears the same clothes, the same make up, everybody has blow-dried hair, and everybody is the same. And I think it's a uniform, and we are all the same.

*

A few interviewees also explicitly said that they considered the veil as a protection against lewd behaviour from men.

Safa, a 37-year-old convert who came from a middle-class background, told how, when she was younger and hadn't yet converted, she would be harassed by men, sometimes even by friends of her own boyfriend.

SAFA: [The niqab] represents the Sunna; it's a [form of] protection. It's not that I'm beautiful but some people radiate something, a certain charm and it's a real problem. People will say that we can defend ourselves. Yes, but I have defended myself and after a while you have enough. I no longer have this problem. But anyway, I also think it's linked to many factors and related to everyone's own personal story. My mother was very, very beautiful and she was often accosted in the street. I saw these things when I was a little girl and it was very embarrassing for me. I know that when I showed her the niqab, I told her, "Mum, you see, nobody is going to know whether I'm beautiful or ugly, black or white. They will see nothing." I think that gender separation is a solution to a huge number of problems. As I told you, I was frequently chatted up. It was happening everyday; it was that common! I also think

that with the niqab, one sees one's own true value and not through the eyes of others. Well, I'm talking about my experiences, but there are similar ones in all families.

*

Amina is a 46-year-old convert to Islam living in a small village.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you wear the seetar?

AMINA: There was a tabligh [Muslim preacher] who was living not very far from where I was and he asked me to marry him, saying that he had seen me and found me attractive. I realised that ultimately in the street the mukabala [encounter] was already done and that my face alone was enough for him to know that he was attracted to me. When I was attending the mosque, I would see the sisters who were veiled with just the hijab. I would realise that you only needed to see their faces to know whether they were good looking or not. So very quickly I understood that the face revealed everything since ultimately it's the face that shows your beauty, the expressions.

INTERVIEWER: Had you already heard about the niqab or did you know people who were wearing it?

AMINA: No, I didn't. I quickly felt the urge to veil my face and when I met some sisters I told them about it. One of them had one [with her] but wasn't wearing it, and offered it to me to try on if I wanted. I put it on and when I saw myself in the mirror I found it so beautiful that I kept it on. She gave it to me as a gift and I have never left it off since then.

*

Eliza was 15 when she was expelled from school.

ELIZA: I started wearing the niqab [when] I was about fifteen and a half. Oh, I think that it was partly, you know, [that I wasn't attending] school. I would have dressed more discreetly if I had been going to school. But since I wasn't attending I thought, why limit myself? In fact, what happened at the beginning was that I saw a woman in a niqab, and I had always been told you can't wear it in France. I held the same views as everyone else. But once I saw it, it intrigued me. I asked, "why is she wearing it when it's not an obligation, when it's not written in the Quran?" In the end, I wanted to try it, and when I did, I thought . . . well, it's not that impossible to wear it in France. And eventually I got caught up in the game. I didn't want to take it off. The discovery of adolescence with the discovery of the woman's body also played its

part. Overnight, getting chatted up in the street was very embarrassing. I was already wearing the hijab, so you say to yourself if that's not enough, we'll add more on. And it's true that [the attention] was something I didn't know about and wasn't prepared for, whether or not it was Arabs who would ask you in the streets to marry them. It was really something I was not prepared for and from that perspective as well I wanted to be left in peace.

*

One interviewee explained that one of the reasons she wore the niqab was because she was about to move to England where she knew she could easily wear it (in the end she was only there for a short duration). In her book, *Les Boucs émissaires de la République* (the Republic's Scapegoats), Sandrine Moulères, the French convert who made headlines when she was fined for driving with a niqab in April 2010, related that she started wearing the niqab in London where she had lived for one year with her family. She explained that the more tolerant atmosphere in London as well as her own research had led her to adopt it. Another convert interviewed for this report had lived in London for over a year and also found that wearing the niqab in the British capital was much easier than in France.

INTERVIEWER: So why did you decide to wear the niqab?

XENA: Because for me, at that point, I felt better with it. I felt like wearing it and it was an evolution in my religion, in my modesty. The fact that I had also taken the decision to go to England encouraged me. I told myself that it would be easier, that I would have less people staring at me. It's true that over there nobody was looking at me, while in France, even with a headscarf, everybody looks at you!

INTERVIEWER: You said to yourself that you were about to wear it in England so you started wearing it in France?

XENA: Yes exactly. In fact in France, if the mindset had been different I would have worn it immediately! But at the beginning, when you start wearing the headscarf, it's such a big change that you don't immediately think about the niqab. And it's true that in my surroundings there was nobody in particular who was wearing it. So later I decided to go to England which I thought would give me the opportunity to wear it [in France].

The Impact of the Veil Controversy

Bushra was not wearing the hijab before the controversy.

BUSHRA: It was the [niqab] controversy which put a flea in my ear. Once again, they tried to make it appear negative, through their own mouths, the mouths of disbelievers. I asked myself, “why?” It’s already unfair in relation to my community and my religion. I tried to understand what it represented, where it was really coming from. I read the Quran and I bought books. And afterwards I told myself, “I’m a Muslim, and if I’m a Muslim and one attacks a part of my religion, then as a Muslim I must be part of the struggle. I’m not killing anyone. The minimum that I can do as a Muslim woman is to wear the niqab, given that they are attacking this little bit of my religion.” Frankly, it was as if they had declared war on the Muslims. That’s how I perceived it. Already, for Eid [a three-day Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan] they don’t allow us to slaughter our sheep,³ they don’t let us go to school with our headscarf, they don’t let us do anything! They say freedom, equality, and fraternity! There is none of that. Now, in addition, they want to create a law against Shar’i law [the religious law of Islam]? It’s a declaration of war! And I was there. I looked at myself and said: “what? You claim you are a Muslim. I wear jeans. I wear my hair loose. In fact, I’m like them!” No I have no right. If I want to be a Muslim, I must fight for my sisters, for my brothers, for my ummah. That’s how I saw it. [That’s the] only thing they’ve achieved well! Thanks to their nonsense, I stopped mine [laughter].

*

Aisha, 19, started wearing the niqab in September 2010.

AISHA: I wore the niqab after the controversy. With all these problems that we saw, I started asking myself questions: the seetar, is it compulsory or not? So I started researching. I found diverging opinions among the scholars, although those who think that it’s compulsory are in a majority, and even the scholars who don’t think it’s compulsory say it’s preferable to put it on. The controversy spurred me on to ask myself why, what’s this problem? They [provoked] us over the issue; they encouraged us and quite frankly I even thank them. They encouraged us to find our khak [truth], to look for the khak on the issue and, alhamdulillah, we found it.

3. She is referring to the regular controversies around the killing of sheep, which arise in France nearly every year during the Eid celebrations.

*

Duniya, 29, started wearing the niqab in June 2010.

DUNIYA: And since the controversy started, it's true that I've asked myself many questions. I confided in my Lord.

*

Haifa 19, wore the niqab for the first time in March 2010.

HAIFA: As they often spoke about it on TV I started researching, because there were plenty of people who were saying that in reality it wasn't true, that it was [a form of] extremism, that it didn't exist in Islam. In the end, I found that "yes" it had a place in Islam.

*

Qubila, 20, wore the niqab in October 2010:

QUBILA: Since this controversy, I'm always watching the news. I love informing myself on all the nonsense which goes on in France. But, honestly, this controversy, alhamdulillah, opened my eyes to many things, and I'm not the only one to say that. Thanks to this controversy there has been a positive evolution with the number of conversions to Islam: people repenting, women wearing the niqab. Actually, this controversy led me to ask myself questions about the niqab. I can't even remember when it started [but when it did] I began my research again, becoming more interested [in it], and then liking it even more as I could see it more and hear about it. Therefore, it heavily contributed [to my decision]! It had its positive side, but it also had its negative side. It's a controversy which had no reason to happen!

What Does Wearing the Veil Mean to You?

AISHA: Firstly, it represents a very important Sunna [involving] the wives of the Prophet Mohammed. It represents modesty, there's a pride in putting it on, especially considering this controversy! I feel even more like wearing it. We are not going to let them mess with us, no way!

*

CAMILE: It represents piety; it's really a rapprochement with God. It's trying to attain perfection, [trying to have] as few faults as possible, studying something and understanding.

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DUNIYA: Ah it represents many things! In one word, or several [*laughter*]? For me it's love, it's hope, it's submission to God, it's fear and modesty.

*

BUSHRA: The niqab is a way of coming closer to Allah. It means that every day I carry my religion with me. Even though I have it in my heart, even if I have it in my head, even if I have it in my bag as I carry the Quran with me, I also carry it on my face, right up to my face because I'm looking for the face of Allah.

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PARVEEN: That's what really separates me from men. It's really what hides my physical [appearance]. When I'm outdoors, it's the cloth that protects me the most from glares. When I was wearing the jilbab, I could still feel that I was being looked at; that there were temptations, that there was fitna [division], and that even I myself was not so modest. [But] from the moment I wore the niqab, my whole behaviour changed and not only my clothing. And this too has enabled me to draw closer to Allah.

*

ROUKIA: Not a withdrawal, but like a separation, as if I was withdrawing a little from this life, but not in the sense of being ascetic. I'm not at that level yet, but I am in my world, I am in my bubble. I am open to the people. You come to my place and there is no problem, but outside I am in my bubble. It's between me and God; there is me and Allah. Only He knows that I am outside. It's as if I was withdrawing to please Allah.

*

UZMA: For us it's a way of saying that we are not a piece of meat on a stall, we are not a commodity. The use of a woman's image for commercial and pornographic gains is also unbearable to me, so by being veiled you take away this image. In the end, we are more a heart and spirituality than a piece of meat. It's also a way for me to feel rehabilitated as a woman. A woman is precious, really. Allah has enabled us to carry children; it's something magnificent. He didn't give man the possibility of

feeling life inside himself and I think we have devalued the woman hugely over the last decades. She no longer has any femininity, no maternity, nothing at all.

*

JAMEELAH: For me the niqab is like a protection against temptation. What happens nowadays is that there's a lot of gender mixing even in the metro. For me the face is a part of [one's] beauty and I prefer to hide this part as well.

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YASMINA: Subhan'Allah, for me it's belonging to my religion, to the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, a resemblance to the wives of the Prophet. It's an example to follow. I say to myself that as a sincere believer, even if you take the opinion that it's not an obligation, even if some things are not compulsory but advisable, you shouldn't say to yourself, "we aren't going to do them". On the contrary, when you really feel love and devotion for Allah, you really seek Allah's satisfaction. You are always going to try to do more. Alhamdulillah, Allah made it easy for me. He put love between me and the jilbab, and I'm attached to my seetar. Alhamdulillah, it was easy, it was not a constraint. I adapted quickly.

*

Opinions were divided on the issue of whether the full-face veil was, from an Islamic point of view, compulsory or not.

DUNIYA: I am of the opinion that the niqab is not compulsory, but I wear it. I wear it because I feel like it. It's a necessity for me, and I feel fulfilled in it.

*

KARIMA: I consider that religiously speaking, because there are several opinions, some which say it's compulsory and others that say it's not, [but] given the proof from each scholar, I think that for a woman it's not compulsory. But for me the best examples are the wives of the Prophet. I know they were dressed in this manner and I try to follow them, insha'Allah, in their clothes or in whatever they do. It's ultimately to follow the Sunna of the women of the Prophet.

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AISHA: I was more convinced by the opinion which argued that it was compulsory than by the opinion that said it wasn't. I had more explicit evidence that it was compulsory.

*

NABILA: I am of the opinion that it is an obligation just as I am of the opinion that it is a recommendation: an obligation because it was Allah who wrote it in His Book, but a recommendation because the Prophet said it in his sayings. But then just because a sister doesn't wear the seetar it doesn't mean that she is disobedient. Everyone takes the opinion that best suits him or her.

*

QUBILA: There are conflicting opinions about this. Some scholars say that it's an obligation; others say it's highly advisable but none say that it is not part of Islam. Therefore, whatever happens, it is part of Islam as the wives of the Prophet used to wear it. I studied the issue; I weighed the pros and cons. I didn't take the liberty to say it was compulsory, but I consider that it's highly advisable. The Prophet said, "There won't be anything more tempting than the women". So we are the greatest temptation for men.

*

SAFA: I consider it as an obligation, but by contrast my husband doesn't consider it as an obligation. It's a bit of a delicate [issue]. I listen to my husband telling me that I won't be punished if I take it off. Yes, I think that we won't be punished because before anything else Allah is merciful. If I was told to take off my hijab, then I would almost have the feeling of falling back to kufr [disbelief], while if I was removing the niqab, I would still be a Muslim who obeys Allah. Finally, I take it as an obligation but not to the same degree as something that is considered compulsory. It's therefore an obligation, in the sense that Allah has recommended us throughout the Quran to follow the Messenger and we know that his wives were wearing it, so we follow his wives. Allah has allowed me to wear it and [wearing] it allows me to do good deeds that I could not have done otherwise, even if I don't think that a woman in a niqab is necessarily more pious than the others. There are some Sunna that we can make and others that we can't.

Activities Before and After the Full-face Veil

AISHA: I see my friends, I see the sisters. We go out. When we have money, we shop; when we don't, we go window-shopping. We take the opportunity to speak about din [religion]. Sometimes we hang out together at someone's place and each of us brings some food. We make ourselves pretty. We have a normal life just like everyone else.

*

NABILA: No, I carry on going to the sea with my girl friends. [Previously] I'd go shopping with my friends; I'd go the hairdresser and have some blond highlights, a haircut and blow-dry. I'd go to the cinema. This hasn't changed: it's my clothing which has changed, my religion which has changed, my heart which has changed, but with my friends I have stayed the same. And I carry on my activities as usual.

INTERVIEWER: You go swimming in the sea?

NABILA: Oh yes, of course. I'm not just going there to sit down, otherwise it's pointless.

INTERVIEWER: With the seetar?

NABILA: Yes, with the seetar, of course. Alhamdulillah, in Marseille we are not short of empty beaches. We go there with friends and we swim in swimsuits or dresses.

*

FARAH: In fact, it has changed in the sense that sometimes I just don't want to go out because I'm fed up with being insulted. But I carry on doing my shopping. I still go out to eat, but no longer at the same places.

*

KARIMA: I particularly miss going out, the possibility of going out without having to worry. Now you have to think twice before going out and I've really withdrawn into myself a lot because when you go out people are really very, very nasty, especially nowadays. Before, it was kind of OK. You had some stares, sometimes people took liberties and said certain things, but not as much as nowadays, especially since it's been in the media.

INTERVIEWER: Are there places where you're afraid to go?

KARIMA: Shopping centres. It's a long time since I've been to one.

INTERVIEWER: So wearing the niqab is stopping you from going out?

KARIMA: It's really because I'm scared of being assaulted. Nowadays people take liberties and do anything. And now when I go out, everything has to be carefully planned. Even going shopping with my husband. We do it when we know there won't be many people around.

*

BUSHRA: I was making music and I was a singer. I was doing rap, hip-hop, soul, groove, and so on. I rapped for about 10 years. I signed with a label, I cut an album. It was really my job. I took some singing classes. I was a professional. I was an *intermittente du spectacle*.⁴ I rapped with famous rappers [*laughter*].

INTERVIEWER: And you no longer rap these days? What about music?

BUSHRA: No, no. I no longer listen to music; I feel much better.

*

PARVEEN: I don't go out as often as before; I try to go out as seldom as possible. Whereas before, wearing a jilbab or a hijab, I didn't mind at all. It's true that previously I used to take liberties and speak with brothers outside, or when I had a question would ask a male passerby. Nowadays I don't do this anymore. It has nothing to do with the controversy; it's religious. I don't do it because I'm scared, or anything like that. I think the most appropriate behaviour for a Muslim woman is first and foremost, modesty. That's why I started wearing the niqab. I wanted to improve my behaviour so I ended all these things.

*

Duniya, 29 and a mother of three, lives in Paris.

DUNIYA: Quite the opposite. [I go out more often] because I feel more radiant, I feel more open. We had planned to create an organisation to help people with all the bureaucracy, with their job seeking or house hunting, with writing letters, and that's what I continue to do. I help people. I'm helping out at a grassroots level with some sisters and both Muslims and non-Muslims.

*

Omera is, a 31-year-old mother of four from the South of France.

OMERA: Before [I began] wearing the hijab I was not at all engaged, but now with the niqab I've become much more involved in society [particularly] at a local level. As regards to my social activities, I'm a volunteer in an association which provides

4. Intermittent(e) du spectacle is a specific status for artists in France which, when they are in-between freelance jobs in the creative industries such as music, theatre, cinema, and television, entitles them to state funding in acknowledgment of the precarious nature of these industries.

housing advice. I also interpret for North African mothers who can't speak French. I help them fill out forms, paperwork. I speak on their behalf, on the phone.

Educational Experiences

Interviewees talked about their experiences in education and employment since wearing the hijab, jilbab and niqab.

Haifa, 19, from Paris, said that after obtaining her vocational diploma, she wanted to take her baccalauréat but, having started wearing the hijab, she knew it would be “impossible to continue her studies with the hijab”.

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NABILA: That's also the reason why I left school: the hijab. I wore it in June 2008, then I went back to school during the first semester and I felt ill. I had anaemia and so I was hospitalized. At first when I was going to school, I went with my hijab, my jeans, and my tunic. I would, of course, take off my hijab at the gates, but sometimes when I didn't have classes I wore the jilbab and during my length of hospitalization I was always wearing the jilbab. When I went back to school, it broke me, I couldn't [carry on as before]; I was feeling too great in my jilbab, so I stopped school.

*

Eliza said that as a result of wearing the hijab at the age of 14 she was (unlawfully) expelled from school in 1994⁵ and had to study by correspondence until successfully taking her baccalauréat a few years later. The entire experience of studying in isolation, missing friends as well as teachers to explain things, was so alienating that by the end she didn't want to continue her studies.

ELIZA: I took my baccalauréat in a niqab.

INTERVIEWER: But what did you do for the oral examinations?

ELIZA: Well, the oral examinations, that was funny! For English, I had a woman at one of the four most prestigious colleges in Paris. I'm someone who makes sure that the niqab is not an inhibition. It's my concern, and for me it's not a barrier. I just

5. The law banning religious symbols at school was voted through parliament some 10 years later, in March 2004.

behave accordingly. So when I arrived, she looked at me and said, "how am I going to know whether it's you?" So I said, "it's not an issue. Wait, first I'll show you my ID otherwise it's pointless." Then I told her, "we are just going to go behind the door and I'll show you my face." I revealed [myself] and she said, "fine."

INTERVIEWER: So she accepted?

ELIZA: Yes, and then I sat in front of her. I hid myself from the rest of the students. So I had [my face] unveiled to pass my oral examination. And it went well. You see, when the problem is not under the media spotlight, it's easy to settle.

Eliza went on to pass the different subjects for her baccalauréat at different Parisian schools, and everywhere she encountered the same pragmatic attitude. After spending a couple of days at another college, she was called by the school director.

ELIZA: And when I went to see her, she said, "you gave us a little trouble, some small concerns. It's the first time, so we called the inspector of the academy, who informed us that we only needed . . ." and listen carefully to what they said ". . . we only needed to check your identity at the beginning of each examination. So we'll make sure that it's [done by] a lady and we'll make sure that for the oral examination in French it's a lady." So that tells you; when the problems over the niqab are not under the spotlight they can resolve themselves easily. At another school, I was told, "you should have told us as soon as you registered as in some special cases we can set aside isolated rooms." I'm not even asking for that much!

*

Farah, 19, from Paris, decided to wear a jilbab in her final year of A Levels. Even though she respected the ban by removing her hijab in front of the school gates each morning, she was always summoned by the school authorities.

FARAH: They asked if I had been forced to wear it, given that previously I was supposedly the trendiest girl in the school. Each time, there were several teachers who came to ask me why I was wearing this [long dress], that it was strange. I could see that they were giving me dirty looks and pointing their fingers at me. I was respecting [the law] but the problem was that they were never happy, and each time they were going further and further. They were telling me I was dressing like an Arab. One could clearly see that there was hate in them, that they were really unhappy. After a while I left. I gave up. I could no longer stay. It's impossible to bear constant criticism.

Aisha, 19, works for a telemarketing company while wearing her niqab.

AISHA: I warned them over the phone. They told me it was not an issue. And to tell you the truth, on the day of the recruiting, out of about ten people, we were the only two to be selected. You see, some people are not stupid.

*

Wafa, 23, also works in a telemarketing company in Paris.

WAFSA: It's going well. I work with tolerant teammates who value my work. They don't stop at the cloth I'm wearing; on the contrary it has disappeared. They have learnt to discover me. It's not a hindrance communicating with people.

INTERVIEWER: You've never had any problems at work?

WAFSA: No.

INTERVIEWER: It's impressive!

WAFSA: Frankly, it is. I was surprised and even when the controversy really started, their reaction surprised me. They were saying it was nonsense! In fact, they had a concrete example [before their eyes] and beyond the cloth they learnt to see the person, to see that there was no difference. I had abilities like them; I could express myself well; I was not somebody who was reclusive, submissive, who could not laugh or think for herself.

*

Xena, 26, worked before becoming a mother.

XENA: In fact, it's true that [the job prospects] are quite limited [for us]. Often it's a telemarketing company, where it's hard to recruit and to keep people because the work is tough. So there they open their doors more easily to the veiled sisters because since they struggle to find a job, they are more serious and in general they don't leave at short notice.

*

PARVEEN: I really don't have my place outside, whether it is in a Muslim country or in France. I believe the place for the Muslim woman is in the home, I think that it is inside her home that she will blossom.

Identification for Security Reasons

YASMINA: When you hear them and their so-called reasons; when they say that it's for security measures that faces need to be unveiled, well until now they have never caught a woman with a full-face veil committing [a crime], not even a theft! With a few rare exceptions, the great majority of girls I know, when there is an ID check at a bank or at school, will lift their veil without any problem. If I'm going to pick up my daughter at school I know that it's appropriate that they have to check the identity of the person who comes and picks up the child, and I do it without any problem. But, to adopt the law, they've relied on people who are ignorant of the Muslim religion, who have said that the full-face veil bears no relation to Islam and that it was merely a custom. And if they were really seeking the truth, they wouldn't dig up some obscure Imam, [they would] go to the source! Go and find some scholarly people!

*

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been asked to identify yourself when you were wearing the niqab?

FAMA: No, I never had this problem because I knew I had to do it. So I will automatically raise it without being asked, to avoid any confrontation. I'm not like some sisters who demand to be seen by a woman. If I have a man in front of me who is doing his job, [since] it is normal, I would let him identify me.

2. Influences and/or Coercion

Role of Mosques and Muslim Organisations

AISHA: Oh no, I don't follow any sheikh. I follow the Prophet because, you see, scholars are not infallible. I am against sectarianism, and I am against an allegiance to scholars. I attach myself to none of them. It's true they have knowledge. You take what is good from them and what is not good you don't take.

*

INTERVIEWER: Have you been influenced by Imams or have there been any authors who have influenced you?

CAMILE: No, not necessarily. Not necessarily, because sometimes they all say the same things. Sometimes they contradict themselves; they disagree. The Imams are not on the same lines. We are Muslims, alhamdulillah, but no mistake, in Islam there are many sects. I listen, yes, but I am not necessarily influenced. It's true that when I go [to the mosque] I listen to what people say. Then I select what I want [from what I hear].

*

BUSHRA: Yes, it's the reading because I would often go to the mosque and I rarely agreed with the sermons so I decided to boycott the mosque. They do what they want, don't they? I realised that I had my own reasoning, without vanity or anything like that. I had my reasoning, which was innate, inside me, which was echoed in the books that I was reading!

*

A few interviewees told us that they had actually started researching and reading about the full-face veil only after adopting it.

ELIZA: What it brought home to me was that you can go out in the street, someone can stare at you as much as they want, but nobody knows whether you are cute or not. In certain circumstances this can be worth all the gold in the world. The process of knowing, of discovering people who were wearing it, and discovering scholars who were advocating the niqab happened after I started wearing it. It was more to reinforce the fact that I was doing it.

*

IFFAT: The niqab is, as I told you before when I was seeing many brothers, [a feeling]. I needed to cover myself, even my face. And I told myself, "I'm going to wear the niqab". And once I had worn the niqab I did some research and, subhan'Allah, the wives of the Prophet were wearing it. I knew it was religious but I had never read the evidence.

*

Some respondents said that it was mainly the reading of the Quran and the Sunna which had encouraged them to wear the veil.

OMERA: No, it's not the mosques. What really influenced me, it's true, are some of the readings on the Prophet's wives, their behaviour, and also very much the hadith sahih [truthful]. But in the first place, I was at a stage where I was searching for something. Despite [wearing] the hijab, for me there was a need for something more. It's true that it was while reading about the wives of the Prophet, their behaviour, on the ahadith. So, I absorbed myself in [the writings], but it wasn't through the mosques.

*

INTERVIEWER: Have there been any specific books that have influenced you in particular?

TALIBAH: No, I don't follow such and such an author. I'm open to all authors as long as his or her sources are based on the Quran or the Sunna and as long as the ahadith are authenticated by trustworthy sources.

*

Some interviewees mentioned the names of classical Islamic scholars.

PARVEEN: [For the] most trustworthy scholars: I try and take as much time as possible to choose my scholars, because the more we advance through time the more the people go astray. That's why I try to search as widely as possible [to find my sources]. So there is Ibn Taymia and amongst the contemporary ones, there is Ibn Baz, Al-Albani, and Fawzan.

*

INTERVIEWER: Have there been any Imams or books that influenced your decision?

QUBILA: The first week that I put on the jelibab I immersed myself in books. I read quite a few books.

INTERVIEWER: Which ones, and how did you choose them?

QUBILA: I was choosing them in a random fashion. I picked the books with titles which I found attractive, such as *The Veil of the Muslim Woman*.

Responses from Families

AISHA: [At first] I was wearing it secretly. My parents didn't know. Then I started having problems. The neighbours who saw me would report back to my mother. [My

family would tell me]: “it’s only a stage; it’s a phase which you’ll grow out of”, “you’re not normal”, “you’ve got psychological problems”, and “you’re unstable”. You see, honestly, you hear a bit of everything. And it’s even more hurtful coming from your close relatives and your family.

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BUSHRA: “Are you mad or what? You’re going to become a terrorist!”... While it has nothing to do with terrorism; it’s really about modesty. From the start they were saying that I had joined a sect while I had never been influenced by anyone. It was really a personal choice. My parents were opposed to it which partly [reflected] a certain amount of ignorance as well as submission to the country. They say to themselves, “we are in the Republic; it’s not our country” and so on. But I am in my country! Maybe my parents are from another country but I’m in my country. In the beginning, I also had conflicts with my female cousins who were against the burqa.

*

ELIZA: I wore it secretly for two years. Oh yes, it was particularly my father. As long as he didn’t catch me with it, it was OK. If he caught me, I think he would have cut my head off! One of my brothers knew about it, and I always made sure that I would go with him when I went out. My other brother knew as well, but for him it was another matter. He was the little favourite, the little snitch! Each time he would catch me with it on, I always had 5, 10 or 20 francs. “Take it! You go home, you haven’t seen anything.”

Eliza provides one explanation for her father’s opposition to her veil, which relates to the Muslim umbrella group (the UOIF or *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France*) which is often portrayed in France as a religiously conservative organisation.

ELIZA: My father had frequent contact with the UOIF. He was very close to these people, and these people have always been very embarrassed by the practice of the niqab. For him, it wasn’t easy being in their presence, knowing that his daughter was wearing the niqab. The hijab was not an issue but the niqab was more difficult. If he had caught me [with the niqab on], I would have been done. But even when I was wearing the jilbab, the long headscarf, [he didn’t like it]. On top of everything else, my father is a designer by profession; he would take the headscarves and slash them with his scissors. So we played cat and mouse for a long time! And finally, it was me who wore him down and not the opposite. And I can tell you today that the feeling of fear of my father that I had at the time was greater than my fear of the law.

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QUBILA: I wore it secretly because my parents are against it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you already know that your parents were against it?

QUBILA: Oh yes, yes. Because even with just the jilbab I had to struggle at home for them to accept it. I probably didn't receive the support I would have liked [but] they accepted it anyway. They are more into traditions than into true [Islam]. For the niqab, I had asked the question indirectly of my mother and sister, since my father doesn't really pay attention, he doesn't care. But with my mother and sister it was absolutely negative. For them, it's radicalism, extremism, it doesn't belong to Islam. And so to not create a fitna at home and make any fuss [I chose to wear it secretly].

INTERVIEWER: You put feelers out?

QUBILA: Yes, two or three times to see whether they had changed their minds in the meantime, but they hadn't. So I wore it secretly, alhamdulillah. I enjoyed it for one and a half months but the truth will always out. My mother learned about it and voilà. So [the ultimatum] was either I take it off and stay at home, or keep it on and take my suitcases. It was either my family or my seetar. So I made a choice, to my deep regret, and handed my seetar to my mother. I told myself that, I have to accept it. I won't wear it, but, insha'Allah, as soon as I get married, I'll do what I want. [They were telling me] that I was an Islamist, a Salafist, a radical, that I was following a practice which was bad, that I was not following a good [branch of] Islam.

*

PARVEEN: My mother said that I was crazy, that it was nonsense and that it had no place in religion. My father said more or less the same thing, that it was only the extremists who were doing this. Basically I had made a promise to God that I would never leave the house with my face unveiled. But [one particular day] I was not expecting to go out and my mother woke me up. She was panicking and told me: "Quick, you must go and pick up your little sister from school, there's nobody to pick her up." I [was hesitating], because personally I had already prepared myself, [but] I had [also] told myself that I first needed to talk it over with my parents. So on that day, I was wondering whether I could wear it. I hadn't told them and they were about to be shocked. But, as I had promised God, I had to keep it, and so I left with it on. My mother started laughing: "you aren't serious! You are not going out dressed like that!" My sister was the same, but it was really my father that I feared. Because with my father, in general, if he doesn't agree with something, there is no way you can impose your [viewpoint]. When I left, it felt like I was carrying a bomb on me. Everyone was

looking at me. There were even workers who stopped working to watch me. Some little kids [were saying], “look, mum, there is a monster! There is a wolf!” But I was in my world. I was thinking of God and I was saying: “whoever fears Allah, so Allah will grant him a favourable life!” So I was in that state of mind. I was quite calm, [although] I was a little anxious in relation to my father, but otherwise I was calm. When I got back home, alhamdulillah, my father was not too hard on me. He said he was against it, that for him it was the extremists who were behaving like that, but that he would let me do [as I wanted]; he would let me choose. So from that day on . . . well, I was mocked by my family, but, alhamdulillah, they let me do as I wanted.

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FARAH: My father told me that he wanted to tear my clothes. My mother was asking me to take it off but without saying nasty things.

*

Haifa, who lives with her mother, said that the latter didn't even accept her wearing the hijab.

HAIFA: Actually she took [the hijab] very badly. She was telling me that I didn't need the hijab, that I could do the prayer without wearing the hijab, that it was not compulsory, that I was still young, that I was about to throw away my life. I told her: “Mum, if I wear the niqab, what are you going to do?” She told me, “I'm going to disown you” and things like that. So I didn't tell her. She only learned about it later. In the beginning I was wearing it secretly [from] all my family as well. I was wearing it all the time. Maybe there were two or three occasions when I didn't wear it, because my mother would ask me to go out with her. But later on, subhan'Allah, as my mother was ashamed to go out with me wearing the jelbab, every time we had to go out together it was cancelled, alhamdulillah. So ultimately I was wearing it all the time.

Haifa explained that her mother eventually kicked her out of the house because she was unable to accept her daughter wearing the jelbab and her unemployed status. However, her mother soon changed her mind and three days after being thrown out, Haifa returned home.

HAIFA: When I returned home she was so happy to see me that she didn't say anything [about the niqab]. So, alhamdulillah, it made it easier. Alhamdulillah, I wanted to tell her for [some time] but this made it easier.

INTERVIEWER: What about the rest of your family?

HAIFA: They call me a Salafist, a fundamentalist. They don't understand my choice and they try to turn my mother against me.

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LATIFAH: And my parents didn't react well, especially my mother. For her it was too much of a radical change. It was hard for her: she thought I was going from one extreme to the other. For her I had joined something [a sect or a group]. Honestly, she became frightened.

*

IFFAT: In relation to my father, up until today I still wear it secretly [from him]. In fact, he has already seen me with it, and he was not at all happy. My mother, alhamdulillah, used to strongly disagree with it. She thought it was excessive but nowadays she accepts it, alhamdulillah, because I explained to her the reasons why I was wearing it.

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As with the husbands, some parents were not necessarily opposed to the full-face veil but mainly feared that their children would be verbally and physically harmed in public whilst wearing the veil.

YASMINA: But otherwise in my family nobody wears the hijab. They were not even praying. Alhamdulillah, they are now starting to realise a little the importance of prayer. At first my parents didn't react badly because they thought that this would be short-lived. They were telling themselves that I was in the midst of self-discovery, following fashions, and that it would not last. But the years have passed. It's not that my mother doesn't accept it, [but] she hates going out with me in the streets. It's not me who disturbs her but it's people's glares, because my mother is someone who can't keep it to herself. If she sees a person who is verbally abusing me or who makes a comment, she is going to respond. Nowadays she is even more worried. She tells herself that, "I'm alone with my daughter" [and] that I should take it off, that I'm going to be assaulted, and that it's dangerous. My father was happy [because previously] I was somebody who was doing a lot of silly things. I was a very head-strong character and I used to do as I pleased. When I wanted to go out, I would go out. I was not someone who was a stay-at-home, I would go out with my friends. So for him it was a radical change. He liked the fact that I had become wiser, that I was getting involved in my faith. But otherwise he thinks the niqab is over the top. [Initially, my parents] thought that [the niqab] was completely alien to religion.

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JAMEELAH: My mother was very scared when I was going out after a certain hour. She didn't want me to go out because she was scared. But it was only out of fear, otherwise it didn't disturb her.

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Only one interviewee said that she had been supported in her choice by both her parents.

TALIBAH: My parents took it very well, alhamdulillah. Considering that I had studied law, they were [just] a little negative about the fact that [I would never] find work. They actually would have liked me to work a bit. So I wore the niqab, it was really a personal choice. It wasn't imposed on me and my parents took it very, very well—and the same for my friends. The friends that I met at university took it very well, and actually I have a white French Muslim friend who doesn't wear the hijab at all but she accepted it very easily. She is very tolerant. For her everyone is free to practice his religion as he wishes. The problem was with my aunties and uncles who asked me why I did it, and said that Islam was not preaching this, that I was practising a too radical strand of Islam, that I was depriving myself of many things, that I couldn't live my religion in this way in this country. So I received some comments, which at times were hurtful, but apart from that, they had no other choice than to put up with it. So, excuse my French, but I don't really give a damn, as long as my parents are supporting me.

The Role of the Husband

LATIFAH: Their line of defence is: “we protect submissive women”, but do I look like a submissive women? I'm submissive to Allah. It is I who has decided to wear it. It's not my husband who submitted me to it, but you; you [are] submit[ting] me. You are forcing me to take it off. Who is oppressing me, my husband or you? This is oppression!

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Maha is the only woman in the sample who has been encouraged by her husband to wear the niqab. She started wearing the headscarf when she married.

MAHA: He was practising. So I wanted to know more, to get into it. And then, that's when I discovered religion. I realised that it was important, that it [the hijab] was an obligation for us and therefore I wore it. It was automatic.

Two years later, she started wearing the jelbab and another two years later the niqab.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you adopt the niqab?

MAHA: You know that there is a difference [between scholars]. For my husband it's an obligation, but he never forced me to wear it. He has always been very patient with me. But through time, in fact, it became automatic to wear it. And anyway when one speaks about the wives of the Prophet, they are covered from head to toe, and for me if the wives of the Prophet wore it, we also have to wear it.

INTERVIEWER: Did your husband influence you in any way?

MAHA: No, he has always been advocating it. It's true that it was he who showed me that it was an obligation, but he never told me that I had to wear it.

*

In all of the other respondents' testimonies, the husband exerted no influence in the woman's decision to wear the full face veil.

OMERA: When I bought my niqab, [my husband] didn't know about it. One morning I wanted to do my shopping and I decided to wear it. He was really surprised. He didn't have much choice because he knew that the niqab had been worn by certain wives of the Prophet, so he asked me: "are you going to go out like this?" I told him, yes. He thought that I was about to carry on [with my studies], to maybe get a job, and so following a path other than the spiritual path. He was surprised because he was not expecting that his wife would wear the niqab. We had never spoken about it. So he was amazed, surprised, but he accepted it.

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INTERVIEWER: So why did you wear the niqab?

SAFA: I really felt a call from God. One day my husband didn't have his [nationality] papers and he had been served several deportation orders. Even after the birth of my son he received a deportation order and I started getting very frightened. I therefore did my udu [ablution] correctly, I did the salat [prayer] correctly, I prostrated myself for a long time before God, and I said: "if you want me to wear the niqab, then give my husband his papers immediately."

INTERVIEWER: You made a deal with God?

SAFA: Yes. And less than a week afterwards they called us. He went [to his appointment]: he received his papers, we crossed the road, and we went directly to the nationality [office]. In the end, he received [French] nationality. So I said to my husband: "I've made an agreement with Allah. I must wear the niqab". He didn't agree, and I was really annoyed so I made duas (supplication to Allah) asking Allah to change the heart of my husband because I didn't want to do it without his consent. For us it's easy to live hidden [behind the veil] but with him he has to face all the stares that fall on his face. It's not easy to walk side by side with us. I didn't want to impose it on him so I waited until he was ready. Then finally he said ok.

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A couple of respondents even reported that they refused to marry men who didn't agree with their decision to wear the full-face veil.

ZARA: I met someone to whom I was about to get married but he couldn't bear all of that, and so through self-delusion I ended up only wearing a hijab with tunics until the day when I couldn't cope with it anymore. I told him that he would either have to take me with the full-face veil or he couldn't take me at all. He refused and that's why the marriage didn't happen. Since then I've kept the full-face veil on.

INTERVIEWER: You refused to marry a man because he didn't want you to wear the niqab? Was he a practising Muslim?

ZARA: Well, he was an Arab, we'll stop at Arab. He was praying but very negligibly. I don't know why I behaved in such a silly manner [by accepting to only wear the hijab], but in the end we were only a week away from the wedding. His parents were about to come over from Algeria for us to get engaged, Islamically. I did istikhara [the prayer of consultation]. I had a strong urge to wear the full-face veil again. So I called him and I told him clearly that I wanted to wear the full-face veil, and he replied: "if you put it back on, then forget about us". Then I said to myself, OK. Well, I'll forget about us. Why am I going to get married to a man who refuses to let me get closer to Allah and who doesn't like Him? Because if he liked Him he would accept that I submit entirely, and it's better to have a fully veiled wife rather than a wife who everyone can look at.

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A couple of interviewees also revealed that their husbands would have preferred them not to wear the full-face veil. This was not because they were against the full-face veil, but because they were fearful for the safety of their wives.

ROUKIA: Yes, my husband would have rather preferred if I had taken it off, as long as we [remained] France.

INTERVIEWER: Because he is scared for you?

ROUKIA: Yes. That's why he doesn't want me to commute on public transport alone, or do the shopping. Especially because he is a bus driver, so he sees how people behave towards sisters.

*

DUNIYA: My husband wasn't present at the time I wore it. I kept him informed of my decision to start wearing the niqab. It was on the phone while he was travelling. Now that he has come back and seen the law, which has been adopted but not implemented yet, he is somewhat reluctant. In fact, he is scared. It's not that he doesn't want me to wear it. He wants me to wear it, but given the circumstances and the possible consequences that this could engender, he feels it would be preferable if I were not to wear it.

*

LATIFAH: My husband was a bit scared. He told me to think carefully before [wearing it]. [He asked me] whether I would really be able to handle wearing it in France. My husband agreed to the idea. For him it was very good, but he was scared I would not be able to bear it. And he met brothers who had told him to be careful because many sisters hadn't been able to bear the weight of it.

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INTERVIEWER: And your husband?

VIVI: Well, mine doesn't care [*laughter*]. As he didn't encourage me at all to convert, I do as I please. And there are things you have to do for Allah, otherwise it's pointless.

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A few interviewees, in the face of their parents' disapproval, took the opportunity of getting married to be able to wear their niqab.

KARIMA: My parents, notably, were completely opposed. They didn't want this, and up to now they still don't want this. They asked me to take it off. But not in the sense that they don't like it; it's more that they are scared for me. It's mainly for this reason, because people, one must tell it like it is, are not very kind. Before getting married, I wore it and my father said, "you take it off, it's out of the question." So the day I got married, it was the first thing I put on. The first time I wore it for good I remember I wanted to go to the mosque. I was with my husband and I had just gotten married. And for me, it was impossible to go to the mosque without the niqab and I didn't know what to do in relation to my parents who didn't agree with it at all. I was scared that my father would shout at me because I had put it back on. So I went to see my mother and I explained to her, "listen now. I have decided I will no longer take it off" and "that's it, I'm married now", because apparently in our culture when we are married we can do as we please [*laughter*]. Then she replied, "you do what you want".

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Uzma had the same experience as **Karima**. Her mother didn't support her wearing either the hijab or the niqab, but the respondent used the opportunity of her marriage to wear it.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start wearing the niqab?

UZMA: End of 2008, in December.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you decide to wear it?

UZMA: I've always said to myself that once I'd get married I would wear it. The fact that the wives of the Prophet wore it demonstrates that it's something which is part of Islam.

INTERVIEWER: Did your husband know that you were about to wear it?

UZMA: Yes, he did.

INTERVIEWER: How did he react?

UZMA: It suited him because for him it was something compulsory.

INTERVIEWER: And how did your parents react?

UZMA: I'm still⁶ in conflict with my parents in relation to religion. I don't know their viewpoint [on the niqab] but I doubt that my mother appreciates it.

6. Uzma had already been in conflict with her mother a few years earlier when she decided to wear the hijab.

INTERVIEWER: So you don't speak to your parents?

UZMA: Not to my mother.

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And finally one interviewee had to remove the niqab when she got married to a convert.

JAMEELAH: I was about to go and live with my in laws and they are not Muslims and for them the niqab was a bit too much. They were not against it but—it's true I admit it—it's hard to accept. You can't impose it on someone. And also the law was coming into force. And there was the fact that I had also married. Sometimes I would walk with my brothers in the street and they wanted to fight with everyone.⁷ So I told myself my husband might also want to fight with everybody. So in fact it was a whole set of things. If it had been just for my husband, I don't think I would have had the strength to take it off. In fact, one doesn't realise, but for the people around us, it's very hard for them. If, for example, I go out with my mother-in-law, she is possibly not going to tolerate everyone is looking at us. Some people can't stand it. Some people are ashamed to be with you because you're wearing the niqab. So I told myself that for the time being [I won't wear it]. But I still miss it. If I could wear it again, I think I would have done it, because for me it was part of my dress.

Response from the Public

INTERVIEWER: What has changed the most for you since you started wearing the niqab?

XENA: The gratuitous maliciousness and insolence of the people. That's what [the niqab] has revealed the most to me.

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JAMEELAH: The first day I felt joy but also fear, because it was the first time that I saw people reacting in this way. It's true that [I had] already [experienced it] to some degree with the jilbab and the headscarf. But what I really felt in people's eyes was that I was a monster. Deep down, yes, there was a joy, a feeling of well-being. But

7. Her brothers wanted to fight with the people who were giving their sister dirty looks or making nasty remarks.

at the same time I didn't think that people could react in this way. That's what I felt at that moment, maybe fear but, first and foremost, astonishment as well as shock.

Verbal Abuse: A common Experience

FARAH: Once there was a woman who said very loudly to her husband, "I don't know what the hell these ones are doing here", as if we had no right to dress ourselves... We get insulted on the train, in the street. Cars sometimes hoot us and people make the sign of the cross?! They call us Darth Vader, ghosts, bitches, sluts. One day there was a woman talking to an African guy who was near her and she was laughing at us. He was looking at her but he was not replying to her. And later she insulted us, telling us we were bitches and that our husbands were shoving our veils up our arses. On another day I was at the bus stop and a woman called us bitches and [she said] that her mother had fought for women, for equality, and blah blah blah . . . and that some women who wore the burqa, the niqab were suffering. We are regularly insulted. Sometimes when we do our shopping at Carrefour or Auchan [large supermarkets], we are brazenly followed around by people. Everywhere we go, there are plenty of people who turn around and insult us. Sometimes it's a pain, because you just want to have a peaceful day, wandering around. But now you can no longer do that. We can't react to their insults, yet morally it's still burdensome. It's like when some people say that they suffer from obesity and then other people call them fat. Now I know how they feel.

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IFFAT: Not long ago, subhan'Allah, I was going to Nanterre-ville station. A man and a woman were sitting [on a bench]. There was a space between them and there was also a black guy as well. So I sat down. And the man was talking to his wife, and as soon as he saw me sitting, he started shouting: "no, I don't live with people like that!" He stood up, he took his wife, and he left. And while I was sitting I felt very dirty, frankly a waste. The black guy who was sitting nearby asked, "what did he say?" I replied, "no, no it's OK, he didn't say anything."

Iffat explained that the man went to confront the man who made the first comment.

IFFAT: Then [the man who defended her] came back and told me not to pay any attention, and he boarded the train with me. But it upset me. It really did affect me, subhan'Allah. I even cried, while usually I don't care. [. . .]Subhan'Allah, [the man

who defended her] had some hash in his hand, which just goes to show you that it doesn't mean anything. How many times have I found myself [sitting] near brothers, near sisters, when I've been insulted and they've said nothing? You see I'm not asking them to beat someone, I'm just asking them to defuse the situation or to say, "hush, it's ok" just so that you feel you're not alone. When you get insulted at a station, everybody is looking at you. You have the impression that everyone shares the same opinion."

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HABIBA: Once in Carrefour, I was walking in the shop with another sister and suddenly [what felt] like a small stone, a little object, whizzed past me. I thought it was something which had fallen from a [shelf] or something like that so I really didn't pay attention. But just a little bit later I got hit by a ball. Someone had thrown a ball at me. Sometimes I also get hit by trolleys in shops. It happened that someone rammed me with a trolley. Once a [white] man [said] he wanted to teach me about life. He thought I was a poor woman and he wanted to demonstrate [what] sexuality [was]. Starkhfir'Allah [God forgives], so he asked me not to conceal myself and he would teach me the pleasures of life. We often get these types.

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CAMILE: I've heard all kinds of things! Some people say: "oh a ghost!" I reply: "really, because you have already seen ghosts? Ghosts like me, who speak, who have a woman's voice! No way, you are too smart!" Voilà! Then you have people who are very nasty. Once a man—I remember it well—looked at me and said: "terrorist!"

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FARAH: Sometimes even the police hoot at us, one can see that they are picking on us. They pass by, they clap at us. They hoot, they laugh, they provoke [us].

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HAIFA: There was a man once who rose from his chair. I was passing by a café with my friend, coming back from the mosque. He stood up from his table. He wanted to beat me, he wanted me to come and fight him. He was a white man who must have been 40. He told me I was a woman who had regressed, but it was he who had primitive instincts. It wasn't me.

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KARIMA: You have some people who sigh loudly [saying], "we are in France here!" and "oh, a fine!" Before, I was letting them, but now it's out of the question. Honestly,

I don't let people mess with me. It's true that it happens every day, as soon as I leave the house. Now, unfortunately, I can't always go out. But the few times when I do go out it happens. They tell us that we are submissive to our husband and all of that, but I say to myself that if we are really oppressed women then it's sadness that you should have for us. But in the end it's pure rage that they have for us. It's spite, while they should pity us if they think we are being beaten!

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Some interviewees related stories where individuals had refused to serve them in shops.

ROUKIA: I was Porte de la Villette [in Paris]. I had to buy some medicine as I was not feeling well. My husband was in the car while I went in the pharmacy. There was a little old man there. I said: "Good morning". He replied, "can you turn around so that I can see your face?" I don't know whether it was a joke but he was very happy, very proud of himself [*laughter*]! I responded, "but, sir, I can't turn around, my face is in front of you." I was rolling on the floor laughing; he might have thought I was laughing at him. He told me, "yes, what do you want?" I said, "since you are a pharmacist . . ." He [interrupted], "no! You get out of my pharmacy! The last time someone like you came in, I was burgled! Get out! You think you are in your own country! You are not in your own country!" And many other nasty things like that followed. And since I couldn't insult him back—it would have been pointless me wearing this dress—I cried! He didn't hear it, but under my seetar tears were pouring down. I left and got back into the car. My husband noticed that I was not talking. He looked at me and realised I was crying so he asked me what happened and I explained. Then he left, went to the pharmacist, and said "sir, you are lucky to be old because I can assure you I would have burnt down the entire pharmacy!" Then my husband told me—my husband doesn't really understand my choice to wear it—"why don't you remove it, it's hard. People are nasty to you". I told him that I preferred to stay like this. So that was the hardest thing for me because it meant that I was being refused any treatment! It was serious! I was really ill, and I told myself that he would have let me die! I was shocked.

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BUSHRA: It was in the morning and I was going to buy a drink at the bakery. I was wearing the seetar, and I asked her for a soda. She said, "I'm sorry, I can't serve you". I told her: "honestly mum, you're being ridiculous. You really are a silly person because where's the harm? I give you money; you give me a drink in exchange, and good bye. You are not going to get stuck with my seetar all day." I said, "your loss!"

I went to the Turkish shop nearby where I asked for a soda, and he gave it to me. She felt stupid, she didn't know what to say. Perhaps she was expecting me to insult her. But I don't sink to that level. I'm not going to insult her. I'm a Muslim.

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JAMEELAH: Yes, after the law, there were many more reactions. I think it encouraged people even more. Each day I couldn't even go out without receiving some sort of comment or insult. One time a woman came up and insulted me with words like w(hore),⁸ rude words like that. Sometimes, though, it wasn't crude words. Throughout one entire journey in the metro, there was someone behind me saying: "I don't understand why you do this". "You're scary". "Your place is not here". "Go back to your country". Once it happened that there was a man who was knocking on the carriage. He was screaming and insulting me. He was knocking on the carriage really violently and you could feel the carriage moving and he was screaming and insulting me further. He was a big tall white man. At first I was a bit scared, but later I made the dhikh [remembrance of God] He carried on insulting me, but he didn't touch me. It was really violent.

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FARAH: Some neighbours no longer say hello... A few of them came to speak to me, and they saw that I hadn't changed. Actually, I was even more sociable. I wasn't very sociable before. Given that in my religion it's a requirement to be very, very kind to one's neighbours, I have started to be more open.

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PARVEEN: I've been stopped in the street to be told, "we fought for women's rights". But there have never been any vulgar insults. Once I was given the finger but otherwise it's mainly people in the street who are shocked, who stare, or say, "oh, look at the girl there!" But I don't feel insulted. Yes, I've already been told that it's forbidden. That's what I hear most often.

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Referring to a woman who was following them around a shop, **Geraldine** recalled: "She didn't say anything, but she just followed me from point A to Z. She followed me everywhere in the shop up to the till. She was at the till in front of me, subhan'Allah, and I was

8. The interviewee did not want to pronounce the word.

shocked. And she was looking at us as if we were insane, as if we were coming from God knows where!”

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Geraldine also said that she was harassed by her neighbour’s constant inquisitive glares in her direction and thinks that, since she is a white French woman herself people like her neighbour find it more difficult to accept:

GERALDINE: Frankly, I think that if it’s a French person, it’s even more difficult for them. They see an Arab woman and they say, “yeah, it’s her family [who is imposing it on her]!” But on the French woman, what can they say? No, it’s not her family. I’m not married, and they can see there is no guy with me. So they must be thinking this is extremism, terrorism. For them that’s what it is.

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A number of interviewees were profoundly dismayed at having unsolicited photographs of themselves taken by members of the public.

QUBILA: Physically, no never, alhamdulillah. Verbally, yes. It’s daily. At first it was [people’s] gazes, then it was “ah, but it’s forbidden”. They would call us ghosts, Zorro, Ninja, and all the nonsense that we still hear. And then you have some who really make a scene on the bus, the train, or the tube: “we are in France! Go back to your country!” All of these absurdities.

INTERVIEWER: Out of all the incidents that you can remember which one shocked you the most?

QUBILA: They used a lighter on my seetar from behind. So I heard the lighter and I smelt something. In fact, that’s what shocked me the most.

INTERVIEWER: Who was it?

QUBILA: A group of youths.

INTERVIEWER: Were they white?

QUBILA: Yes. Youths aged about 25–26. And so I smelt it and turned around immediately. But it frustrated me so much that I remained stuck, frozen. I didn’t react at all and yet I’m [usually] not like that. I’m very impulsive, very nervous; I’m quick-witted. Otherwise what else is annoying as well is that we have paparazzi who take pictures of us. Once, a woman took a picture of me, brazenly with her camera. It wasn’t even

her phone; it was her camera that she took out with a flash. But this one, I didn't let her go. I caused a scene on the train and she deleted the photo. I tried to ask her why she had acted like that. I told her we weren't at the zoo. Okay, we are a work of art but one shouldn't take our pictures like that! She started speaking about image copyright and I don't know what. Anyway it was the world turned upside-down! She said that there was no copyright on the image so at the point when she said that, I took her picture on my mobile. She was so grossed out that she proposed, "you delete mine, I delete yours." So I made her delete my photo first and then I deleted the one I took. Then I asked her why, and she [openly] said, "I admit that I did it as a provocation". I asked for her age and she didn't answer, but she must have been about 40, a French woman, not necessarily well dressed or anything like that, like a hiker. Finally she left like a coward and preferred to go to another carriage.

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HAIFA (hesitating to say the words): Bitch, scarecrow, dirty whore, carnival, Mardi Gras, sex object, things like that.

Haifa said that what shocked her most "were not the insults, but the fact of having my picture taken. One day I was on the train, a man came and sat just in front of me. He got his phone out and took a photo. It shocked me. He took a picture and laughed as if I was a monument or a circus freak. And after that, he stayed nearby as if nothing had happened. And on another day a woman said, "long live female circumcision!"

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AISHA: I was at the Gare du Nord waiting for [a friend] on the platform. A woman came towards me and took a picture! But not discreetly. You really are an animal! We are in the zoo and you see I'm taking the picture of a monkey, you see what I mean! Frankly, I don't mind [having my picture taken] from a distance. I don't care.

*

XENA: Once I remember, it made me feel a bit strange. I was going to a conference and I had an appointment with some sisters, so I was waiting on the platform of a metro. There was a tourist who was passing by and she took a picture of me and then she carried on walking. I ran after her because I didn't like her taking my picture and wanted her to delete it. I felt that there was no longer any respect, as if we were no longer human beings. You don't take a picture like that; you go and ask the person first, but here the person took a picture of me as if I had no say in it, and it deeply shocked me.

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At times, the testimonies were also comical.

CAMILE: So currently, since they've been speaking about the law, people are behaving like the police in the streets. Once, I was doing my shopping and a woman took out her phone: "Call the police! Call the police!" She really shamed me! No, honestly, I was ashamed! Why was I ashamed? Because I was scared that they would think that I had assaulted her or something like that. It was a woman of a certain age. She said, "call the police! Call the police!" I was ashamed! WallAllah [I swear] I was ashamed! I told myself, they are going to say, "here we go, it's the Muslim who has assaulted her, or maybe she stole from her, or at least she did something!" While it was her who had something against me because of how I was dressed. WallAllah, I was ashamed that day! Because I could see all the people starting to look at me. You know there was a crowd, there were plenty of people, and they were starting to look at me. I didn't know what to do! I told myself that it doesn't matter if they think badly of me but what I was scared about, was them thinking I assaulted her or that I was about to hurt her or something like that. This is what I was scared about. You see I got scared! "Call the police" she was screaming.

Many of the women reported physical assaults and spitting.

BUSHRA: It was not violence but it was a bit like that. It was a bloke who jostled me on the train. I pushed him back and there you go. He grew scared because I was wearing my seetar: my eyes were concealed and when people can't see who is behind [the veil], they don't play the smart aleck too much.

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CAMILE: A woman was looking at me. I said nothing. I didn't speak or anything else, I was just passing by. She started shouting, screaming in the street. Honestly, she started screaming and shouting, and she [approached me] and she really wanted to tear it off, to take it off!

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INTERVIEWER: Do you often go out?

TALIBAH: No, I won't say often, I'd say once or twice a week. [When I] do my shopping or when I go to my parents. I take public transport or I go walking. It's people's gazes, which are really unpleasant. There are days when nobody bothers you and

there are days when people are freaking out at me. You are going to receive insults, very, very dirty looks, and hurtful comments. [But] until now nobody has ever laid their hands on me. I don't know how I would react. Oh yes, once I was spat on.

INTERVIEWER: Who did that?

TALIBAH: A man, a French guy in his 50s.

INTERVIEWER: How did you react?

TALIBAH: I ignored him. I didn't answer, I carried on.

INTERVIEWER: Can you relate the whole incident? What happened exactly?

TALIBAH: He was in front walking towards me and our paths crossed. He was coming towards me and he started looking at me. I carried on and when came up close to me he spat on me, and he said, "Poor France!" I looked at him and he continued on his way completely normally.

INTERVIEWER: Where did he spit on you?

TALIBAH: At the height of my feet, to really show his disgust.

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IFFAT: Once I found a gob of spit on my niqab. Who knows whether I was spat on, "wallahu'alam" ["God knows best"], but I think somebody did spit on me.

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A few interviewees also said that they had to avoid certain places, notably shopping centres.

GERALDINE: To start with, when I'm alone, when I return home on my own, I'm careful about the bus routes I take. I take certain "strategic" routes in quotation marks. I commute through places which are not very crowded to avoid any problems.

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HAIFA: The places that I avoid are shopping centres.

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INTERVIEWER: Are there certain places you are scared to go with your niqab?

TALIBAH: Yes, as it happens, there are some shopping centres which are more in central Paris. Otherwise, when I have appointments at hospitals or with the doctor I am a bit apprehensive about [these] visits.

INTERVIEWER: Why the hospital?

TALIBAH: Well, it's always the same, you encounter people . . . the people at the reception are unkind. I went for an appointment and they were very unpleasant to me. They would ignore me, or make me wait for ages. That's why I'm always apprehensive about it.

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Xena made some interesting comparisons between her experiences in France and in the UK, where she spent a few months.

XENA: From the beginning it really surprised me, because in Paris when I was wandering around with just my jilbab, I was always receiving unnecessary comments from ill-mannered people. Over there I was even more visible wearing the niqab, but nobody was saying anything. People were not even turning their backs on me. I never received one comment; there were no tiresome gazes.

INTERVIEWER: Where, over there? Are you talking about England?

XENA: Yes, England in relation to France. I was even more concealed because I was wearing the niqab and nobody would look at me or speak to me; while in France my face was unveiled, and despite that people would always make comments.

INTERVIEWER: And in France you were wearing the niqab only sometimes?

XENA: Yes, sometimes. But, generally speaking, when I was wearing it I would try not to be alone, to always be with sisters. Wearing [the niqab] and being on public transport alone, I didn't feel at all safe.

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Another Parisian interviewee spoke of the sharp contrast in people's behaviour towards her, whether she was walking in her local area and in the city centre.

FARAH: Well, [the insults] don't happen every day because, for example, if I stay in my neighbourhood there's no problem, people smile. If I go to other places, inevitably . . . when I take the train to go to Paris, for example, it's true that many people are going to insult me.

Many interviewees pointed out that not all public reaction had been negative. Some people were just inquisitive.

IFFAT: I can understand that they are shocked, they see a woman all veiled like that. But it's no reason to insult us, to make comments. For example, once a woman asked me why I was wearing this and honestly it delighted me that, even though she didn't share my viewpoint, she was trying to understand, she came to speak to me. She told me, "don't think that I'm attacking you". I told her, "no, no, on the contrary, I am really happy to talk with you. And then you know what she told me? She told me, "Precisely! Me too. I am happy to be able to speak to you." And therefore, alhamdulillah, they are not all like this.

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GERALDINE: There are some gazes which are inquisitive, but that are not disturbing. And then you have gazes that are wicked, where it's as if they were undressing you. The other day, I was in the market with another sister. I was wearing my seetar and a teenager passed by and said to her father, "but how is she able to see?" It amused me, in the sense that if I hadn't seen a sister before I would have [also] asked, "how can she see?" "How does it work?" So when you get some comments like that, you shouldn't take them wrongly. Now it's true that when you hear comments such as, "go back to your country", if the person knew that I was born in Neuilly-sur-seine [one of the wealthiest districts of Paris], that I was living in a house, that my parents hold certain professional positions, I think they [wouldn't] have a clue. For them, we all live in social housing, we are all Arabs, we are all migrants, we have no culture, we are uneducated. It staggers me. "Go back to your country". You hear it all the time.

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KARIMA: And then to finish, you have other kinds of people as well. Once while I was out, I saw a man who got out of his car and told me that he wanted to know why I was wearing this while there were women in Afghanistan—always they link us to Afghanistan, to stonings. I told him, "listen, sir, first we are in France, not Afghanistan, and what is the connection between what I wear, the Taliban, and Afghanistan?" In the end, he himself couldn't answer. That's what we hear on TV, because he didn't even know what a stoning was, and each time he said something it was about the women in Afghanistan. I told him, "the difference is that we are not in Afghanistan, we are in France and it's [my] choice". I was with my husband, he asked him the question and my husband said that he'd rather let me answer. And it was me who told him that it was a personal and spiritual choice, and I didn't see where the harm was. He said, "I'm sorry, it is really just to know; it is simple curiosity." It's just as I told you: there are people who are really inquisitive and then [there are people] who are spiteful.

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FARAH: If [only] they came to speak to us and they didn't [come to] insult us in the street, [or] sideline us, because we don't feel like women. We feel like a piece of garbage people would prefer not to see again. If [only] they came to speak to us, and behaved towards us in the same way as they behave towards everyone else, maybe then we would open up more to them. In any case, anyone who came to speak to me was somewhat shocked to realise that I could speak, that I could laugh, that there were no issues at all with me.

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Some interviewees also had positive experiences.

XENA: I had reactions from people who were not at all Muslim and who were respecting this choice. I was surprised that some people will come and sit near me in the metro and say, "I think that what you are doing is beautiful. You probably have your own reasons." So, I was surprised to be supported by people who were not necessarily Muslims.

INTERVIEWER: It was a person who just came over to see you like that? Was it a woman or a man?

XENA: It was a woman, a French woman. She was old, maybe in her 40s. She was very warm with a big smile, telling me that if I could find my happiness this way then there was no reason that I wouldn't bloom. She was wishing me well. It was someone who was really pleasant, [the kind of people] you don't often meet.

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JAMEELAH: There was [a reaction] which left a vivid memory. It was a woman of a certain age, and in general people of a certain age are always [the ones making nasty comments]. But, alhamdulillah, I was in the metro. I was standing, and hesitating over whether to sit down near her. I was thinking that I might bother her or, if she possibly disliked the niqab, then I didn't want to scare her [either]. But people were entering [the carriage], and so I went and sat down. Then she started talking to me. I initially thought she was about to insult me, but she said, "I really like the way you are. It's your choice because these days everyone is half-naked and I like the way you are." It really shocked me. She complimented me and [yet] she wasn't a Muslim, not at all. It really touched me a lot.

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YASMINA: One day, I was taking my daughter to the park and a man, a gawri [a white Frenchman], was passing by with his little girl who pointed her finger at me and said: “hey, daddy, look!” But, masha’Allah, the reaction of the father! He told her that it was impolite to point fingers at people. He said that it was my religion and that I had decided to practice my religion. Alhamdulillah, some people have the intelligence not to hold prejudices.

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HAIFA: One day I remember there was a black guy. I went to Auchan. Well, he had been drinking. He must have been between 20–25 years old, and he looked at me. I thought he was about to assault me but he told me: “it’s you! It’s you! It’s you who is the best!” I don’t know. It warmed my heart, subhan’Allah.

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MAHA: It’s true that at first it might have shocked them [the neighbours] but they never showed it openly. But until today, it’s been going very well with my neighbours and frankly I haven’t noticed any changes.

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INTERVIEWER: So how is it going with your neighbours and the shopkeepers?

NABILA: We say hello, sometimes “How are you?” No, it’s ok. People chat with me. I don’t have much trouble, I don’t have any actually.

INTERVIEWER: And with the shopkeepers neither?

NABILA: Never had a problem on that side.

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ROUKIA: My town is a town with a large number of Jewish people and, masha’Allah, I’ve never had any problems. On the contrary, a shopkeeper, who is Jewish, likes me a lot! He knew me before [I was wearing the niqab] and knows me with the niqab. There are people who are respectful of religion. Otherwise Bobigny was great and even today I still go there! There were Arabs, black people, Pakistanis, Asians, Jewish people, French: it’s really cosmopolitan and, masha’Allah, I never received any remarks. And now here, where I live, it’s crazy. I only have one neighbour who is a Muslim and since she doesn’t wear the headscarf you wouldn’t know. When I moved in they were making crow noises when I’d go out. You have people who insult me:

my female neighbours of a certain age see me and [say pfff]. But it makes me laugh, as they are old women [*laughter*]! In any case, it's better to take it that way, otherwise I couldn't stay here.

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VIVI: I haven't gone through the same experiences as some sisters who have received [numerous] insults. I've never experienced any of it. I haven't been insulted; it's been going well. I have been confronted with some funny situations sometimes, like a granny who was dying to see my face at any cost. She was over 80 and was telling me, "I can't see you!" Then we chatted and she told me, "you give me a kiss?" I kissed her, she was happy and voilà. . . . Once a pharmacist told me, "I would like the law to be voted in", but without attacking me, without being unpleasant. I explained to him my position, and so did he. So there was an exchange, but in the end we both stuck to our positions.

Vivi explained that her experiences, which differed from that of other niqabis, might be partially linked to her own life perspectives.

VIVI: I have been a punk: I once had a red Mohawk down the middle of my head [*laughter*]. [I was a] hippie, baba cool [French term meaning hippie], I had dreadlocks. I had a lot of experiences in my youth, so I don't give a damn about people's stares, except at work where I'm careful. I never had a problem with the niqab, not even with the police, nothing at all!

INTERVIEWER: You've never been told things such as, "Go back to your country" or "We fought for women's rights?"

VIVI: No. . . . Once I heard, "hey, tell me, it's carnival!" and I replied: "yes, it's the masqued ball!"⁹ and I started singing the song of the Compagnie créole. I laughed. The person felt a bit silly but laughed too. It's the only comment I ever had. The fact that it's not the jilbab that I wear but a jilbab makes a difference, and my niqab is not black but white, so it hasn't got the same connotations. In French culture, the colour black is scary, it's sad, it's negative while white is fine. I know a sister who lives in the Paris region. She wears a white seetar and she told me that when she goes out with the white seetar she feels that there is less spiteful gazing at her.

9. The masqued-ball is also the title of an old popular song by a group from the French Caribbean.

So I think there is something about the colour. One must say as well that it's easier here than in the Parisian region. Since living in southern France I have been much more communicative, if only at the mosque. We chat and contact is easily made, while in the Parisian region, even inside the mosques, people found it hard to say hello. I would say that the human being is like an animal. He knows when you are scared, and he is going to come and growl at you. He can sense when he is going to have the upper hand over you.

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SAFA: Personally, I never had any problems, insults and all of that.

INTERVIEWER: None at all. Not even Batman or Darth Vader?

SAFA: Yes, I've already heard Darth Vader. Well, I made the sign with the swords! Otherwise, I hear, "go back to your country, we are in France here!"

INTERVIEWER: These are clearly insults!

SAFA: No, for me this is not an insult.

INTERVIEWER: Don't you think this is still aggressive even if it's not very violent?

SAFA: No, I don't think it's an insult. For me, an insult is an insult.

INTERVIEWER: A rude word?

SAFA: Yes!

INTERVIEWER: So what would you call it then?

SAFA: We'll say that they say aloud what they are privately thinking but I don't call it an insult.

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YASMINA: But, alhamdullilah, where I live I don't have any problems. Initially when I moved in, yes, but they've adapted to it quickly. At the beginning, they were looking at me strangely, then, they got used to the idea of seeing me often. Then [through time] you end up discussing it with them. Sometimes people call to you in the street to ask you some questions and as long as you respond, as long as you are open, not aggressive or cold, alhamdullilah, the people are less scared. It's true that the first time I saw myself in a mirror with my niqab, I was surprised. Each time I saw my reflection in a window or a mirror, I always had a smile on my face, because it really gives a strange impression. In fact, one sees oneself without seeing oneself [*laughter*].

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None of the interviewees who were parents encountered any issues in their children's schools.

DUNIYA: I speak with my daughter's teacher. I get on very well with her. They knew me when I wasn't wearing it, so they know who I am. They respect my choice, even if they don't share it. I have participated in several school events, like the end of the year party that they held. I had my niqab and it was not an issue. I had a good time with them.

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INTERVIEWER: You had no problems with the teachers?

MAHA: Quite the contrary. I kiss them all [*laughter*]. No, [they are French]. They are very kind. Honestly, it's going very, very well. They are very nice with the kids and with me, it's the same.

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OMERA: Alhamdulillah, it has always gone well [with the teachers]. Perhaps now that my daughter is in secondary school [it might change as] there are one or two teachers with whom my relationship is not good at all. But it has to go well because I am wearing the niqab and I will make sure it goes well. I consider that I'm like everyone else, so I make sure I always attend the school events and I am always there when they need help at school. But it has always gone well. I've never been asked to take off my niqab on entering the school.

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The women spoke about the effect of wearing the niqab on their children and other relatives.

DUNIYA, speaking about her young daughter: "She supports my choice. I know she supports me because once, when I was with her on the bus, someone had the nerve to make some comments, and she said, "you leave my mother alone. You leave my mother alone. It's not your business. Her niqab is her business."

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OMERA: Alhamdulillah, [my children] took [my niqab] very well. I'm very present in their everyday life. [With] my oldest, when I take her to secondary school, I don't hide in my car. I'm proud of who I am, alhamdulillah, I'm proud of what I wear. I

reveal it and my daughter is conscious of it. As a mother, when you are positive in your relations with Allah, and you are positive in your relations with your children, it can only make them positive. Even if she has friends who ask her why her mother is wearing this, she doesn't get involved in any arguments. She tells them to go and ask me. When they want to do something, school trips, etc., my daughters will ask, "Mummy, mummy, please, tell them that you are coming with us!" They are not at all the kind who says, "don't come with us." On the contrary, there are times I have to refuse because sometimes I don't feel like it.

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A couple of interviewees also did all they could to avoid going out with their brothers or sons because they feared for their safety.

HABIBA: I avoid going out with my sons because they don't respond in the same way as I do. For example, when I'm walking with my son in a large supermarket, if it's my son who is near me pushing the trolley, then I don't receive any remarks from anyone. By contrast, if my son is in a different part of the store, and I'm some way from him, then people think that I'm alone, and they'll speak.

INTERVIEWER: And how does your son react in that case?

HABIBA: It depends, but often it ends up [badly]. Once I was near my house walking on the pavement to get into the house while my son had his head in the boot of his car taking the shopping out. It wasn't obvious that I was with him. A man passed by me on the pavement and he called me a whore. My son heard him, dropped his bags, and went berserk. He dropped everything and it ended up in a fight on the pavement. My son went towards him and said, "who are you talking to?" The guy was saying, "yes but, yes, but". He didn't have the time to reflect that he received a blow. It's someone that I often meet because he lives near my street.

INTERVIEWER: And now he leaves you alone...

HABIBA: Oh yes! He even lowers his head. It's often like this. So I avoid going out with my sons because I'm a bit scared for them. One of my sons even fought in the middle of Carrefour, and the police came.

INTERVIEWER: Was it someone else who insulted you as well?

HABIBA: Yes, it was an Arab. I was close to the till while my son was slightly behind me, but he could see what was going on. The man was ranting at me and my son approached him saying, "are you mad or what?" The man told him, "fuck you!" Then he turned towards me and he said whore, which is when my son hit him.

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JAMEELAH: [When I was walking with my brothers] people would insult me but not [as intensively] as usual. They would make snide comments or they would look at me nastily and immediately my brothers [would tell them]: “what? Is there a problem?” “No but I don’t understand why she is wearing this!” “And is that your problem?” My brothers would quickly get worked up. It used to scare me, which is why, at times, I would try to avoid going out with my brothers, whether it was my older brothers or the younger ones, because my little brothers couldn’t bear it as well. What is hard to take is when you realise that it’s also hard for the people [around you]. They can feel it; the fact that someone insults me saddens them. And so whatever I was subjected to I would try to hide, or to make sure that I wouldn’t go out with them too often.

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A couple of interviewees also related that some of their relatives didn’t want to go out with them. This was the case with **Zara**, a convert who explained that her mother doesn’t want to go out with her, unlike her grandmother:

ZARA: My grandmother, the poor woman, is very elderly. She is 80 years old, and even if she doesn’t accept [the niqab] she loves me so much that in the end she accepts it. She doesn’t mind going out with me; for her it’s natural. Once a woman was giving me dirty looks and my grandmother told her: “what’s wrong? Did [my granddaughter] say something to you? You look at my granddaughter in this way but maybe yours will be even worse because at least my granddaughter has never hurt anyone!” I was amazed!

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Many interviewees felt that the public debate and media coverage played a role in intensifying the hostility towards them.

ELIZA: So today [people tell us], “but this is forbidden now! There’s a €150 fine!” But ask them to trot out other laws in the penal code, what they will incur if they break them, and I can assure you that they don’t know as much [about them] as this law! I know, for example, that it’s forbidden to smoke in public places, but I can’t recall the fine you receive. But with this law they know it by heart!

INTERVIEWER: Have you noticed any differences before and after the controversy?
ROUKIA: Of course. Today, people insult you. They are not scared and you know

there's this remark that returns time and again: "but isn't this forbidden yet!" I've heard this [comment] at least 50 times. They take liberties because they know they have the law on their side.

One interviewee removed her full-face veil even before the debate and controversy had ignited, due to her experiences at the hands of the general public. Her story shows that the verbal abuse the interviewees faced existed before the controversy. However, when those interviewees who had worn the niqab before the controversy were asked as to whether they had noticed a shift in people's attitudes towards them in public places, all of them said they had. **Eliza** gave the most compelling testimony. Although very long, it is reproduced below:

ELIZA: "When the media covers the affair of the Islamic veil, it's better not to go out. And it's not only me. Everybody will tell you the same thing. You see, after the terrorist attacks in France during 1995, I didn't feel anything in particular. And the same after the terrorist attacks in 2001. But each time there's a controversy over the veil, then that's another issue."

INTERVIEWER: It's strange! So the terrorist attacks had no impact?

ELIZA: Honestly, none. Whether in '95 or 9/11.

INTERVIEWER: But the coverage on veil controversies does?

ELIZA: Yes. Besides, that's what made me laugh because apparently in England, when you had the terrorist attacks in London, an Imam allegedly advised women to remove their headscarves because one woman was assaulted.¹⁰ With French people, it's really something else. On the niqab, the insults [you receive] are a carbon copy of the political discourse. It's the case 90 per cent of the time. For example, I'm told, "it's not in the Quran, or it's in the name of women's freedom, [or] *laïcité* [secularism]". It's really a cut and paste job from what politicians are saying.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been attacked?

ELIZA: Yes, it has happened. Over the niqab, the last time was the day after Nicolas Sarkozy's speech when he said that the burqa was not welcome in France. The day after! It was in the morning. I was commuting very, very early. I was still half asleep because it was on the day of my grandmother's death. I was taking my mother to

10. Professor Zaki Badawi, former head of the Muslim College in London and former Chairman of the Council of Mosques and Imams. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/aug/04/race>. July 7.

the airport. We had woken up at 4:00 am and there were people on the train. After a while at one station, a woman came up close to me. I was very near the door, and she said, “sorry, are you getting off?” I thought she wanted me to move to let her pass by, but I wasn’t completely blocking the door. She could have passed. But I kind of moved back a bit and she said, “all right, because in any case I’m going to tear that thing off you!” and just then I had the instinctive reaction to push her back and to try to protect myself as I wasn’t expecting it at all. And then the other people, there were three of them trying to move her away, and she was coming back and they were pulling her away. A man managed to push her off the train, but she came back on board and was screaming exactly what Sarkozy had said! That it was in the name of the woman’s dignity that it was not in the Quran. She was screaming while I was not even responding to her. It was not as if the conversation had become heated, that there were insults being hurled back and forth. Not at all! She was screaming all by herself. She was in her 40s, a feminist . . . well, “feminist”, that’s what she claimed. The day after Sarkozy’s speech! He made his statement at the end of June 2009. Voilà! Gérin launched the debate and Sarkozy pounced on it.

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Omera was one of the rare interviewees who was at risk of being seriously physically assaulted on the day after Sarkozy’s speech

OMERA: I have been attacked, subhan’Allah. I had [previously] never been attacked and I had been wearing it for the last 11 years. The first time [it happened] it was the day after our illustrious President of the Republic said before the National Assembly and on TV that the burqa was not welcome in France.

INTERVIEWER: You were attacked the day after?

OMERA: Yes, the day after. It was when I was leaving the school with my kids. I had come to pick them up from school and there was a woman who didn’t like it. She was sitting down with other old people and she pointed her finger at me saying, “what is that? We must tear it off of her”. When she said that, I didn’t embarrass myself; I asked what was going on. My husband was parking the car and when he was about to get out of the car, a man who was sitting down stood up and went to his car to get a large knife, Rambo-like. He came towards me while I was with all the children. There were some mothers who live in my block and the district nearby. They came and told me to stay to one side. At that point the old man didn’t know that my husband was getting out of the car so my husband jumped on him and disarmed him, and some youths came to separate them. When the old man saw that there were too

many people, he went back to his car. He then took some pétanque balls. He was not interested in my husband or any other person, he was interested in me. So he came towards me with the pétanque balls, and once more everybody jumped on him. We called the police and when he saw the police he took his car and sped off.¹¹

INTERVIEWER: Have you seen a change in the way people behave towards you since the beginning of the controversy?

OMERA: Oh, yes, easily. It's blatant. I have been wearing the niqab for 11 years. It's true that at the beginning people stared at you but there wasn't much else. It was really something new for them, so nothing very malicious in their gazes. No hatred. While nowadays, if I go for a walk in the city centre, you should see the way people look at me. Some people don't bother me but within a few metres others give you certain looks. People nudge [others] with a kind of, "look at that woman! It's nonsense!" The way people look at you has really changed.

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Iffat also believed she was receiving more verbal abuse in the streets than prior to the controversy.

IFFAT: People, when they see the news . . . seriously it can only be expected! And honestly, I often say that if I wasn't a Muslim and I didn't know my religion, I too would have been frightened when we hear what they say . . . the Salafist movements! And the editing that they do and all of it! On the day when they showed the mosque, they were showing brothers with their beards, you know kind of showing it in slow motion. Seriously, if I wasn't a Muslim, I would have been scared. I don't condone the behaviour of the people; it's not normal. But when I see how they depict us on TV, I say to myself that to some extent it is affecting them. Of course, it's no reason for them to insult us.

*

INTERVIEWER: Do you think people's behaviour in the streets has changed since the beginning of the controversy?

CAMILE: Yes, yes, definitely. You have people who are more or less racist. You have people who are more or less nasty. But since it has been under the spotlight, it's

11. Omera noted her assailant was later arrested and charged.

as if they had encouraged people a bit. May Allah forgive me if it's not the exact word? I might be wrong in the way I'm expressing myself, but honestly, since they started talking about it, people are taking more liberties. They behave as if they were the police! Even the police don't behave like them! It's really nasty and gratuitous, subhan'Allah.

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INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the beginning of the controversy? Actually you wore the niqab well before it?

MAHA: Yes, before then there was nothing. People in the streets didn't give a damn.

INTERVIEWER: Has there been a change since then?

MAHA: Yes, yes, yes. It's the law—since they started talking about it. Because before, you could take the bus, you could walk, and nobody paid attention; whether a French person or an Arab, or a Turk, a black guy. They really didn't give a damn, young or old. They just didn't give a damn. While now it's no longer the case. I have friends who don't have a driving licence, and who previously could take the bus normally. It was just a normal routine for them. But it's no longer the case. They no longer take the bus because they are always frightened that they'll encounter someone who will talk rudely to them, particularly because they are shy women. They don't dare to answer and they feel persecuted and humiliated so they no longer take public transport.

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WAFI: Since the media spotlight, the heated controversy, we feel that people consider it their right to express their opinions, to be unnecessarily nasty, to hurl insults, and we didn't have that before. Previously, people were surprised, but they would not [say much]. Today, it has been so much under the spotlight that they [the media] have managed to convince the people that it disturbs them. Once I was confronted by somebody who told me, "yes, we have the impression that you are being provocative!" I told him, "listen, sir, how can I be provocative? You are asking me questions, I answer them. Have I assaulted you? Has anything changed in your life because of me? It hasn't changed anything in your life! You have a discussion, you are going to go back home and tomorrow will be the same. You will go back to your routine. I will not have had any influence on your life." One can't tell me that I'm being provocative. It's me who is being provoked with the implementation of certain laws. People have listened so much to the media that they can no longer think for themselves. People just repeat the political arguments.

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TALIBAH: It's really the media which magnified it, because when I was wearing it at the beginning, it didn't go further than stares, and the insults were very, very rare. While nowadays people are blowing their tops more. I have the feeling that they are using this opportunity to spew out all the stuff they have inside themselves. It's as if this law had helped them to empty themselves.

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YASMINA: Since there has been this controversy, and especially when they were talking about it a lot, people have been much more aggressive verbally. It got them animated and it's been almost legitimate to assault or to insult us in the street [especially] since there was a potential law which was about to be voted on.

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Finally, a few interviewees said that the situation has been less heated since the law passed.

FARAH: It has calmed down now because they speak about it less on TV. So I think this explains why it has calmed down. But when we were in the midst of the controversy, which lasted for a really long time, it was really over the top.

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INTERVIEWER: What is it usually like in the streets when you go out with your niqab?

AMINA: People make lot of comments, they insult us as well. They were actually much more aggressive when [the country was debating] the law on the full-face veil. But they have calmed down since it has been adopted.

INTERVIEWER: So you felt the influence of the media on people's behaviour in the streets?

AMINA: Yes, because before there was always someone who would make a comment, although it wasn't everyone! Generally speaking it was OK. Sometimes I would go out without receiving any remarks, but during the [debate on the] law I couldn't leave the house without being insulted, even though I don't often go out. I only go out once a week to do my shopping or when I need to. But anyway, it has calmed down apparently, because the last couple of times I went out I noticed that nobody made any comments.

Who Insults Them?

BUSHRA: Yes, yes, and the category of people who assault me verbally: they are white French. Old people. Yes, it's also women. They tell me [sarcastically], 'France is beautiful', things like that.

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CAMILE: In any case, they are not young. Youngsters have better things to do, I think. They are not involved, they don't care.

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DUNIYA: In general, it's the same age bracket. It's people who are, let's say, 40 or even older and white French. And what makes me laugh is that it's often women who have botox, with stretched faces.

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IFFAT: I never had any issue with black people. I have had problems with French people aged from 30 to 50.

*

JAMEELAH: It's not really youngsters. Maybe those around 30 or 40. But the youths no; in general they don't care. Well, they look at you, they can be surprised, but in general they live their lives. They have no time for this kind of stuff in fact.

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KARIMA: The average age is 30–50, but especially the little old ladies. And it's really the women in fact. A young woman who was 30 told me: "we fought for women's freedom! For the freedom to wear miniskirts and you are wearing this!" But she has fought for nothing, and the women who did, didn't do it to wear miniskirts but for the freedom to dress as they pleased. It's exactly what I'm doing. You want to wear a miniskirt, I want to be veiled. I don't see where the harm is in the end.

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LATIFAH: I can't remember that any youth has ever been disrespectful to me. It's mainly mature people in their 40s for the men and in general over 40 for the women. But I can say that women are nastier than men in their comments. Women shout while men are more likely to make remarks. A woman is [likely] to insult me bluntly.

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INTERVIEWER: What is the profile of the people who make comments?

ROUKIA: Women: old ones; 40–60.

INTERVIEWER: And youngsters?

ROUKIA: Sometimes they will look at me but that's [all].

INTERVIEWER: So it's older women?

ROUKIA: Yes, I think it's women who have sacrificed themselves, who didn't have as many rights as us today, and maybe for them we are regressing. You know at one time there was a law in France which stated that women couldn't wear trousers. So these people have lived through that, and they don't understand that while we have all rights, we are isolating ourselves. They fought for freedom and for them freedom is encompassed by trousers, smoking cigarettes, so they don't understand.

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SAFA: In general it's French people in their 50s, both men and women.

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WAFI: Old French people, men and women.

Many women also said they had been verbally abused by either Muslims or people of Arab descent.

YASMINA: Yes, it [insults] comes more from women and in particular from Arab women. What is sure is that each time I have been bothered, in most cases it was by Arab women. Once, I remember, I was about to board the train. There were two or three Arabs, mothers in their 40s, and 50s, who were getting off the train. They waited until I got on and the train was about to depart to say: "yeah, one wears the burqa and one wears suspender belts underneath."

*

CAMILLE: Sometimes I met people, Muslims, who when they saw me, they would say: "a'uzubileh min el cheytan el rajim" [I seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed]. Yes, I heard it many times! Yes, they were Muslims as they could say: "a'uzubileh min el cheytan el rajim". Or else when they see me, they would say: "AstakhfAllah [God forgive me], astakhfAllah!" I can't make any sense of it. Or they

say: “bismilleh, bismilleh elrahman elrahim!” [In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate]! [*Laughter*]! But in those cases, I honestly don’t react. I don’t respond because there is nothing to say. If you have mistaken me for Satan, what do you want me to do! If you can’t make the difference between a wise man and a madman, there is nothing I can do, I don’t respond.

*

UZMA: Once I was outdoors with sisters. We were near a Muslim library and a woman came out and started screaming because of the niqab I was wearing. She was yelling, “Fire! Fire! Fire!” In others words, she was telling me, “Yes, you are wearing that, but you are going to burn in hell.

INTERVIEWER: Was she a Muslim?

UZMA: Yes, very much so. She was North African so there you go. It shocked me because nobody else reacted. There were plenty of Muslims outside and she threw a barrage of insults. And once I was walking with the mother of a friend, and an old man, a North African as well, spat close by me as if he was disgusted. On another occasion, I was doing some shopping and there was a cashier who was a North African. . . . I told myself it’s only North Africans who are doing this to me while there were plenty of French people around and they didn’t make any remarks.

INTERVIEWER: And, generally speaking, what is the profile of the people who insult you?

UZMA: It’s mainly old white people, mainly women.

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FARAH: They insult us, they look at us with contempt. Honestly, it often happens! When we say Salam to them, sometimes it’s even sisters with hijabs who don’t respond to us. Once a guy said tffou.¹⁶ It’s really very nasty glares. One wonders if in the next second she isn’t going to assassinate us.

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HAIFA: Arab women look at me with disgust but I have never been insulted by an Arab. However, sometimes I’m with a friend in the street who wears the hijab, and

12. An Arab expression involving a light spit, which marks a deep disgust of somebody or something.

perhaps we'll meet people who know her mother and they're going to warn her, "be careful who your daughter hangs out with" or "I saw your daughter with a terrorist" or things like that.

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ELIZA: There is also the verbal violence of the Arabs. It's an expression of complete insecurity vis-à-vis the way I choose to express my Islam. It's not necessarily marginal, but it's something else. For them, it's similar to saying, "you are shaming us!" Once when I was in the supermarket doing my shopping, someone came behind me and told me in Arabic, "it's your fault that we live so badly in France". I laughed. I didn't want to be aggressive but I felt like asking her whether she had her identity card [*laughter*]!

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PARVEEN: The neighbours are against it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you live in the banlieue?

PARVEEN: [Yes] it's full of Muslims but ignorant Muslims, Muslims who are more into culture and tradition rather than religion. They often tell me, "you are shaming Islam! You have understood nothing! This is not Islam!"

INTERVIEWER: And how do neighbours behave with you?

PARVEEN: In the beginning when they were stopping me in the street, when they would recognize me, they would ask me, "how are you doing? So you wear the niqab? How come? Why did you change? But do you know that this isn't religious." Well, generally it's OK, they aren't aggressive. I encountered some aggressive Muslims but they weren't my neighbours, they weren't people who knew me. My neighbours try to change my mind but gently, through dialogue.

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KARIMA: I remember one woman. I was actually with my best friend, and the woman looked at me really spitefully. I asked her, "do you have a problem?" She started insulting me. When someone is vulgar, I just let it happen and leave because one can't speak with people like that. But she told me, "I am a Muslim and I don't wear the hijab" I said, *alhamdulillah*, "I'm not here to judge you. You want to be a Muslim and not wear the hijab. Surely there's no harm if I who am a Muslim want to wear it." I had the feeling that she was looking for an excuse through me to absolve herself because she wasn't wearing it.

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HABIBA: People don't go as far hitting but they spit on us. It happened to me a few months ago. These kinds of attacks were frequent after the controversies. I was walking with another sister, she was wearing neither the niqab nor the seetar, and I was spat on. I was told that I was dirtying the religion and they spat on me. They were Arabs, two old people, men. They spat on me around waist height. They were sitting on the front steps of a house.

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Xena said that among Arabs it was also a generational issue: "For the sisters who I knew [wearing the niqab] was normal. I realise that for today's youth it's not an issue at all. In fact, it's something that shocks them much less than it does their parents, even those of North African descent.

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HABIBA: It's not done in the same way. [With] Europeans [white people] it's going to be verbal assaults such as: "we are not in Mecca here!" "Go back home!" "We are in France here!" With North Africans women, "shameful". It's as if we were carrying on a form of degradation, a regression.

The Muslim Community's Response

AISHA: What hurts me the most is the [Muslim] community. Because, you see, at the end of the day, when an unbeliever looks at you weirdly you can understand because you can tell yourself, "he doesn't know; he may never have even heard of it. It's not his religion and at least he doesn't claim to be Muslim. Or maybe it was just an inquisitive look." The community hurts us more than the others. Wallah [I swear], that's what disturbs me most, all the time. It's the community, our own community, who hurt us. An Arab guy, not to say a Muslim, an Arab guy with a Muslim name, I asked him if it would be possible to pray on time [at work] and he answered in an arrogant and pompous tone, "no way. There is no praying here. It's a workplace" and blah blah blah . . . And, subhan'Allah, it has to be the one who is neither Arab nor Muslim who tells me, "don't worry, I'll see what I can do for you!" You see what I mean? It's our ummah [community] that is frankly rotten. Put it in your article, the ummah is disappointing us. Frankly it's an ignorant, pompous, and stupid ummah! When you look, the most successful of us are either comedians or singers, nothing

else! Comedians or singers, we're here to be the clowns! They are the court jesters! Or else they're football players, waawh!! You can kick a ball! And then you are acclaimed and then France digs you. You see what I mean?

Eliza provided a general analysis of the situation,

ELIZA: No, I find the Muslim community as manipulated as the rest of the French population, except when they are particularly concerned by something. During the headscarf affair in schools, apart from those who were wearing it or who had relatives and friends who were wearing it, the general feeling within the Muslim community was a bit like, "no, no, they are shaming us! They are fundamentalists. We don't wear the headscarf!" Then, when they start talking about the niqab, it is the same thing, except that the ranks of the defenders have shrunk since there are fewer niqabs around. So apart from those who are wearing it, the rest of the community is reacting exactly the same way as in 2003: "no, it's not a religious prescription. It embarrasses us!" If I had to generalise, the official stance of the CFCM (French Council of the Muslim Faith) is one of embarrassment at the practice of the niqab. On the other hand, there is another category represented by the youth who were born in France, who religiously speaking are not necessarily very practising, but who recognise what racism is. Their reaction is to demand freedom and equality, and they don't see why the niqab should be forbidden. They are a sizeable majority. I receive more support from them than from the official representative Islamic institutions. You can see this very well in way the CFCM was set up, not by youngsters but by the elders.

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Xena provided a similar answer.

XENA: It depends on the generation and the amount of religious involvement. I think that the sisters who wear a hijab or a jelbab are obviously going to support us, even when they don't necessarily want to wear it. But the generations closer to our parents, who want to integrate, who want their children to succeed, don't support us at all. They think that this way will reduce their career prospects.

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KARIMA: I think there is also a genuine problem within the Muslim community: nobody has defended the veil. And, believe me, unfortunately sometimes Muslims are the worst, making completely phoney comments. And that's why I find excuses

for non-Muslims. I say to myself, “they’ve never seen this, it’s normal, it’s not their religion.” But when you see it happening inside the Muslim community. . . . You know what happened to me on the day of Eid? The community had rented a big gymnasium and the men and women were not separated. So I didn’t remove my niqab given that there were plenty of men around. I was sitting near one woman, and as we were about to start the prayer, she looked at me and said, “why are you wearing this? Why?” She hurt me so much because here was a mother who couldn’t even speak two words of French but who still made the effort to hurt me saying many nasty things. And a woman nearby also [supported] her. So I took my coat and I went behind them. I prayed. I left in tears because it deeply hurt me. I told myself, subhan’Allah, even if you oppose [the niqab], on the day of Eid you should at least make an effort!

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The fiercest and most widespread criticisms among interviewees were undoubtedly directed towards Muslim representatives.

UZMA: They made it worse for us!

INTERVIEWER: Are you talking about Muslim representatives who went on TV?

UZMA : Yes, things became worse because of them. They took liberties in saying certain things about religion.

INTERVIEWER: Such as?

UZMA : That the niqab was not part of the religion, that it was a tradition.

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BUSHRA: Those who are appointed in the mosques, the rectors and others, are people appointed by the state and who therefore say what the state wants to hear and not what the Muslim community wants to hear.

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Camile said what was echoed by many interviewees, “What really shocked me was to hear Imams stating that it’s not part of Islam!”

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GERALDINE: No, clearly [we haven’t been supported]. When you hear sisters who wear the hijab on TV saying that the niqab is not an obligation but rather a complete innovation and that we do it to attract attention. . . . That they don’t agree with the

niqab is something I can understand. Everyone has their own opinion on it. This is not the problem. But now we aren't even supportive [of each other] and frankly it's distressing. When your community says that women who wear it are being provocative, that the law should be adopted—the worst [part of it] is that they say this to the media. It basically means that the women who dress like that are all extremists. Honestly, I find it astonishing.

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PARVEEN: Those sisters who, like me, wear the niqab and the brothers who have a wife or someone from their family who wears it are the ones who supported me. The others didn't, they were against it. In the mosques I came across a lot of people against me, because, according to them, it's due to us that Muslims in France are having difficulties, because we don't want to integrate.

INTERVIEWER: What happened exactly in the mosques?

PARVEEN: Well, I heard the Imams saying that we were putting pressure on the community that because of us Islam was being badly perceived by non-Muslims. So that was the Imams who were talking, and behind them some Muslims were agreeing.

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Many interviewees also stressed that there was an important distinction to make between the support received at a grassroots level and the lack of support from the Muslim establishment.

NABILA: The community supports us, but with the representatives, the CFCM or I don't know who, it's zero, no comments! I'm wondering who appointed them as Muslim representatives. At a community level, alhamdulillah, nobody is ever going to tell you that it's not a part of the religion or things like that. They will tell us that it's good and that we are courageous.

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OMERA: Personally, I have been well supported but it's a bit delicate. The people around me who I know in the community supported me. But then outside, in the [wider] community, there are certain personalities. For example, a certain Imam, who had the nerve to say to the press that he was against the full-face veil and that he was supporting the law [against it]. I'm sorry but if you are against the full-face veil you are against religion. In Islam, it's acknowledged that you cannot be against a Sunna.

It's impossible! If you are against a Sunna, then you are against the Prophet. You cut yourself off from a certain link with the community. Another example is the famous president of the CFCM. One should tell it like it is: he hasn't defended us, he has sold us out, and that's for sure! When he was heard [by the Commission] he said that the full-face veil was a minority [practise], that it debased women, that it was not equality vis-à-vis the woman, always while stipulating that it was a minority [practise] that didn't exist within Muslim traditions. I am sorry, but if you deny a Sunna, which is part of the religion, you are not defending these women. For me, he sold out his sisters, so we cannot talk about real support.

*

JAMEELAH: Honestly, not all [Muslims are supportive], that's what hurts me the most, I think. When I see a woman in a miniskirt, even if she is a Muslim, I'm not going to judge her. It's her choice and maybe in her heart, she is better than me. And if I see a sister who is not veiled, I am not going to judge her either. It's God who decides. At one point I wasn't veiled. For me, the fact that everybody judges me because I wear the niqab hurts. I don't take liberties and judge you, so why are you judging me? Everyone is entitled to his or her own choice.

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INTERVIEWER: Generally speaking, do you think Muslims are supportive?

ROUKIA: Yes, I had more support and reassurance than nasty things, even from girls who were not veiled, who don't pray. You wouldn't know that they are Muslims. Even my neighbour, that's how she came to speak to me for the first time. Honestly, many people come to see you and tell you to keep strong.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you think of the Muslim representatives?

ROUKIA: They are the government imams. They're here more to please Sarkozy and his troops. I don't know if you've heard about the [a particular imam], but it really shocked me! I saw him in a report with bodyguards; they were kuffirs [unbelievers]¹³ It means that he was protecting himself from his brothers and sisters with kuffirs! Once, I saw this guy from Drancy who said it [the veil] had no place in the religion. When I saw Fadela Amara, who said that she was against the veil, when you see someone else in the TV show "Who's afraid of Islam?" arguing that those who think that the niqab exists in religion are wrong, when you see all of that, I swear to you! . . .

13. Nowadays mostly used in a derogatory way.

VIVI: The Imam [...] I don't agree at all with him because, [although] we can have disagreements within the community, one should not, as the saying goes, air one's dirty laundry in front of one's guests, certainly not in the spotlight! On the contrary, in the spotlight he should have said that he was against this law, [he should have] shown some solidarity with the sisters.

However, **Vivi** also explained how she was happy with the level of support she had received.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the Muslim community has been supportive?

VIVI: Yes, with the exception of [a particular imam], but anyway there's always one. And, oh yes, there's also the woman from [the organisation] Neither Whores nor Submissives [...].¹⁴ But I would say otherwise, because the last two Friday sermons from the Imam were aimed at protecting the sisters.

INTERVIEWER: Was it the local Imam?

VIVI: "Yes, the Imam called for brotherhood and to the support the veiled sisters, not to let them down, to intervene if they are assaulted, to report it to the Imam.

INTERVIEWER: You are really positive? I didn't hear many similar responses in the interviews I conducted. The sisters were rather disappointed with the community.

VIVI: Maybe, because I see [things] on a small scale. I say to myself that as long as I know my community's local Imam supports me, if I have a problem I can go and see them. I know I would be supported. I don't need to have [that support] in the communities of any other [French regions]. For me, it's where I live that I need to be supported. Some people live in places where they are not supported by anyone! Then it's up to the will of God; it's He who decides and I think many people forget that. It's not we who are deciding but Allah. Afterwards, we are confronted by some situations and our faith is tested. We cannot condemn or accuse, we can only say alhamdulillah. And then, alhamdulillah, in comparison to other countries [at least] we are not tortured. One must also put things into perspective a little. For example, my father experienced the Second World War. He was deported to Germany because he was a communist; he was tortured. Or my grandfather: during the Spanish Civil War he was tortured and shot. No, honestly, I'd rather experience what I'm experiencing now!

14. Fadela Amara is the former President of Neither Whores nor Submissives; she has served in the Sarkozy government.

Allah forgives me but what the sisters are experiencing now is more bearable, even if [they must suffer] insults or glares, than being tortured like my father! I don't know if you had the opportunity to read *Le miroir des limbes* by André Malraux—you can see what he went through.

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A couple of interviewees also expressed their view that generally speaking, Muslim men were more supportive than Muslim women.

BUSHRA: What I have noticed, is that, masha'Allah, brothers are more supportive than sisters. Because some sisters think that it's a submission.

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IFFAT: Well, I don't know, but out of the great majority of people that I meet on the bus Muslim women don't support us at all. Men are more like, "it's good, we are with you. Allah makes it easy for you!" Women? No, not at all! Sometimes I don't know whether they think I'm a convert, but I hear them saying in Arabic, "look, it's because of her! Where does she think she is! In this case, she shouldn't be leaving her home!" Many things like this. So I say to myself that solidarity doesn't exist, like sometimes when you see imams on TV who proclaim: "yes [the full-face veil] doesn't exist in Islam."

3. How the Women Respond to Insults and Abuse

BUSHRA: Frankly, if I had to stop each time I was verbally abused I'd still be in the forest.

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INTERVIEWER: Did you ever respond to people who were insulting you?

JAMEELAH: No, never. I was telling myself it was pointless. Whatever happens they won't change their mind. I was pretending I hadn't heard anything and I was carrying on my own business.

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GERALDINE: Honestly, I've heard loads of insults and I don't pay attention. I try to cover my ears because I believe that if she's insulting me she already hates me. And to convince someone full of hate that our veil is not at all a provocation is impossible.

But anyway, if I'd started speaking to her, it could have ended up badly. And I don't want to insult the person because if a Muslim behaves badly, they won't say it's "this Muslim", [instead] they'll say, "look at how all these Muslims insult us!" Now it's also true that from a religious perspective we aren't allowed to attack them. Besides, we have more serious problems in our lives than these idiots who make comments.

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ROUKIA: No. There is an actual hadith, which says that the Prophet was in the company of Abu Bakr when someone passed by and insulted them. The first time Abu Bakr didn't say anything. The second time Abu Bakr got upset and the Prophet furiously stormed off. Abu Bakr was sad because he loved the Prophet deeply, so he asked him why he had left. The Prophet told him, "the first time the angels defended us. The second time when you got upset, it was Satan who was with us". I respect this hadith; the one who [can control himself] is the one who will have the greatest reward. We know why we are doing it. We are doing it for Allah, to go to paradise. They are ignorant. Allah will suffice. I am not going to complain. I don't wish [the abuser] any harm, I just wish him to be guided.

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AISHA: Physically, you have the people who shove you. But, you know, [when] they shove you, you give them back a good dig with the elbow and they calm down quickly. Yes, we're no Christians, because in the Bible if they slap you, you offer the other cheek. We are Muslims. If someone slaps you, you slap him back.

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LATIFAH, I think that before people contemplate physical aggression they experiment a little. But when they see the kind of mad woman [I can become], I think that at that moment they really restrain themselves, because usually they [take a look] and then leave. They don't see my face but they can see my eyes, which is enough in itself. And with the tone [of voice] I use, I show them that I'm not scared of confrontation, which really dissuades them from laying their hands on me.

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Maha, a 29-year-old mother from Marseille said:

MAHA: In general, [when they yell insults at me] it's always from a distance or passing by. By the time I stop they have already left. And since I'm often driving, it often relates to other cars passing by. But it's always in a rush: "hey, did you see this one!"

or “Fantomas!”¹⁵ Things like that. But always in a hurry; there has never been anyone who has stood before me and said, “Fantomas!” because if Fantomas headbutts you, you’ll fall on the floor!

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OMERA: No, I don’t let people mess with me. It’s not a personal insult [which affects] my self-esteem but it’s an insult directed towards my religion. Because basically the niqab doesn’t reflect who you are, it doesn’t reflect your face because one can’t see you. It reflects a religion, it reflects Islam. For me, when someone insults me or insults my niqab, they are not only attacking the woman who wears the niqab, they are attacking Islam, as in 2004 with the hijab. It’s an Islamophobic act, and there’s no way on earth that I’m going to let someone insult me because I’m a Muslim. Besides it’s true that I’m not someone who is ever at a loss for words, and I have no problem defending myself. I am as much the victim of the government as the victim of its citizens. When Sarkozy decided to announce that the burqa is not welcome in France and that there is some controversy on the issue, it gave *carte blanche* to French citizens that these people were your scapegoats and to target niqabi women. You’re not going to let yourself be gratuitously insulted when you haven’t asked for anything from anybody, when you are just seeking to practise your religion.

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Iffat revealed that a while ago she hit a woman who had insulted her on a bus. She linked her behaviour to her lack of knowledge on Islamic teachings at the time and now regrets having behaved in this manner.

IFFAT: I was leaving school and [someone] called me a slut. I was on the bus and she insulted me. I had just started practising my faith but was still a bit violent. We fought. I was wearing the jelbab, I had lifted up my niqab as I was leaving college and going to attend Friday prayer. May God forgive me! I should not have hit her. At first I was telling her, “madame, I don’t want to argue with you.” For about a quarter of an hour I must have repeated that. She told me, “yes, you say that we are whores while it’s you who are whores!” She said that in front of everyone on the bus. And so I hit her, and then I still wanted to jump on her but, alhamdulillah, I managed to calm down. I asked the bus driver to open the door [and] I got off, and that was it.

15. Fantomas is a fictional character that appeared in a series of French crime novels. This criminal mastermind wears a mask and uses a number of disguises to commit heinous criminal acts.

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Karima confided that she used not to respond but one incident in particular triggered a complete reassessment of her reaction in abusive situations:

KARIMA: But otherwise I respond [to people when they insult me]. I'll tell you why I respond. Once I was with my husband [at the airport in Brussels] on my way to Nice. We had been the first people to check our luggage and we were queuing. Suddenly the crowd starting to swell and although we'd been waiting for three hours, a woman jumped the queue and stood before us. She was really stuck up, snobbish. She looked me up and down, in a haughty, condescending way, probably thinking, "I've taken your place, and there's nothing you can do about it!" My husband was starting to push his suitcase [forward]; he wanted to react [further]. However, as there were only bourgeois passengers on this flight to Nice, I told him that if we were to make a scene, they would blame us and side with her. Everyone was staring at us from all corners, but my husband carried on pushing his suitcase. The woman was on the phone, and she said, "gosh, there are some people who are getting on my nerves. They are right behind me and won't stop pushing my suitcase. Who do they think they are?" She looked at us and told us . . . honestly, taking us for idiots: "YOU NO PUSH SUITCASE ME!" I didn't say anything at the time, and regret to this very day not having responded to her.

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Twenty-one women were asked whether they would report a physical attack to the police.

Geraldine stated that she would never file a complaint with a police.

INTERVIEWER: Why not? What if, for example, someone slapped you in the street?

GERALDINE: First, because my trust is only in Allah and not in the government, and [also because] our government does everything possible to feed Islamophobia and racism. I'm not going to cry in front of them. So I'll go to the police station, great! I'll go there with my niqab or even [just] in a hijab, and I might encounter someone [there] who'll insult me even more. And what am I going to tell him [when] the law has been voted in? If someone slaps you hard, even if you end up in hospital, what would be the point of [complaining]? The problem is that any incidents which affect us never make the headlines, but when it's the reverse, it's always in the headlines. To tell you the truth [the only solution] is to leave. I am French and before I would never have told you that. My country is France, my parents are in France. It would

sadden me to leave, not to see my family every day [But] it's clear that France is not for us. I think this affair has gone too far. It's really a shame!

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JAMEELAH: I was thinking that if I was to file a complaint, the police would heap even more misery on me than the general public. Sometimes I have even witnessed police [in their] cars who as soon as they spot someone in a niqab glare at her or make some snide remarks. I often get the impression that the police are even worse than the others. So I tell myself that it's pointless.

INTERVIEWER: If you had been physically assaulted, would you have complained?

JAMEELAH: I think the people around me would have encouraged me to complain, because I'd hide it even from my family, from my mother to avoid her getting worried and asking me to remove it. I was hiding a lot of what was going on outside. I'd often return home in tears as people were so [nasty]. I knew there were issues with racism, but I didn't realise people could insult [a person] like that. Sometimes I would weep with sadness, but as soon as I got home I would have to smile. When you have the feeling that everyone is against you, you think that no help will come from anywhere. You tell yourself that if you say anything to the family, you'll only upset them and they'll ask you to take it off despite your wishes. Others [family members] will say, "we told you so!" You tell yourself that you are alone against everyone. On TV they are always going on and on about [the niqab]. The only thing that enabled me to be strong was religion and faith, nothing else. Otherwise, I would have become desperate! I had the feeling that I was no longer human, that I was a monster. They should have respected me because at least I was a human being like them. When the person cannot comprehend this, then he or she has nothing in her heart. Respecting a person is one of the most important things [in the world], whatever your religion, whoever you are, whether you wear the headscarf or not, whether you wear the niqab, or not. Respect must be there. It's what is going to allow us to all live together. If there is no respect, there is nothing.

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Talibah experienced someone spitting on her and was asked if she had considered complaining about it.

TALIBAH: No, I am not going to complain. If one were to complain every time we were assaulted, it would become unbearable, and I think that the police would laugh in our faces as they are opposed to the niqab. So no, [I wouldn't complain] as long as I haven't been violently hit, or beaten, or really attacked with a knife.

INTERVIEWER: You don't complain because you think it's pointless, or for other reasons?

TALIBAH : I think that it's of no use. As long as no physical harm is done to one's body, I don't think it's of any use.

INTERVIEWER: So if you were violently attacked then you would complain?

TALIBAH : Oh yes, yes! If I was harmed, I don't know if they would do anything about it, but in all cases I would complain.

INTERVIEWER: But even verbal abuse is illegal!

TALIBAH: But if it's a person that you only meet once! Can you imagine? You [aren't] going to stop them and ask for their contact details saying, "I'm going to the police station to press charges against you". If you don't know their identity and you press charges, there won't be any follow up. We live in a country where we hear racist comments every day. It might shock you to hear, but one gets used to them. Some days more than others, it gets on our nerves. Sometimes I have even responded to the person. By contrast, when I go out with my husband, I don't hear any insults! Until now I have never been insulted when I was out with my husband so they must be scared. People really take advantage when the person is alone.

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INTERVIEWER: Have you ever pressed charges in relation to the insults?

UZMA: Not at all. The insults are plain nonsense and I tell myself that Allah sees and I wish that Allah guides them.

INTERVIEWER: If you were physically assaulted, you wouldn't press charges?

UZMA: No, no. Given that we are not in a Muslim country, anything related to the law is not in our favour. We saw that in Germany. The woman who was wearing a hijab was insulted by a man. There was a trial and she was killed. They finally said that the [killer] had a mental problem so he was sent to a psychiatric hospital. So the law won't work in our favour, it's pointless.¹⁶ It's Allah who judges.

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16. She is referring to Marwa El-Sherbiny, a 31-year-old Egyptian who was killed in a courtroom in Dresden (Eastern Germany) in July 2009. Her murderer actually received a life sentence.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever thought of pressing charges?

YASMINA: No, I haven't. Let me explain to you why. It's pointless because in all instances I think the case will be closed. Either you immediately settle the problem [with this person] or you forget about it. To some extent silence is the best weapon. Once I had to call the police. I was in a park with my daughter and a man was taking a lot of pictures of me. When I found out, he denied it, saying, "no, I was only taking pictures of the landscape!" So I snatched his camera by force and I saw that there were close-up pictures of me. When I asked him to delete them, he refused telling me that it was not forbidden, that he had the right to take them, and that in any case you couldn't see my face. He added that it was only forbidden to post them on the Internet or publish them in a newspaper. I didn't give up. I [told him that I would] follow him to his house! I didn't want to let him behave in this manner, because taking pictures, especially with my daughter, [was inappropriate]...

INTERVIEWER: And you called the police?

YASMINA: I called them several times. The first time I called them, I explained the situation, and they said that they were coming. After one hour they still hadn't arrived, so I called them again. Once he saw that I was following him, I think he got scared as he didn't want me to know where he was living. So we had [a heated argument]. We were shouting. I was carrying my daughter who was getting tired. I was starting to get upset because I couldn't understand why he vehemently wanted to keep those photos. So, it caused a scene [watched by] many people peering from the windows of their flats. And then, alhamdulillah, one bloke came down [and said], "aren't you ashamed, insulting a woman like that in front of her daughter! What kind of behaviour is this, especially at your age?" Then, he grew menacing and said, "it's simple; either you delete these photos now, or I take your camera and I break it!" And at that point the problem was resolved.

But I have noticed something. Generally speaking, people take it out on sisters when they are alone. Even the girls who don't wear the niqab, a girl who ventures out alone, who just wears the jelibab, is inevitably going to attract remarks, insults, and jostling while if she is with her husband, a brother, or a man, by some coincidence the glares are more discreet.

INTERVIEWER: And this man who came; was he a Muslim, an Arab?

YASMINA: It was someone with a very fair skin. He might have been a Berber. There were also some gypsies who witnessed the whole scene and they got involved, but they wanted to attack the old man. I told them that it would be pointless. And the

police did eventually arrive after the young man had forced the old man to delete the photos. And when they arrived they said, “yes, he has the right to take your picture as long as he doesn’t publish these photos”.

INTERVIEWER: So they defended him?

YASMINA: It’s not that they defended him. It’s just that they basically said that there was nothing I could do, even if the photos hadn’t been deleted, because they were supposedly legal. He can take a picture of whatever he wants.

INTERVIEWER: He has the right to take pictures of kids . . .

YASMINA: Well, that’s what they said.

INTERVIEWER: What were the insults that he was hurling at you?

YASMINA: They were related to religion: “dirty Muslim!”

INTERVIEWER: But couldn’t you press charges over racist insults?

YASMINA: At the time, I didn’t think about it. The only thing I was worried about was the photos. And anyway, [let’s imagine that] I’m in the street, it’s early in the morning. I encounter a man or a woman on the pavement who says, “dirty piece of Muslim shit”. There are no witnesses but I go to the police station. Where’s the evidence?

INTERVIEWER: And if there are witnesses?

YASMINA: If there were witnesses, yes. But what am I going to do, file a complaint against X? It’s difficult.

INTERVIEWER: So the main reason why you will not lodge a complaint is because it’s complicated, or because you don’t think that you’ll win your case?

YASMINA: Because I will not win my case, and because I told myself that in any case, it’s a lost cause.

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MAHA: Of course, I’ll be the first one to go [to the police] with my niqab! Unless I’m able to defend myself and I knock him to the floor, I’d go if there were three of them and they beat me.

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NABILA: If someone came to assault me physically, I would return him the favour. [Although] we are Muslims and need to behave properly, we are not dogs. Even a dog

should not be beaten. People think we are little doggies, that we won't lift a finger [if they attack us].

INTERVIEWER: Would you file a complaint with the police?

NABILA: I don't think I would do anything. [Although] I don't put everyone in the same box, in most cases, the police, people, everyone, all look at us as if we weren't human, as if we were from somewhere else.

INTERVIEWER: And if a group of people attacked you, you wouldn't file a complaint?

NABILA: No, this is another matter. Then I would file a complaint but I would also take care of it at my end. Because we have grown up in the banlieues, it doesn't work like that: It's an eye for an eye. You hit me, I hit you back. And with the family, you hit one person, you've just hit the entire family.

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INTERVIEWER: If you were assaulted physically, would you file a complaint?

SAFA: Yes, I think I would bring charges. Anyway I wouldn't stay there and do nothing. And neither could my husband bear it if I remained silent, doing nothing. I'm not going to let them walk all over me. We are all equal before the law! Supposedly . . .

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Omera was unsurprisingly one of few respondents who had brought charges, not once but six times in total. Once, for example, a man in a car shouted at her, "Hey, Bin Laden's wife, go back to your country!" She noted down the registration number and called the police:

OMERA: The driver was called and he was fined. So they know me well at the [local] police station.

INTERVIEWER: How do the police officers receive you in general?

OMERA: Well, at the beginning, it's true that it was a bit strange. One officer who I was standing near said to his colleague, "I'm not receiving her with her niqab!" I told him, "If you need to speak to someone, it's definitely me you should speak to. I'm like you, aren't I?" So it dampened their spirits. Now they know me, so they automatically send me to a woman.

INTERVIEWER: So you filed six complaints. How many times did you win?

OMERA: [I won] each complaint.

Despite the deep-seated lack of trust of the police or the French judicial system, another respondent who filed a complaint after being abused by a man in a doctor's surgery also won her case.

Omera said that she had also contacted SOS Racisme, a French antiracist organisation.

OMERA: They immediately told me, "you know, we cannot do anything about it. It's going to be very difficult to defend you on this issue. It's not easy, it's very delicate". I called them to know what could be done about racist and Islamophobic insults and they said, "ah, really. You know we're not used to receiving these kinds of calls". I told her, "well, you'd better get used to it because I won't be the only one. You are an organisation which helps the victims of racism?" "Yes, absolutely," she replied, "but you are talking about the full-face veil, and with the controversy it's a delicate issue. It's not easy to defend people who wear a piece of cloth which is going to be prohibited by the law. I'm sorry but I can't help you". I asked her whether she could refer me to another number. She said, "oh no! You should check with your community or with your mosque".

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Iffat was adamant that she wouldn't whether she would consider either filing a complaint or contacting an anti-racist organisation, if she was ever physically assaulted.

IFFAT: It's Allah who judges. I ask for the help of Allah, I seek support from Allah. And [besides] it wouldn't lead to anything

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INTERVIEWER: Have you ever thought about filing a complaint to the police?

PARVEEN: No, because I think it would be pointless. It won't make [the perpetrator] change his or her mindset. I try to attract people to Islam through dialogue. With filing a complaint, I don't see the point.

INTERVIEWER: And if a man comes and hits you, you won't file a complaint?

PARVEEN: I would try to defend myself as I am able to but I won't file a complaint. I consider that the French justice system doesn't suit me so I'm not going to call [for its enforcement].

INTERVIEWER: But why is the French justice system not suiting you?

PARVEEN: The only justice that suits me is God's justice. It is not implemented in France so I don't see the point of calling a cop who is going to fine [the abuser]. Does God tell you that if someone beats you, you must fine him? This is not the law of God so I don't accept it.

INTERVIEWER: If he beats you, he is not only going to get a fine but he will also go to jail!

PARVEEN: It's true, but nonetheless it's still not the law of God. When I have a problem, I'll call on the law of God and not non-Muslim laws.

INTERVIEWER: Do you also fear you won't be taken seriously or even be discriminated against by the police?

PARVEEN: Not at all. I'm not scared, I do not trust them at all but it's not the reason why I won't file a complaint.

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QUBILA: Yes, I always respond. Well it depends, because if I start responding to every person who makes [a nasty] comment, I wouldn't stop speaking. But when it's completely out of order [...] I respond because the [...] [abusers] never expect us to respond or that we will ever put them in their place. Their bluff is called and they don't know what to say. But it's tiresome; after a while you just have enough of it.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever thought of filing a complaint?

QUBILA: No. I start from the principle that we are in France. It's not an Islamic state. It's a state of disbelievers, so the legislation is that of disbelievers. It's not the laws of the Shari'a, so I'm not going to ask disbelievers for justice.

INTERVIEWER: If you are physically assaulted, would you file a complaint?

QUBILA: No, on the same principle.

INTERVIEWER: Is it also because you think you won't be heard anyway?

QUBILA: Yes, that also. I think that with the current controversy, I would definitely not win the case. But anyway, I'm not going to ask for justice against the disbelievers. Even if I was put in a hospital, I wouldn't file a complaint. I would try to fight back, [because] Islam is not a religion of Buddhists.

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INTERVIEWER: If you were assaulted verbally or physically would you press charges?

VIVI: Of course, I would.

INTERVIEWER: I'm asking you this question because the response is not obvious for everyone.

VIVI: Yes, it's true. I've asked people who have more knowledge than me and most of them explained to me—showing me hadith—that as long as you live in one country you must submit to its laws as long as they don't prevent you from practising your religion. If you are the victim of aggression, you should press charges. You know that the justice exercised won't be the justice of Allah, but at least you can protect yourself with the means available in the country where you live.

INTERVIEWER: The sisters who didn't want to press charges told me that it wouldn't lead to anything and also that the laws of God were not being applied in France.

VIVI: Oh yes, I had these kinds of discussions with sisters who told me that we were in a country of kuffir, that it was haram [forbidden]. So if this is the case you should also no longer receive any welfare payments since it's the money of the kuffir. If one rejects the entire system, then we better help ourselves an awful lot, because [state] money is not halal [lawful or permissible] either. It's too easy to accept what suits you, such as money because you need it, and to reject all the rest!

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Although many interviewees reported a certain mistrust or antipathy towards the police one respondent's experience did counter this prevailing attitude. **Habiba** related the following story about the insults that she had received from people of North African descent.

HABIBA: "I was in Vénissieux [southeast of Lyon] with a female police community officer. The officer came out [of the police station] with me to check my car, and a man of a certain age told her, "the law has been adopted! The law has been adopted!" The officer was looking at him without responding before the man carried on, saying, "she is no longer allowed to wear it! Hey, you are no longer allowed to wear it! I hope you are going to fine her!" The officer then approached the man and told him: "firstly, sir, this is not your job, it's mine. And then no, I'm checking her car's tyres. And in any case, the law hasn't been adopted yet, and if it was adopted, I wouldn't associate myself with the people who agree with the criminalisation [of the veil]." The police female officer was shocked, she thought it was [out of order].

INTERVIEWER: It's incredible that it was the police officer who defended you?

HABIBA: Yes. When we entered the police station, she told the incident to her colleagues. She thought it was [out of order].

Respondents viewed the controversy over the niqab in very negative terms.

AISHA: I quite simply felt that it was a persecution and a provocation against Islam. They have declared war on Muslims. They have declared war on Islam. As simply as that! Because today it's the niqab, but tomorrow, what then? Tomorrow it's going to be bearded men. Then it will become illegal to wear trousers rolled up above the ankles!¹⁷ And then what's next? One must dress in pink? They have declared war, that's it.

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FARAH: An injustice. An injustice as well as hatred against Muslims. In any case, there are many Muslims in France who feel that way.

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IFFAT: I felt attacked. When I see the sisters in niqabs, who speak on TV, I feel concerned. When they speak about Salafist movements, when they filmed inside the mosque while I was attending [prayers] there, I really felt concerned. I think they really have achieved what they wanted: hatred between people. We were the sole object of the [public] debate. Now it has calmed down a bit, because the law has been adopted. But, subhan'Allah, for a while it was all about us, the minarets, the halal fast food, the so and so, and it will return. Why does it affect them so much? I'm struggling to understand. They have really manipulated the people because I have witnessed it myself. I was wearing it before the controversy and it wasn't [as bad] as now. And when it concerns Islam, everyone gets interested in politics, everyone tells you, "the law has been adopted!" Yet [generally speaking] nobody is interested in laws.

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QUBILA: [The controversy] has no reason to exist; it's daft, it has no foundation. What is it going to bring them? Is the unemployment rate going to fall? Is the inflation rate going to change? Is [Sarkozy] going to leave? I just don't understand. Is it going to bring more security to public places? We are not safe anywhere. Have we ever heard of a woman with a niqab attacking someone? No, we haven't! They are [the ones] veiling their faces; they create a whole controversy, which enables them to divert [attention] from the more important issues. It's a veil! This controversy is their own niqab. They are even veiling their own brains.

17. In reference to some Muslim men who wear their trousers above their ankles as a way of adhering to the Prophet's way of dressing.

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Safa, a white convert married to a man of Algerian descent:

SAFA: Frankly, I think the biggest shock I had was when Le Pen (leader of the Front National) advanced to the second round [of the presidential elections]. I remember it well. I was standing and then I fell down! I didn't realize that French people were that racist and from then on, I was less shocked when the debates on the niqab happened. It was just a follow-up, a continuum, its [logical] ending. How far is France going to go? What will be the next issue because I don't think this has finished! They won on the hijab, and nowadays you hear them speaking more and more about beards but I say to myself that they can't [do anything] since there are also some French people who wear beards! But I've learned to expect anything! I have the feeling; I can see it with my mother. My parents were not at all racists, but I believe that as they grow older the more racist they become. My mother gets on very well with my husband, so for her it's as if he wasn't like the other Arabs. I hear many comments, which slip from [my parents] which show that it is racism. And yet I wasn't raised in this atmosphere, so it's really surprising.

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VIVI: There is a kind of consensus among certain people willing to pass absurd laws. Personally I've seen women in seetars long before the controversy arose and there were no problems. Why suddenly overnight were the cameras directed towards them? I have the feeling that [they] are scapegoats, that it's a political manoeuvre.

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INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about the controversy?

Wafa: It strengthened me because I was seeing all of this nonsense that people could fall into. It was impressive how much the media could affect people's mind-sets. I met people who could no longer think for themselves. On the public transport system you could see them overnight thinking that now they had a right to have a say on the issue, to say everything and anything to the "other" [the niqabi], and to hurl gratuitous insults against them goaded on by the possibility of a so-called law. It's really spiteful from the political system and the French people.

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XENA: What I don't get is that supposedly they voted this law in so that women are no longer obliged to wear it. But then in the streets these women are insulted. It's

not really logical. If I pity someone and I want to help them, I'm not going to heap insults on top of everything else. What they are doing is not very logical.

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FARAH: People are really like sheep. They [believe] what they see on TV. More than half of the things that were said on TV are 100 per cent false; there're only lies. If we really were were terrorists and all of that [in their eyes], then they wouldn't dare insult us. When you fear someone, you don't abuse him, you don't insult him.

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DUNIYA: During the height of the controversy, there was a news story that really left its mark on me and deeply hurt me. It was the story of two men who were veiled; they were wearing a niqab, and they robbed a post office. In the midst of the controversy! But it's strange because we heard about it for two days, and we haven't heard about it since then. Allegedly two men wearing niqabs were allowed to enter the post office in Essonne [south of Paris]. They were armed and as soon as they removed their niqabs people saw that they were men. They did what they had come to do and left with their haul. To this day, they have not been found, and we didn't hear anything about it afterwards. This is disinformation, meant only to harm us.

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QUBILA: They dealt with the issues amongst themselves, with testimonies from women in niqabs that were monologues because nobody asked them any concrete questions. No, [instead] they were asked questions such as, "are you married? Your husband, what does he think?" And why do you think they choose the term burqa? Because of Afghanistan! What do you hear? Terrorism, Taliban, Islam, Muslim. All of this is a vicious circle, which they have created [themselves]. And these sheep from France, but not only from France, because there's also Switzerland, Belgium! The [sheep-like] general public has followed without doing any research themselves.

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ELIZA: One must understand that there were certain TV shows dedicated to the issue with four or five guests on the panel. In general, when there is a debate, one [invites] opposite viewpoints, but not [in this case]. I have seen TV panels with six people and everyone opposed the niqab. Or when they were [trying to be balanced] they would [invite] as [representative] Muslim women those who are obviously against [the niqab]. Our famous Neither Whores Nor Submissives, who have apparently become

the feminist experts par excellence on this piece of cloth, because apart from this topic, one hardly hears a word out of them on any other current gender issue.

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INTERVIEWER: Did you have the feeling that your viewpoint has been represented, even by non-Muslims?

NABILA: Yes, once. I was watching Francis Lalanne¹⁸ who was on a panel with Tariq Ramadan, and it surprised me because [Lalanne] was quoting the sources of the Quran. He explained that it was our choice, that we shouldn't be judged for it. And there was a woman as well on the panel who was saying that when she sees naked women in calendars, in shocking poses, she feels ashamed and disgusted.

INTERVIEWER: Did it happen frequently or rarely?

NABILA: "I saw it on many reports [online]: non-Muslims who were defending us.

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INTERVIEWER: Have you watched particular shows dealing with the niqab on TV?

ROUKIA: Just one, but I thought I was going to reach inside my TV when Fadela Amara came on. Otherwise, they [invited] some Arabs but I found them too docile; they were not there to defend Islam. There was also a man from Provence [South of France], who was great. [He was] a sociologist [Raphael Liogier] who even did a [documentary] on the web about women wearing the niqab. I thought that even though [Islam] was not his religion, he was very open-minded. He was simply explaining that everyone is free to do what they want. He met several women wearing the niqab and said that most of them were converts, and [wore the niqab] out of their [own] choice.

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INTERVIEWER: How did you personally feel about the controversy?

XENA: I had the impression that it was the same old people who are being demonised. They [the authorities] are always preventing us [from doing] anything. Whether it's sisters organising sport tournaments, they always try to stop them. Each time we try to organise swimming sessions they refuse. They prevent [us from doing] anything! And now to concoct a whole affair, [adopting] a law, I think has gone too far.

18. French singer.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have the impression that the issue was treated in a balanced way by the media?

XENA: It's true that they let some sisters have a say. Well, actually it was always the same sister who was invited onto TV panels. But I think that generally speaking the [sisters who were invited] were not people who could express themselves effectively, who have enough religious knowledge to be able to respond correctly. I think they invited [unqualified] people, while [on the opposite side] confronting these people you had politicians and other speakers used to expressing themselves in public. So in each encounter we inevitably ended up being ridiculed.

INTERVIEWER: Were the sisters ridiculed?

XENA: Not always. It's true that there were some sisters who were even eloquent, but when it came to the more general context of the French law, it's obvious what happens if you oppose a politician with someone not well-versed in law. I thought that the sisters were [out of their depth] and unconvincing in their responses.

INTERVIEWER: But did you have the feeling that your viewpoint was being represented by at least someone?

XENA: They were always repeating the same points—that the law was supposedly being adopted for the well-being of women. I think it wasn't [to support] the women who wear the veil out of conviction that they created this law, but to oppose them.

The women were asked why they thought the debate had taken place.

ELIZA: I have noticed it since 1989, when girls were told to remove their headscarves without any legal basis to support such a request, and [how] later a law was adopted. Personally I don't really differentiate between the [two] controversies, because I think that France has a problem with the visibility of the Islamic veil whether it is a full-face veil or just a partial one. So, one realises that it first starts with hostile reactions which are later transformed into law. One must understand that there are other laws in preparation in the drawers of the National Assembly.

Ten years ago if I had been told that we had reached this point in France, I would have told you it's impossible, [France], the country of human rights, etc.! But already in 2004, I started becoming concerned, and by 2009, when they initiated [the niqab debate], it was clear to me that we would end up with a law. Everyone was telling me, "no way! No, you are going to see they won't do it!" Overnight [they put in place] the same mechanisms: the mission of research, the parliamentary commission, National

Assembly, and then prohibition. Other legislation is in preparation. Tomorrow there will be a controversy, there will be a mini social crisis in France, and it will be the same story all over again. They will most notably extend the prohibition [of the headscarf] to the universities; this is in the drawers of the National Assembly.

Some MPs already tried to introduce such a bill but have received little attention. They want to enlarge [the headscarf prohibition] to universities, for minors, in all places where public services [are delivered].

There is a social crisis and one tries to hide it somewhat with the most convenient of scapegoats. One hundred years ago it was the same thing for French Jews. The discourse then was perceived as just as legitimate as it is today in relation to Muslims. One other point is that Mr Sarkozy started out from the ruins of 2002 and thinks about the potential National Front vote. There is this fertile ground for the National Front, so he feels obliged to sweet-talk this constituency. During his electoral campaign, he had already announced the creation of a Ministry for Immigration and National Identity, and nothing came of it.

Then finally, the niqab affair materialised and Mr Sarkozy decided to officially instrumentalise it by initiating a notorious debate on national identity. [Not only did the debate] end in failure, but it became an outlet for all the hatred, all the bile stored deep in one's heart, as well as a means of expressing aloud one's inner thoughts, and ultimately it led to nothing. By contrast, with the law on the niqab, I expect that in his assessment of his five-year term, around the time [Sarkozy] will want to be re-elected, he will need to revisit the issue of national identity and the only concrete [achievement] will be [the adoption of the law on the full-face veil].

I might have read this wrongly. I'm not a politician but at least I don't suffer from amnesia, I don't tend to forget things. And one can see perfectly that he is adding an extra layer [to the nationalist rhetoric] with his treatment of the Roma people. It's the same as with [Muslims], they are a much-maligned population, a marginalised population who have fingers pointed at them.

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AISHA: They wanted to mask their greatest problems with something completely absurd. When you see the unemployment rate, the suicide rate, the number of people suffering from AIDS, how many people are homeless, how many. . . . Honestly, they had nothing better to do? Voilà, they wanted French people to forget their genuine problems, quite simply by planting fear and aggression in [people's] hearts.

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BUSHRA: Because they are racists! They fear Islam, they are Islamophobes as well! France today is Khadija, Aicha, Mohammed, that's what it is. And it's even Elodie who has now become a Muslim, and there's nothing you can do about it. They don't accept what France has become. It's not the France of old where there were only French people. It's a France with Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Malians, Congolese and Chinese. It's very mixed.

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FARAH: For me it was premeditated. It's to stop the expansion of Islam and notably the [number of] women who more and more often wear the headscarf or veil. There are a huge number of people who are converting to Islam and who are veiling themselves. And I think it's really seen as a problem for them, because nowadays, you can even go to Picardie, in the French countryside, and you'll still find Muslims. And that's a real problem for them.

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GERALDINE: I clearly think they harbour hatred. They are racists pure and simple, not only towards Muslims but towards everyone.

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MAHA: It's to conceal all the other problems. It would have been great to vote in a law banning unemployment, a law that gives work to everyone instead of closing down French factories to open them abroad.

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NABILA: It's to cover up the rest: the economic crisis, unemployment, housing problems.

*

OMERA: It has always been like that anyway. As soon as France faces massive problems, a small minority is fed to the French citizens so that they can spit on them, have a go at them, and then everyone forgets. Nobody can remember thinking about unemployment, economic deficit. What is interesting them now is the niqab.

*

ROUKIA: It's because they are scared of [the rise] of Islam. There are more and more [niqabis]. In the beginning there were only 3, but nowadays it's upwards of 500 and tomorrow there will be 1,500 [of us]. And I particularly think that when they compile their statistics, they realise that many [of the women who wear the full-face veil] are converts, and they are scared.

*

VIVI: It's really a political diversion. On YouTube, there was a Swiss MP, who, mocking French politics, said that the French government had been successful in its manoeuvre. People were only preoccupied by the full-face veil and had forgotten the pension [reforms]. But it has always been like that. My mother was Spanish and emigrated to France in 1954 to escape the Franco dictatorship, and in her time it was the Spanish, the Italians, the Portuguese who were badly perceived. My mother experienced a very horrible incident. While she was working at a factory she cut off part of her right index finger. They retrieved the piece of finger, put it in a cold place, and rushed to the hospital, but the staff refused to treat her. "We don't want any of these dirty Spanish here", they said. She was taken to another hospital, but she lost that bit of her finger. Immigrants have always been used as a scapegoat! What is really frightening now is the feeling of going back 60–70 years in time, to the era of Hitler, the fascists, Mussolini, where all the people who are different (currently the Muslims, the Roma) are affected by these measures. We don't know what's going to happen. It's Allah who decides.

4. The Question of Identity

AISHA: I'm a citizen of the world. Wherever I go I'm at home. I'm a descendant of Adam. I live on earth, the earth on which Allah put me, the land of Allah, of no one else.

*

BUSHRA: Oh yes, yes, I'm at home [in France], [but] they want us to leave: "we are going to put pressure on them until these dirty Arabs,¹⁹ these Muslims leave!" No way! I was born in France, I pay taxes, I've worked, and I used to follow their rules. And today I say: "no way am I going to follow your rules any longer!" It's my rules.

19. She uses the term "Bougnoules", a derogatory and racist term for Arabs.

I'm an adult. I'm a full-fledged French citizen! I'm not Moroccan but of Moroccan descent. But in Morocco, it's the same thing! In Morocco, I'm an immigrant, a youth from France. Given that I can choose, I was born here!

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CAMILE: Of course, I'm at home [*laughter*]. Who else's [country] am I in? I feel at home. I have my family here, we live, we eat, we cry, we laugh, we suffer, we don't suffer. Some people are pleasant, some insult us. But truthfully, the day the law will be [implemented], I'll no longer feel at home.

*

DUNIYA: No. I no longer feel at home since I have returned to Allah. I would love to go back home.

*

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel at home in France?

ELIZA: [*Sigh*] Oh, it's complicated. I have the feeling of being in love with a man who spits on me, who mistreats me all day long, but who I dare not leave because I'm still madly in love with him.

*

FARAH: Even when I didn't wear the headscarf, I felt [that I was not French]. It's more so now that I'm veiled.

*

GERALDINE, a convert: Yes, I used to feel at home [in France], but now I don't. I am stateless.

*

HAIFA: It's Allah's land, so yes I feel at home. But it's true that I would rather be in a Muslim country.

*

Iffat said that she doesn't feel at home in France but used to.

IFFAT: When I was in the dunia [world], when I was dressing up and going out. I could see that I wasn't disturbing anyone. And now I no longer feel at home since I disturb everyone.

*

JAMEELAH: I think it's hard to be a French Muslim. It's not in relation to ethnicity—although ethnicity plays its part—but certainly the main [issue] is religion. To be a Muslim and to hold French nationality, it's hard to combine both, because you feel that you don't have the same rights as everyone else. I used to feel like everyone . . . well, everyone used to accept me. I was dressed like everyone else and I didn't have many issues.

*

KARIMA: Yes, I feel at home in France. It's hard what we are going through at the moment but I was born here, I grew up here, I represented France in sport. That's why it's hard for me to entertain the idea of having to leave because they are forcing us to take off [the niqab]. I'm at home here, as much as [Sarkozy] and as much as the others.

*

Latifa would ideally rather stay in France than leave for a Muslim country.

LATIFAH: I have all my bearings here. I have my family, and I have my parents. Allah put me here. The earth is very vast, but I would rather stay where I have my mother and my father, in the place where I have built my life! [French] is my mother tongue. After my retirement, [perhaps I will] end my life elsewhere, but at the age of 27, to be forced to leave I think [would be] a pity. I think they should leave us alone.

*

MAHA: Of course, I'm at home [in France]. I was born here, I grew up here. I'm at home.

*

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel at home in France?

NABILA: Yes, of course.

INTERVIEWER: You define yourself as French?

NABILA: Yes, of course. I was born in France. I hold French nationality. Well, I'm French, but above all I'm Muslim.

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PARVEEN: Before wearing the headscarf, I was feeling at home because I was like them. I was the average French person. I was living a non-Muslim life, so I was feeling at home. From the moment I chose to follow a path other than the one that suited them I stopped feeling at home.

*

QUBILA: The French Republic is a Republic of disbelievers. It's not my Republic and they aren't my values. My values are Islam. It's my faith, my modesty, my religion, and Shari'a. The more I open my eyes, the further I advance in my religion, the more my faith grows, and the less I feel at home here. It's true that I would perhaps feel better in a country where the Shari'a is implemented, where we are freer to do what we want. If I could leave, I would have already gone. If I could, I would leave tomorrow.

INTERVIEWER: Where would you go?

QUBILA: I have some ideas. At one time Saudi Arabia was the country. What attracted me was Mecca; it's Beit-el Haram [the Sacred House]. I wanted to live close by, to do my hadj [pilgrimage] on foot, but I realised how the Saudis behave. So I said to myself I won't go to Saudi Arabia. So I don't have a precise idea, but, insha'Allah, I will go to a Muslim country.

*

ROUKIA, a convert: Since I've been to Mecca, I no longer feel at home here.

INTERVIEWER: And before?

ROUKIA: No, I've never felt at home. I have French [nationality] but I'm not French. There is no France in my blood. I don't feel as if I belong to any country. I feel Muslim. I'm not sectarian. I start from the principle that we are human beings, and now it's Allah who guides. You can't judge people.

INTERVIEWER: How do you see your future?

ROUKIA: We are leaving. We are going to study religion. I would love to go to Yemen, but my husband prefers Egypt or Saudi Arabia.

INTERVIEWER: And in the long run, do you see yourself living in a Muslim country?

ROUKIA: Yes, my husband is Algerian. I said to myself, as we are thinking about it, let's [settle] in his country. It's a couple of hours away from Paris and my parents can come when they please.

*

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel at home in France?

SAFA: Less and less so. I travelled a lot when I was younger. I come from a middle-class background and we were always going on holidays. Now we [have to] leave France [to go on holidays]. Last summer we went to Morocco and it was great fun. It's a very beautiful country: we eat halal, there are no hassles, and nobody gives us a headache. But it's true that I have childhood memories of the magnificent French landscapes and all of these things that I'm attached to and don't want to separate myself from. I like France, but I increasingly dislike the French mindset. It looks as if they don't want to accept that France is now multicultural. When I converted, some friends told me that I had disowned my race, as apparently Islam is a race!

*

LATIFAH: The values of the Republic are shaped according to the people who live in the Republic. So 50 years ago, all the nuns were covered, and being topless [on the beach] was shocking, while today it's normal. The women who are displayed on billboards with their naked breasts don't represent the values of the Republic of 50 or 60 years ago. The evolving Republican values do not take into account the diversity of people who live in France. This is reductive because [in France] there aren't only people who look like them. But, in fact, they don't want Islam, that's it! Even in England, when the debate [on the burqa] started, [the English] said, "no, we can't [adopt a law]; there is diversity and we accept it". In France, they want a country where everyone looks like Pierre, Paul, Jacques, and where [everyone] is dressed the same.

5. Wearing the Full-face Veil Once the Law Is Implemented

AISHA: No! I won't take it off. I won't take it off. They can fine me as often as they want. I won't pay! And honestly this law should encourage all women to wear it, just to make a point.

*

Camile didn't want to take it off but she is unsure how she will react in April 2011.

CAMILE: Why should I remove my niqab? I'm not an outlaw. I'm not a terrorist. I'm not a criminal. I'm not a thief. I, who today respect all the laws, the laws of God and the Republican laws will tomorrow become an outlaw. What I'm doing is a spiritual journey and not an act of provocation. One cannot prohibit someone just because of who he wants to be. One cannot prohibit someone from being a Muslim. [But] I can't speak about tomorrow. Only Allah knows the future.

*

ELIZA: [When the law is implemented] I think I'll be crying for a week—well, not necessarily crying, but coping with the blow. The problem is that I work. I can't limit the number of times I go out. I'm going to test the law a little. I'm going to buy a scooter, and whoever says scooter, says helmet. Then I'm very seriously thinking of leaving.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you want to go?

ELIZA: To England. Initially I was thinking of running a company, making it successful, and then being able to settle in Algeria. I'd take my company there. [But] given that customs and lifestyles are different there, today would be too [soon] to settle in Algeria. It would be impossible financially and I'm not ready to do so yet, and over there things aren't run in the same way. Here in France, you can go home at 11 pm and nobody is going to bother you, but in Algeria a woman who gets home at 11 pm is behaving unacceptably. And in Algeria there is also the problem of corruption, and I'm not used to that.

*

Geraldine would like to get married and leave France. Like a few of the other interviewees she is thinking of hiding her face with something other than the veil.

GERALDINE: If I can get married before [the law] and escape [France] quickly, al hamdullilah, otherwise we'll see how it goes. Some laws, such as those on dog fouling and spitting in the street, are never respected. Now if I see police officers everywhere searching for women in a seetar, we will wear surgical masks over the jelbab and nobody can prosecute us.

INTERVIEWER: But you would like to leave France?

GERALDINE: Yes

INTERVIEWER: To go where?

GERALDINE: Not necessarily a Muslim country, although it would be ideal. When I went to Scotland, it honestly warmed my heart. They are not even from your community and despite everything they accept you. The people become interested in you. They come and speak to you normally. They have no hatred, no fear, and frankly it was really pleasing.

*

A few interviewees said that they would be spending more time at home. Again, marriage was seen as an opportunity to continue wearing the niqab for some of the younger respondents.

HAIFA: Insha'Allah, I would have gone by then. Otherwise, I don't know. In all cases, I will not take it off and I won't pay the fines. Since I live at my mum's, if they bring the bailiffs around, because I haven't paid my fines I'll just try to not go out and be fined.

*

IFFAT: I'll wear a face mask to protect against flu. And may Allah grant me my wish to be married so that I can stay at home, [so that] I no longer need to go out. They say we are submissive, but it's them who are submitting us to these things.

*

KARIMA: They say that it's our husbands who are locking us away but actually they are the ones who are locking us away. Now my husband doesn't want me to go out alone because he saw how people were abusing me when he was with me. So he thinks that on my own [the abuse] will multiply, and always insists I be accompanied. We shouldn't delude ourselves. There's no need to dream; I would end up taking it off. But what is clear is that I'm really going to restrict the number of times I go out to the bare minimum. I'll go out only when I need to do necessary things. In fact, I would love to settle in Medina. It would make things much easier with the niqab.

*

MAHA: Who is telling me that I have to stay at home? It's not my husband! And now because of whom will I be staying indoors? [I'll stay inside] because I'll fear the cops, the €150 fine, the [compulsory] course on citizenship.

*

TALIBAH: [The controversy] hurt me. I was taking my kids to the doctor and I had the opportunity to take them to the park. But that's what has hurt me the most as I was no longer able to do these things with my kids.

*

OMERA: For me, this law goes against the laws of God. It's a law that I will not respect. I will carry on with my life. I will go where I want to go. I'll carry on as a practising Muslim woman with a niqab, alhamdulillah, as I have always done. If they come and fine me, alhamdulillah, I will use this penalty to make an appeal before the European Court of Human Rights.

*

PARVEEN: I'll try to go outdoors as little as possible and to leave [this country] as soon as possible.

INTERVIEWER: Where would you like to go?

PARVEEN: Ideally Saudi Arabia, if possible. My ideal future would be to become a housewife, a good mother, a good educator for my children. I also hope to acquire a high degree of religious scholarship and to pass it on, but mainly to be a good wife and homemaker as I can't see myself making my life outside [my house].

INTERVIEWER: You really don't like going out?

PARVEEN: No, I don't have my place outside, whether in a Muslim country or in France. I think the place of the Muslim woman is at home. I think that where she blooms is indoors.

*

ROUKIA: I won't do anything. I don't care; I'll remain the way I am. I'm not going to please them, and yet I know that [the niqab] is not a religious obligation. So if I wanted, I would take it off. But I don't want to please them.

*

YASMINA: I already have a surgical mask, and besides, it's my pharmacist who gave it to me for free and he is not a Muslim.

INTERVIEWER: Did he know what you were going to use it for?

YASMINA: Yes, yes, he knew. He knows me and he asked me what I was about to do and I told him that to piss them off I would wear a surgical mask saying that it was for my health. He laughed and he said that he was giving it to me for free.

INTERVIEWER: He is cool!

YASMINA: Yes, he is cool! But even at the post office, they told me, “yes, we know you, we’re not going to ask you to unveil.”

INTERVIEWER: What are your future aspirations?

YASMINA: I’m very much attached to my country Morocco, and if I had the possibility to live there, to settle there, it would be ideal.

*

FARAH: Ideally, I would like to get married. Well, not immediately. In fact, I can see myself as “Desperate Housewives”, but as a Muslim [*laughter*]! When I stay at home, I feel fine, particularly with children. I love children.

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JAMEELAH: I would love to go back [to my country, Gambia]. I don’t know Gambia very well, but the people over there are simple, and I like simplicity. Even if you have a hole in your clothes or [if you wear a] niqab, nobody bothers you, you do what you want. Otherwise, I would love to settle in a Muslim country where you can live freely, where I know I can practice without being bothered.

*

QUBILA: [In the future] I see myself, I don’t know, like Laura Ingalls. I would like to live in a small house on the prairies, to be married, to have a family, to try to do good around me and be of help for my brothers and sisters, because I wouldn’t be able to sleep peacefully knowing that my brothers and sisters were sleeping rough. Insha’Allah, I would try to do many things: to help orphans, to support good causes. I have plenty of ambitions on religious and non-religious levels.

*

VIVI: Although many sisters want to go there, Saudi Arabia is not really a holy land, [especially] when you see what the Saudis are doing. I would rather end my days in the Maghreb close to my husband’s family, in a village in Kabylie [Algeria], nearby Tizi-Ouzou, as genuine Muslim countries without corruption don’t exist. It existed at the time of the Prophet but nowadays corruption is everywhere.

*

XENA: Ideally I would like to settle in a Muslim country. I have a little girl and it’s more to do with her and her education [that I would like to leave]. She’ll encounter

fewer problems with her studies. If she wants to wear the headscarf she can do so without it impacting on her studies. In France it's not possible: you either study or you wear the headscarf.

INTERVIEWER: So ideally where would you like to go?

XENA: I don't have a definite country in mind. It's true that at the moment, and with my husband's situation, it would be easier to go to Saudi Arabia. I would like to leave, to be able to do activities in my daily life such as practising sport, be able to have fun with my children, insha'Allah, and not to feel the constraints that are applied each time we want to do something [in France]. Not to have to organise ourselves in a certain way. For example, if we want to swim we have to rent a house. Simple things always prove very complicated and that's what I want to leave behind; no longer having to make all this effort every time I want to do something.

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Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Muslim Women Wear the Full-face Veil in France examines an issue causing considerable debate and controversy throughout Europe: the relationship between religion and European identity or, more succinctly, Islam's compatibility with European values. The report offers the views of 32 women across France who wear the full-face veil, their reasons for doing so, and their experiences in public before and after the debate over banning the veil. It is an attempt to distinguish the real-life experiences and perspectives of the women who wear the veil from the popular myths and misperceptions promulgated by the media and national figures.

The At Home in Europe project of the Open Society Foundations focuses on research and advocacy activities to examine and improve the position of minority and marginalised groups in a changing Europe. Since 2009, the project has issued a series of reports, entitled "Muslims in EU cities", on the city and municipal policies in 11 European Union cities that have actively sought to understand their Muslim communities. The aim is to contribute to better informed policies and debate on diversity and equality in Europe.

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