Georgia Institute of Technology

Muslim Women and Secularist French Laws
MS-GMC Final Project Proposal

Mackenzie Dumaresque
MS GMC French
Dr. Andrea Jonsson
Dr. Narin Hassan

Table of Contents

Project Description

Historical Context

To answer how the headscarf ban in France came to be, we must first briefly outline the country's colonial history. Though France's colonial history is extensive and complex, I will try to simplify how it serves the French perception of hijabs (and other headscarves). Though France hosts a variety of religions, it is only Islam that is "framed as dangerous to the French republic," due to its association with immigration (Beaman, 45). The majority of French Muslims originate from France's former African colonies. In 1830, the French arrived in Algeria and "aimed to assimilate these underdeveloped peoples to French culture" (Scott, 46). As is prevalent in colonization, the French viewed the Algerians, especially Muslim Algerians, as an 'uncivilized' population. France also gained control of Tunisia in 1881 and Morrocco in 1912 and remained in control of the two countries until 1956 (Laurence 2001 qtd. Beaman, 45). Large numbers of immigrants came to France from its colonies during World War I and World War II (Scott, 50). An even larger wave of immigration occurred, in the 1960s and 1970s, when many European nations' economies were in need of a labor force, so they turned to their former colonies to recruit workers; for France, as we know, that meant recruiting workers from North and West Africa (ÖzyÜrek, 511). When these workers immigrated to France, their negative perception was reinforced by the conditions in which they lived. Scott writes:

> The jobs they found were of the worst sort: the work was dirty and unskilled, the pay minimal, and the social supports nonexistent. The men lived in cramped housing, clustered in neighborhoods that quickly were associated with high levels of prostitution, homosexuality, and crime. A report for the city of Paris on the conditions in which these migrants lived expressed appropriate horror at the situation of the men, but its tone and

> choice of words inevitably fed the perception that somehow they were less than human—only animals could tolerate such conditions (51).

Though France itself had placed these immigrant workers in such horrid conditions, the French were still able to exploit the immigrants' ability to live in them, (disregarding the fact that they had little to no choice). These circumstances were caused by the French people, yet they reinforced racism and discrimination against its immigrants.

Now, France has the largest Muslim population in Europe with close to 6 million Muslims (Pew Research Center qtd. Aziz), but that does not mean that they have been accepted and integrated into the French population. The result of the lingering past of colonialism is a subconscious, or even conscious, understanding of the colonies and their inhabitants to be "lesser" than the colonizer who sought to "civilize" them while exploiting and enslaving their people and their resources. While in Algeria especially, the French "insisted that their presence was necessary for liberating Muslims from the grip of traditionalism" (Scott 61). Unlike the multicultural United States, France never sought to embrace its diverse population, rather, it has always aimed to assimilate its people into a narrow national identity. The French government seeks a population that has allegiance only to the nation, not to communities and factions within said nation. A large part of France's national identity is its position as a strict secularist country. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs explains that, due to growing cultural diversity in France, secularism, or "laïcité," "enables all citizens, whatever their philosophical or religious beliefs, to live together, enjoying freedom of conscience, freedom to practice a religion or to choose not to, equal rights and obligations, and republican fraternity." The hijab stands as a stark contrast to this desire for unity. As Scott explains, "we cannot understand contemporary debates

about the veil without this history: in French eyes, the veil has long been a symbol of the irreducible difference and thus the inassimilability of Islam" (45). Muslim girls are:

> living expressions of a decidedly French dilemma in being simultaneously socially excluded and culturally assimilated while being defined as a threat to the 'national identity.' […] The headscarf has been made to symbolize something antipodal to French values and culture, which then triggers those statist practices (i.e., laws and policies) aimed at franco-conformity (Keaton 4).

France has long sought to conceal its dark colonial history and cultural pluralism by enforcing universalism. The hijab (also referred to as headscarf or veil), was, and is, seen as a glaring opposition to French national identity and universalism.

In the 90s, the "veil," as it was largely being referred to at the time, was an especially hot topic in France, as many questioned if it should be allowed in schools. At the time, decisions on whether veils were permitted were determined on a case-by-case basis by school authorities (Scott, 25). This all ended when one of the most (in)famous laws put in place to promote French secularism: Law 2004-228. With the implementation of Law 2004-228, all clothing or attire displaying religious worship were banned from being worn in public schools. Many opposed, and continue to oppose this law to date, saying it unequally affects minorities:

> On its face, [law 2004-228] does not single out any religion, several minority religions—including Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism—require manifestations of faith, while other religions, including the majority Catholic faith, do not. Children in these religions are therefore disproportionately affected (T. Singh et al).

Though the hijab ban in schools was controversial, and continues to be a topic of debate, the law has remained in place now for almost twenty years as it is not *legally* discriminatory. The French

Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights both "make a distinction between the right to conscience, which is inalienable, and the right to expressions or manifestations of conscience, which can be subject to restriction" (Fernando, 19). Already stigmatized and mistreated, Muslim girls are especially at risk of losing "life-chances in a credential-driven society," as they are "penalized for the politics of others, people who would sacrifice the girls' education to their own beliefs" (Keaton, 183). Despite ethical debates and international criticism on hijab bans, French politicians continue to target Muslim women with increasingly strict secular laws.

In 2010, France became the first European country to ban "full face veils, known as the niqab, in public spaces including public transport and parks, streets and administrative buildings. Women caught wearing a niqab in public space face a 150 euro fine and being arrested by the police" (Aziz). Then, in 2016, the full coverage swimsuit, known as the "burkini" was banned in 15 towns and municipalities in France (Aziz). Last year, an "anti-separatist" bill was approved by the French National Assembly that aims to 'protect religious freedom,' and to 'curb religious extremism.' The legislation and its amendments are being debated in a "highly charged atmosphere" following three attacks that occurred in late 2020 (France24). Though the bill does not, in its writing, specifically target Muslims, "the government's intent is clear: To get at the root of the separate culture of extremist groups holding the laws of Islam as superior to the laws of the Republic" (Cohen). One amendment attempts to prohibit minors from wearing "any conspicuous religious sign," and any "dress or clothing which would signify inferiority of women over men" (Al Jazeera). This proposed amendment sparked a social media movement found under "#handsoffmyhijab," or "#pastoucheàmonhijab" as it was attempting to prohibit Muslim girls under 18 from wearing hijab. Just this year, the French senate voted in favor of

banning the wearing of the hijab and other religious symbols in sporting competitions (Aziz). France's attempt to preserve its national identity and contain religious extremism is shown through its increasingly strict secular laws that are targeted at Muslim women.

I question if these laws are a result of Islamophobia, or if they are contributing to Islamophobia. Likely, the answer is both – Islamophobia and secular law reinforce one another. In just the past decade, France has faced more than 50 terrorist attacks that have killed closed to 300 people (Fournier). Intentions behind stricter secular law may not align with the reality they create, though, as recent developments essentially conflate "Islam, the religion, and Islamism, a political movement," which could "sharpen the sense of alienation felt by some, but far from all, French Muslims, who make up about 8 percent of the population" (Cohen). Far-right politicians have gained traction for their views on immigration and secularism. French political journalist, Éric Zemmour, is especially known for his "polarising attacks on Muslims and immigrants," even emerging early in this election as a "dark horse," as he has "vowed to reverse the immigration he blames for undermining France's identity and core values if he wins the country's upcoming presidential election" (Mazoue). Another far-right French politician, Marine Le Pen, who was runner-up in this 2022 election, garnered further support than the previous election by "softening her approach. Her politics are still radical—she would quit NATO and maybe the EU, strip away immigrants' rights, and ban the hijab from public spaces" (Grabar). In this election hijab bans are being used as political pawns to garner votes, and, arguably, it's working. France's national identity is heavily reliant on suppressing its minorities and it is a complicated topic that needs to be examined from an outsider's perspective.

Project Plan

Due to the expansive nature of this topic, I will be creating a multimedia website that seeks to inform the public on the history, present, and future of Muslim women in France, educating others on the discriminatory practice of French secularist law. In conjunction, I will be performing an interdisciplinary study to examine and showcase on my website the role of secularist law as a contribution to, and a result of, growing Islamophobia in France amid the current presidential campaign and election. I will examine the way Muslim women and the hijab are being used as political pawns in the current election through news media research and interviews with a variety of people, including an interview with Lallab, an organization that advocates for the rights of Muslim women. This research will be displayed on the website through essays, journalistic columns, video edits, and photos.

I have been researching this topic for several years. During my undergraduate studies, I acquired the methodological foundation in anthropology, focusing on the concept of identity (see essays in in "Sample Website Materials" section). My background in anthropology, French, and International Studies, has curated my love of learning about new cultures, and has brought me to now focus on issues of secularism in France through an interdisciplinary sociological study. My previous research will continue to be extremely useful in this project, but I will also be significantly varying my source types as I move through history and contextualization into the present. As this topic has become increasingly politicized, the women and girls who are directly impacted by these expanding hijab bans are being treated as political symbols rather than human beings. This website will seek to use my privilege as a white woman and outsider to French culture to give a voice back to Muslim women and act as a landing point for those looking to understand how the current political climate came to be.

My theoretical foundations are based on two main sources, first Trica Danielle Keaton's book *Muslim Girls and the Other France: Race, Identity Politics, and Social Exclusion.* Currently an Associate Professor at Dartmouth College, Dr. Keaton's areas of expertise are in "Afro/Black French & European Studies; racism, race, racialization; and identity politics" (Dartmouth Directory). Her book, *Muslim Girls and the Other France* (for short) was published in 2006, providing an analysis of French Arabs and Africans living in Parisian suburbs (Parisian suburbs, or "les banlieues" can be more accurately related to what we call "the projects" here). The book focuses on France's national identity and looks to ethnographic research done in settings common to Muslim teenagers, like schools and housing projects. Dr. Keaton highlights the contradiction between France's universalistic ideals and the lived experiences of minorities, especially those coming from North and West African origin. Dr. Keaton published this book soon after law 2004-228 was passed, and, as Manthia Diawara says in the book's foreword, it "contains an implicit warning to you, France, not to repeat the American racism in your country." I have been in contact with Dr. Keaton, and we are working to set up a date for an interview so that I can ask her about how she sees France's current treatment of Muslim women and girls 16 years after the publishing of her book.

Second, Joan Wallach Scott's *The Politics of the Veil.* Dr. Scott is an emeritus professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study. She is the author of thirteen books, in both English and French, and her groundbreaking work has "challenged the foundations of conventional historical practice, including the nature of historical evidence and historical experience and the role of narrative in the writing of history" (IAS Scholars). In *The Politics of the Veil,* Dr. Scott critiques the headscarf ban, emphasizing that it does not eliminate religious and ethnic differences, rather, it only heightens them. She gives a detailed description

of France's colonial history and the racism that has long occurred within the country. She argues that this history and treatment of France's colonial subjects is prohibiting Muslim citizens from truly integrating into society and feeling French. Another important aspect that Dr. Scott presents is the idea that sexuality lies at the heart of the debate on the hijab. This is a large part of the debate in present time as well, with supporters of the ban arguing that headscarves are "anti-feminist." I have also been in contact with Dr. Scott, and she has agreed to answer my questions via email. As her book was written in 2009, and she has continued to do work in politics and gender studies, I am excited to see how her ideas have developed and how she sees the current French political climate.

Using these two foundational works and pulling from a variety of other sources, my website will include essays about France's colonial history, French nationalism, and Islamophobia in France. These peripheral topics will serve as contextualization for what the current political climate is in France. Specifically, I will be focusing on the evolution of the hijab ban starting with Law 2004-228 (banning hijabs in schools), the 2010 niqab ban in public spaces, followed by the burkini ban across 15 towns and municipalities in 2016, the 2021 social media "#handsoffmyhijab" campaign (following the "anti-separatist bill"), and the January 2022 vote to ban hijabs in sports. These topics will ultimately lead me to performing an interdisciplinary study on the current French presidential election, within which secularism is a key topic of debate, as candidate Marine Le Pen proposes a ban that will fine women for wearing their hijab in public.

As I build this website, conduct my interviews, and create journalistic columns, I will be attempting to answer the following research questions: "How does France's colonial history and its distinct sense of identity affect its treatment of Muslim women and girls and lead to rising Islamophobia within its borders?" and "Why have Muslim women and the hijab become a key

part of political discourse in the current election, and how does that affect French Muslim women and girls?" I will take a variety of approaches, as previously mentioned, to illustrate these issues and answer these two questions and display this on my website.

Timeline

May / Early June Goals:

- Edit existing papers and turn them into column article format
- Create journalistic column from interview with Mariam
- Begin designing and formatting the webpage (using Cargo or Wordpress)
- Virtually interview Dr. Trica Keaton (author of *Muslim Girls and the Other France*)
    - Possibly get contacts from her to interview
- Interview Dr. Joan Wallach Scott (author of *The Politics of the Veil*)
    - Sent an inquiry, but have not yet heard back
- Email Lallab and set up a time to visit their office while in Paris
    - Get in contact with a Muslim girl student in the banlieue
- Reach out to all my French professors to try to get in contact with a Parisian public school teacher

Late June Goals:

- **Arrive in Paris 6/19**
- Meet with Lallab – interview them about their organization's mission
- Interview public school teacher
- Interview Muslim girl student
- **Train to Montpellier 6/26**
    - Living with host family and begin attending language institute
- Turn interviews into articles

July Goals:

- Upload columns to the website
- Create a source list for those interested in doing more research
- Website goes live – promote on social media
- Send the link for the website to high school French teachers; Alabama French, Global Studies, and Anthropology professors; and Georgia Tech French professors.
    - Propose to these professors' implementation of the website and topic into their classes and offer to speak with their class.
- Create a video from asking students a series of questions about French secularism and how they understand it

August / September Goals:

- Take the DALF (Diplôme Approfondi de la Langue Française)
- Present final project to the new cohort and propose someone taking over the website
    - Could be a different language who uses my format as a template to examine their country of choice's colonial history and its present-day impacts

Potential Public Impact

As briefly mentioned in my timeline, upon the completion of my website, I will be reaching out to different professors and teachers asking if I could present for their classes, and I will provide my website as a teaching tool for them to use. As I learned about secularism in my high school French class, I could revisit my high school to speak about the topic to their class. It's not often that high schools have guest speakers, so it would be a great learning tool. Also, I would ask my high school teacher to put me in contact with other French teachers in the district. Furthermore, I can reach out to my global studies teacher, Dr. Kent, from my undergraduate studies and ask if I can present this topic in her class. In the global studies course I took with Dr. Kent, we talked about immigration and intercultural competence, so this topic would fit very well into the course. Additionally, I can reach out to French teachers at my undergraduate school and Georgia Tech as well to see if they would be interested in teaching this topic and hosting me as a guest speaker. Even if any of these professors are not interested in having a guest speaker, my website will still be available as a Digital Humanities teaching resource for them to use, nonetheless.

Furthermore, as I have not seen anyone in the past nor the present cohorts create a multimedia website as a final project, my project can serve as an inspiration and guide for a future student to do the same. Though in creating a multimedia website the topic could be anything, I could also inspire a student to take up where I leave off. Meaning, I can pass my website down to a future student who is also passionate about this topic and allow them to add to the website or contribute their point of view. For example, they could study secularism in a different country, how secularism has evolved since my research was completed, or even turn this website into a nonprofit organization. The possibilities are endless.

Muslim women and the hijab in France have become so politicized that people have lost their empathy for these women and girls as actual human beings, rather than a political stance. They have become the face of French secularism. My project aims to use my privilege as a white woman and an outsider to take a step back from French politics to make these women human again. My final project is important because it is a current, developing, human rights issue. Generally, when people don't understand a topic, they are far less likely to have empathy or compassion. My website will provide a timeline of the oppression of Muslim women in France in an accessible, simple format providing people the opportunity to learn, and therefore, an opportunity to care. I will also serve as a resource as I offer to present in high school and college classrooms about my website and my research. In completing first-hand my own research, in addition to pulling from a variety of sources, my interviews with women that are experiencing this for themselves, will allow Muslim women to answer questions that politicians are trying to answer *for* them.

Though there are a multitude of articles and books focused on Law 2004-228, most were published in the early 2000s and do not bring readers to the present moment. There is a fear to tackle this topic in the present because it has become so politicized and polarizing. My website will be a landing point for people to observe the history, but even more so, to see how the history of Muslim women in France has shaped the present. Often, it can be overwhelming to have so many news articles, so many books and journal articles that the true meaning is lost. My website will compile and simplify sources to bring a sense of ease to learning, which will increase the number of people who are willing to learn.

Works Cited and Consulted

Al Jazeera. "'Law against Islam': French Vote in Favour of Hijab Ban Condemned." Religion News | Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 9 Apr. 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/9/a-law-against-islam.

Anas, Diaf. "Féminismes, France et Foulard" *à l'intersection,* 23 July 2021, https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/à-lintersection/épisode-9-féminismes-france-ChJB6tfnlU2/embed/.

Aziz, Shaista. "Opinion: France Is on a Dangerous Collision Course with Its Muslim Population." CNN, Cable News Network, 5 Feb. 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/05/opinions/france-hijab-ban-sports-aziz/index.html.

Beaman, Jean. "As French as Anyone Else: Islam and the North African Second Generation in France." International Migration Review, vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, pp. 41–69. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12184. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

Cohen, Roger. "French National Assembly Backs Law to Combat Islamist Extremism." The New York Times, The New York Times, 16 Feb. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/europe/france-law-islamist-extremism.html.

Cohen, Roger. "France Takes on Islamist Extremism with New Bill - the New ..." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Dec. 2020, https://aws-500412s99ds96299.esa.wangsucloud.com/2020/12/09/world/europe/france-islamist-extremism-bill.html.

Croucher, Stephen M. "French-Muslims and the Hijab: An Analysis of Identity and the Islamic Veil in France." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 37, no. 3, Routledge, 2008, pp. 199–213, doi:10.1080/17475750903135408.

Dramé, Ahmed, and Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar. *Les Héritiers. Tubi*, Loma Nasha, 2014, https://tubitv.com/movies/477241/once-in-a-lifetime?start=true&tracking=google-feed&utm_source=google-feed. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

"Eric Zemmour Face à Une Femme Voilée En Direct à Drancy : « Enlevez Votre Cravate, j'Enlève Mon Voile »." *Dailymotion*, Dailymotion, 25 Oct. 2021, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x852mwa. Accessed 3 Dec. 2021.

Ezekiel, Judith. "French Dressing: Race, Gender, and the Hijab Story." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2006, pp. 256–278, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20459086.

Fournier, Gaëlle. "A Painful Project for France: A Museum on the Ravages of Terrorism." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Mar. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/europe/france-terrorism-museum.html.

FRANCE24. "France's Lower House Approves Anti-Separatism Bill to Battle Islamist Extremism." *France 24*, France 24, 23 July 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210723-france-s-lower-house-approves-separatism-law-to-battle-islamist extremism.

Grabar, Henry. "How Marine Le Pen Convinced French Voters She's 'Extreme Right, but Nice.'" *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 23 Apr. 2022, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/04/marine-le-pen-why-do-french-voters-support-her.html.

Ivekovic, Rada. "The Veil in France: Secularism, Nation, Women." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 11, Economic and Political Weekly, 2004, pp. 1117–19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4414758.

"Joan Wallach Scott." *Institute for Advanced Study*, 13 Oct. 2020, https://www.ias.edu/scholars/scott.

Keaton, Trica Danielle. *Muslim Girls and the Other France Race, Identity Politics, & Social Exclusion*. Indiana University Press, 2006.

Lallab Magazine, https://www.lallab.org/.

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

"Loi n°2004-228 DU 15 Mars 2004 Encadrant, En Application Du Principe De Laïcité, Le Port De Signes Ou De Tenues Manifestant Une Appartenance Religieuse Dans Les Écoles, Collèges Et Lycées Publics." *Ministère De L'Education Nationale De La Jeunesse Et Des Sports*, https://www.education.gouv.fr/loi-ndeg2004-228-du-15-mars-2004-encadrant-en-application-du-principe-de-laicite-le-port-de-signes-1697.

Lokmane, Samia. "France : Une Campagne Pour La Promotion De La Laïcité à l'École Accusée De Racisme Et d'Islamophobie." *Middle East Eye*, 10 Sept. 2021, https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/france-affiches-laicite-ecole-polemique-racisme-islamophobie-colonial.

Mazoue, Aude. "Spooked by Immigration, Islam and 'Woke' Ideas: Who Are Éric Zemmour's Supporters?" *France 24*, France 24, 29 Mar. 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220329-spooked-by-immigration-islam-and-woke-ideas-who-are-%C3%A9ric-zemmour-s-supporters.

Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. 2021. "Secularism and Religious Freedom in France." *France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*. Accessed April 17, 2021. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton Univ. Press, 2010.

Singh, Tejinder, Hansdeep Singh, Jaspreet Singh, and Ranjit Singh. 2014. "When Discrimination Masquerades as Equality: The Impact of France's Band of Religious Attire in Public Schools." Issue brief. International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/FRA/INT_CCPR_ICO_FRA_17451_E.pdf.

"Trica Keaton." *Dartmouth Arts & Sciences Faculty Directory*, https://faculty-directory.dartmouth.edu/trica-keaton.

Sample Website Materials

Media Analysis

Les Héritiers is a French movie released in 2014 and directed by Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar. This coming-of-age film is based on a true story about a group of multicultural students living and attending school in the outskirts of Paris. The movie focuses on a particular group of troubled students who are all brought together into an art history class taught by an inspiring teacher, Madame Guégen, played by Ariane Ascaride. Madame Guégen gave her class of troubled kids a group project, focused on children and adolescents in Nazi concentration camps, that would be submitted to a national competition. Through this realist depiction of a true coming-of-age story, Mention-Schaar illustrates the divisive nature of French secularism, and the importance of education, respect, and hope in the lives of students.

In France, secularist laws forbid the wearing of religious attire in public spaces. *Les Héritiers* has an interesting way of displaying the issues that come with secularism. To explain, though the movie doesn't explicitly tackle secularism, it depicts the major educational issues that occur as a result of secularist laws in the everyday lives of the students. It is important to look at the way this topic is portrayed in media as, often, Islam – especially its impact on women, is portrayed in a negative light in media. *Les Héritiers* takes a very realistic approach to the topic without providing an argument of "right or wrong." For example, the opening scene of the movie depicts a Muslim girl in her hijab asking why she couldn't receive her diploma. The teacher explains that she couldn't give her the diploma because the student was wearing her hijab, and due to French secularism, hijabs cannot be worn in public spaces, including school. The student argued that she had followed these rules for years and that she wasn't a student anymore, but the teacher would not give her the diploma and the principal told the girl

and her mother to leave. This student never reappears in the movie, which is an example of the realist depiction of French life in this film. Additionally, there is a brief scene where the students are walking into the school and the teacher points at a Muslim girl and says "foulard" (meaning scarf), and the girl takes it off, but in comparison she tells a Christian girl to put her necklace under her shirt. In my opinion, this is an interesting demonstration of the inequity of secularist laws. Again, this scene is very brief and is never further discussed in the film. These two scenes, along with several more throughout the film, are realistic depictions of how secularism plays a part in the day-to-day life of French students.

Beyond displaying secularism, this film also depicts the difficulties that come with placing a large group of students together who all come from very diverse backgrounds. The students that the movie is centered on are all in an art history class together because they did not have good enough grades to get into other history classes of their choosing. There is a thought-provoking scene in the film where Mme. Guégen shows a historic Christian painting in which Mohammed is placed in hell. The many Muslim students react very strongly to this image and immediately assume that Madame is justifying Mohammed being in hell. Instead, she explains that it is historic Christian propaganda and that the students just proved its efficacy. It can be difficult to tackle learning and teaching when all the students come from such diverse backgrounds. This film also highlights the home-life of some of the students, showing that, often times, when students act out at school, it is because they are dealing with something at home. For example, we see Melanie return home to an alcoholic mother who does not care for her. It allows viewers to have insight to the reasoning behind her tough exterior. Since many of these Parisian suburb schools teach kids from low-income, and often immigrant, families, it can add an additional layer of context and difficulty to a learning environment. Mme. Guégen

teaches her students to see what they have in common with each other, rather than what makes them different from one another.

Schools in Parisian suburbs are notorious for their troubled and often underprivileged students from diverse backgrounds. There are notable scenes from the movie where we see how the students react to treatment by teachers other than Mme. Guégen. This contrast shows viewers the impact that respect can have on the students' behavior. To illustrate, there is a scene in a different classroom where two of the main characters, Melanie and Malik, are arguing. The teacher is yelling at them, trying to get them to stop, and writes them up. The teacher does not listen to what either student has to say about what happened, and ends up telling them that they will never get their "Bac," which is essentially a French high school diploma. The two students become even more enraged and Melanie essentially asks why she's even there if she's never going to amount to anything and proceeds to leave the class. This scene is directly contrasted by the following scene which depicts Malik and Mme. Guégen having a calm person-to-person conversation about what he wants out of his future. It is very interesting to note the way the students talk to Mme. Guégen with respect because she respects them in the first place. She does not talk down to him like the other teacher does. Far too often, students, and kids in general, are expected to blindly respect adults, even if they have not earned this respect. It is unfair for students to be expected to give respect without getting it in return. This movie shows viewers how big of an impact one single person can have on the lives of many, simply by believing in and showing them respect. While the project for the national competition gave these students purpose, Mme. Guégen gave them something even more invaluable – hope, and hope, can change everything. In direct contrast to the teacher's comments made about not receiving the Bac, the end of the film tells viewers that, out of the 27 students, 20 of them

received their Bac with honors. This was a very impactful choice made by the director to include this as a black screen following the conclusion of the film. It helped remind viewers that the movie is a true story, and to emphasize the impact that respect and hope can have on an entire class of students.

The story told in *Les Héritiers* is not only the story of these kids, but it's also the story of many other students attending suburb schools in France, most of which are not as lucky as to have an inspiring teacher like Mme. Guégen. This film is realistic, true, emotional, and inspiring. It does not follow the typical coming-of-age movie format, which is refreshing. It allows viewers to experience what these students, and many others like them, experience on a day-to-day basis. The movie includes a lot of background detail that adds to the audience's understanding of, and empathy for, the characters being portrayed. These seemingly minute details are what truly makes this film remarkable. *Les Héritiers* says so much about the educational impact of secularism and navigating diversity, without having to explicitly say much of anything at all. Not only will this film be very useful in my research, but it was also a simply enjoyable film, and I would recommend it to anyone.

Interviewing About the Hijab

The person I have decided to interview, Mariam Mahmoud, is a Muslim girl I went to middle school with when I lived in Nova Scotia. I reached out to her via Instagram after remembering that she wears a hijab and is open about her faith. I have selected her to interview because she is a Muslim woman who wears a hijab. I believe she will give me perspective on what the hijab means to her and other Muslim women. Thankfully, she received my message well, and is glad to hear people talking about it because it's an important topic that does not get enough attention. I believe she will be able to provide the sentiment behind why this topic is so important and why it is harmful to force Muslim women to remove their veil. I can understand it conceptually, but I cannot ever fully understand it. The topic of my interview will be the meaning of the hijab for Muslim women and why secular laws are harmful. I've selected this topic to help me gain the first-hand perspective that I am currently missing and that I am not able to understand as a non-Muslim woman.

I plan to ask questions about the meaning of the hijab and its importance in Muslim women's lives. I also want to gain information on her experience with Islamophobia, especially with how it relates to wearing the hijab. Since she is not French, I plan to ask her questions about how it would make her feel if she were forced to follow the laws that Muslim women are forced to follow and in what ways these laws are harmful. I am much more interested in the feelings, emotions and experiences of Mariam, rather than any data or quantitative information. She is not a researcher in this space, but she is first-handedly experiencing the challenges a Muslim woman may face, and I do not want to speak for Muslim women without understanding their experiences and feelings surrounding the subject.

This interview may create a sort of ethical dilemma as religion can be a tricky subject to cover and I do not want to insult her religion or misspeak about it in any way. I also imagine that it may be difficult to talk about experiences with Islamophobia, and to respond to the assumptions that others make about your religion. In order to ensure that she feels comfortable during the interview, I told her about my project and the types of questions I would be asking her via Instagram. I also made sure that she knew that she does not have to answer any questions that she did not feel comfortable answering. I plan to conduct this interview via zoom and use the recording feature.

Draft Interview Questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself – where are you from? Where does your family originate from - if your family immigrated to Canada, what made them decide to move? What are you studying in school?

What role does your religion play in your life? How important / essential is it to you and in what ways is it a part of your everyday life?

When and why did you start wearing your hijab? Do you think you will always wear it?

What does the hijab mean to you – does it speak as an attestation of your faith, is it a sense of your identity, or something else?

What are the rules / expectations for Muslim women regarding wearing the hijab and dressing modestly?

Do you and your friends who wear their hijab feel forced to wear it, or is it a personal choice? Do you have any Muslim friends that do not wear a hijab? Do you find yourself gravitating towards people who share your religion? If yes, why?

There is a conception of Islam in France, especially the hijab as being a way to control women, but also that Islam is anti-feminist. How does that sentiment make you feel?

Do you feel as though France is making laws on behalf of Muslim women without taking their perspective into account? How does that make you feel?

In what ways is French secular law that prohibits Muslim women from wearing their hijab at school harmful?

How would it affect you if you were forced to remove your hijab to get an education?

Have you ever experienced Islamophobia simply for wearing your hijab? How does Islamophobia make you feel and how do you cope with and combat these sentiments?

How can non-Muslim people combat Islamophobia and support Muslim women? What do you think would be an effective way to educate people about Islam and Muslim culture, especially the hijab and why women choose to wear it?

Interview Transcription

(General greeting and pleasantries before beginning of recording).

Mackenzie: Okay so first, if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, like what you're studying in school, where you're from and where your family originate from, what made them decide to come to Canada?

Mariam: Okay yeah, for sure, my name is Mariam Mahmoud, I am a 4th year university student. I go to a small French school here in Nova Scotia called Université Sainte-Anne. I am completing my bachelors of science and majoring in biology. My parents both grew up in Kuwait. My dad is originally from Palestine but his family was forcefully removed by Israeli forces, so he spent a large majority of his life in Kuwait. He later came to Halifax to complete his education at Dalhousie. My mother moved to Halifax as a result of the Gulf war in Kuwait. Both my parents met in Halifax. I was born here in Halifax NS, I have roots in Palestine and Syria.

Mackenzie: Okay awesome, I know you're in the middle of exams too, so thank you so much for meeting with me. Diving into things, what role would you say your religion play in your life? Like, how important and essential is it to you and how is it a part of your everyday life?

Mariam: My religion is the most important thing to me. There are some very evident ways in which my religion is a part of my everyday life. For example, I pray five times a day, I put on my Hijab every day before leaving my house and I attend a religious studies lecture every Wednesday evening. But there are also more subtle ways in which my religion plays a role in my everyday life. For example, the concept of intentions, and having very pure inventions, doing things for the sake of Allah (God) is a very important concept in Islam. Therefore, eating healthy every day with the intention of nourishing my body and taking care of it is something that I am getting good deeds for. Because we believe that our body is a gift from Allah, something that we are meant to take care of and that we will be asked about on the day of judgment. Going to school every day with the intention of enriching my knowledge so I can work towards my dream of becoming a doctor and use that knowledge to benefit others is something that from an Islamic perspective, I am getting good deeds for. Going to work every day so you can provide a living for your family, is considered an act of worship in Islam. Doing many of my daily tasks, when done with pure intentions, is something that we as Muslims are rewarded for. Even smiling, in Islam is considered an act of charity. It was narrated by our Prophet Muhammad "to smile in the face of your brother or sister is an act of charity." Therefore, as a Muslim, almost everything I do in my life, I consider it from an Islamic perspective. I consider my religion when it comes to big life decisions such as choosing my future career. And as you can see, it also influences my day-to-day tasks. Islam isn't just a set of guidelines for me to abide by it shapes my whole lifestyle and mindset.

Mackenzie: That's honestly so interesting to hear, especially you talking about the more subtle ways that your religion impacts your day-to-day life, I hadn't really considered that before. So, when and why did you start wearing your hijab and do you think you will always wear it?

Mariam: In Islam, when a woman hits the age of puberty it becomes obligatory to wear hijab. I started wearing my hijab when I was 13 years old. I decided to put it on because I felt like I was ready for this next step in my life. It was the summer before starting a new grade so I thought I would have some time to get used to wearing it out before wearing it to school. A few years later when I reached high school, I actually struggled with my hijab a lot. I found it difficult to fit in and I felt like I was different. I had actually considered taking off my hijab a few times, I definitely came very close to taking it off. Some people may have thought that since I was struggling with it so much why don't I just take it off. But I don't believe that just because you are struggling with something that you should give it up altogether. There are so many things in life that are "hard", that doesn't mean you should stop doing them. On many days studying is hard and I may rather go out and have fun with my friends, but deep down I know that the best decision for me in the long term would be to study for my exam or whatever it is I have to do to get the grades I need and get closer to my dream career. It's the same thing with hijab. As Muslims we believe that just because you have an urge or a desire to do something does not mean it is always a good idea to do it.

Mackenzie: No for sure, that makes sense, and like high school is already hard enough time for everyone, so it makes sense for that to be a time where you struggled or questioned.

Mariam: Yeah exactly, Hijab was definitely challenging for me in high school, just like it is challenging to go through high school when you're different in any way. Being different is not something that is embraced in high school. Anyways, thankfully, I made it through that period in my life and I am now very happy and confident in my hijab. Today, I could never imagine taking my hijab off. It has taught me how to truly be confident. It taught me that confidence has very little to do with outer appearance. Because outer appearance is something that will eventually fade away and disappear. It has taught me that I would much rather rely on my skills, my passions and my mind to become confident rather than getting my confidence from something so temporary such as physical appearance. There are many reasons why Muslim's may tell you they wear hijab, it can be for modesty, so that they can be seen for who they really are instead of their appearance, the list can go on. But ultimately, the reason why I wear hijab is because it is a commandment from Allah and my religion is something that is of the utmost importance to me.

Mackenzie: I love that. You kind of touched on this already, but what does the hijab mean to you, is it a sense of your identity?

Mariam: Right off the bat, my hijab is a commandment from Allah, therefore it is a religious obligation that I am fulfilling. It is also something that visibly identifies me as Muslim. On a more personal level, the hijab may mean something different to each individual. For me, it is definitely an important part of my identity because I have been wearing it for almost a decade now. It is also something that has played a huge role in making me the confident person that I am today. I used to struggle a lot with my confidence, it used to come solely from the way I looked.

On days where I had a full face of makeup on and a cute outfit I felt "confident". And on days where I didn't, I had no confidence and barely wanted to be seen in public. My hijab helped me realize that I am SO much more than how I look. It helped me realize that outer "beauty" isn't something that lasts. Beauty standards are something that are ever-changing, and my hijab helped me realize that I don't need to succumb to these standards to be beautiful and feel confident. My hijab helped me focus on other aspects of who I was. To work on bettering my skills, on pursuing my passions, on feeding my mind, and on letting those things define who I am and fuel my confidence. My hijab is also a daily reminder of who I am. I am a Muslim woman. Anytime I do something publicly, I remember that I am representing my religion.

Mackenzie: Yeah, I think that's something so many women struggle with, and I love that your hijab is what helped you gain that confidence.

Mariam: For sure.

Mackenzie: Okay so, can you explain to me what the rules or expectations are for Muslim women regarding wearing the hijab and dressing modestly?

Mariam: In Islam, when men and women reach the age of puberty, they become religiously responsible and held accountable for their actions. Islam has outlined a set of guidelines for both men and women when it comes to how we should dress. There seems to be a lot of confusion around this today, but in Islam, it is a religious obligation that women wear a head covering and dress modestly. By dressing modestly, this means to wear loose fitted clothing that covers the body except for the hands and the face. Of course, everyone has the free will to do whatever they want. No one can hold a gun to your head and force you to follow every religious commandment. And it is explicitly prohibited in our religion for this to be forced upon someone. As a matter of fact, as I previously mentioned, the concept of intentions and doing things for the sake of God alone is very important in Islam. Therefore, if you are going to complete any religious obligation it needs to be done for the sake of God in order for that act of worship or religious obligation to be accepted. And this is no expedition to hijab. Therefore, hijab needs to be something that a woman chooses to do on her own and purely for the sake of God. Not something that she is forced to do. And not completing a religious obligation does not make mean you are no longer Muslim. If a woman chooses not to wear a hijab, then that is something that is between her and God and none can judge her for it except for God.

Mackenzie: This is so insightful for me. It's very eye-opening to hear you say that you religion prohibits these expectations to be forced upon someone because I think that's not something that is understood by most non-Muslim people.

Mariam: Yeah, it's definitely misunderstood.

Mackenzie: Do you have any Muslim friends that do not wear hijab? Do you find yourself gravitating towards people who share your religion? If yes, why?

Mariam: Some of my Muslim friends do wear hijab and some don't. I have friends that are Muslim and friends that follow other religions. I value all my friendships. I have many non-Muslim friends that I have been friends with since I was young and that I love and cherish very

much. And I also find it very important to have Muslim friends because my religion is very important to me. My Muslim friends help strengthen me in my religion. And I don't need to explain things to them, they get it. For example, when we're out and it's time for one of the daily prayers they will remind me that we need to go pray. In general, as humans we tend to gravitate towards people that we share the same values with, that we can relate to etc. And given that my religion is a huge part of who I am it is not a surprise that I have many strong relationships with my Muslim friends. However, like I said I still have non-Muslim friends that I love and cherish very much.

Mackenzie: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Just to basically touch back on something you said earlier, do you and your friends who wear their hijab feel forced to wear it, or is it solely a personal choice? Mostly asking because that is a common conception in France.

Mariam: Personally, no, none of the Muslim friends that I know feel forced to wear the hijab. Many non-Muslims are surprised when I tell them that both my sisters don't wear hijab, my grandmother doesn't wear hijab and my mom actually didn't wear hijab until after she had me. As I mentioned previously, Hijab is obligatory in our religion but as humans we were given the free will to make decisions on our own. And choosing to wear or to not wear hijab is ultimately a decision that is between a person and God. With all this said, just like there are extremists in any other religions there are people that claim to be Muslim and force their family members to wear hijab. This is something that I'm sure people have heard of and is heavily highlighted in the media. From an Islamic perspective this is not acceptable. I feel like there is often a microscope on any wrong action a Muslim may do. And this is then reflected on the religion of Islam. This is what contributes to islamophobia. Just because someone is Muslim and does something wrong does not necessarily mean that it should reflect on the religion of Islam. When a Christian man abuses women or commits a crime or does anything "bad" it is almost never blamed on their religion. Their religion is not even mentioned. But as soon as someone that is Muslim does something bad the media makes sure to highlight the fact that they are Muslim and reflects it on the religion. Just because someone claims to be Muslim does not mean they are a perfect representation of Islam and definitely does not mean that every action they make will reflect upon the religion. Humans are flawed. Therefore, if anyone ever wants to know what the religion outlines then they should look at the religion itself and what the scripture has to say. In Islam, humans are given the free will to make decisions for themselves including that of putting on the hijab. It should not be forced, only advised.

Mackenzie: It's definitely interesting that your other family members do not wear hijab, but I feel like that speaks even more to your point of it being a personal decision between you and God. Um but moving into more things France-related, there is a conception of Islam in France, especially the hijab as being a way to control women, but also that Islam is anti-feminist. How does that sentiment make you feel?

Mariam: I could quote several verses from the Quran and narrations from the prophet that prove that Islam is a religion that is pro-women. However, it's not right that Muslim women have to constantly justify their choice to practice their religion. Just because some of their beliefs may be different than those of western societies, and that they may dress in a way that is different from

how women in western societies dress, does not mean that their religion "controls" women. Our religion outlines a set of guidelines for both men and women. At the end of the day humans have the free will to make their own decisions. I would argue placing laws that take those choices away from women are laws that are considered controlling. I believe that the people in France that hold these conceptions and that are working towards implementing these discriminatory laws that place restrictions on Muslim women are extremely hypocritical. These restrictions, some of which have already been implemented, aim to control women. It is forcing something upon women. It is quite literally taking their choice away…

Mackenzie: I just got chills haha. But I completely agree with that. I wanted to ask also if you feel as though France is making laws on behalf of Muslim women without taking their perspective into account and how that makes you feel?

Mariam: They are very evidently making laws on behalf of Muslim women. Clearly, there are many Muslim women that choose to put the hijab on. Although I don't live in France, I am an example of one of MANY Muslim women whose hijab is a part of her identity. And we are very clear about how we feel. A law that would not allow a woman like me to make this choice for myself would make me feel like I am being controlled and like my right to practice my religion and fulfill a religious obligation has been taken away from me.

Mackenzie: For sure. So, regarding laws that are already in place, in what ways do you see French secular law that prohibits Muslim women from wearing their hijabs at school being harmful?

Mariam: It is placing barriers on women receiving education. It is potentially standing in the way of women becoming doctors, journalists and lawyers. It is depriving a whole generation of women of all the amazing things they could accomplish. It is literally going backwards in time and depriving women from their basic right to receive education…

Secularism literally means that rules are conducted in a neutral way when it comes to religion. It means that the state is separated from religious institutions. It means that the state itself does not take a stance on religion, but it still allows its people to freely practice what they want. Therefore, I don't believe that these laws can be justified by secularism, they far exceed that. They are flat out discriminatory. Because they prohibit a group of women from fulfilling a religious obligation if they want to continue their education.

Mackenzie: For you personally, how would you be affected if you were forced to remove your hijab to receive an education?

Mariam: I could not imagine having to choose between pursuing my career and essentially, my religion… By making me choose between removing my hijab and pursuing my education they are essentially asking me to pick between my religion or my education. Because as I mentioned the hijab IS a religious obligation. And for me it is something that has been a part of who I am for almost a decade. I don't even want to imagine what it would be like to be faced with this decision. But if I was faced with it I would probably move to a place that would allow me to keep my hijab on while pursuing my religion. Obviously, this would not be easy, moving to

another country would not be easy. I would be moving away from everything that I had ever known. But ultimately, I don't think I would be able to live in an environment that did not allow me to freely practice my religion and fulfill my religious requirements.

Mackenzie: Yeah, I see that completely. A lot of the research I have done talks about the way that Christianity does not require the manifestations of faith that Islam does, so even if this legislation does not say any specific religion, it is very clear that they are targeted towards these minority religions and especially Muslim women.

Mariam: Yes, exactly.

Mackenzie: I wanted to talk a little bit about Islamophobia as it is very present in France and many other European countries. Have you personally experienced Islamophobia simply for wearing your hijab? And in general, how do you cope with witnessing Islamophobia and combat these negative connotations about your religion and the feelings it brings?

Mariam: Thankfully, Halifax is a pretty accepting place. For the most part I live in a really great neighborhood and the people I spend the most of my time around are very accepting. However, I have had to deal with a few incidents. For starters, when I first put my hijab on, I definitely felt that some of my peers at school looked at me differently. It was almost like I had become less approachable. All of a sudden people didn't want to come and approach me as openly as they had before. Instead, I had to make the effort to talk to others and appear extra approachable. I had to take the first step to talking to others and showing them that just because I have a piece of fabric on my head, I'm still a normal human being. Thankfully though, my close friends were super great about it. They were very accepting and did not treat me any differently when I wore a hijab. When it comes to incidents outside of school, I faced Islamophobic comments twice when I was working at a retail store and once this past summer when I was volunteering at a covid rapid testing center. Luckly, I have very thick skin so I don't let these comments get to me but nonetheless they are unacceptable, and no one should have to deal with this type of ignorance.

Mackenzie: How can non-Muslim people combat Islamophobia and support Muslim women? What do you think would be an effective way to educate people about Islam and Muslim culture, especially the hijab and why women choose to wear it?

Mariam: Accurate and real representation in the media is another very important point. The large majority of the time, if a Muslim women that wears hijab is every portrayed in the media, she is depicted as oppressed. The whole storyline will revolve around how she struggles with her religion or how she feels oppressed. This is extremely inaccurate representation, and it contributes to a false depiction of Islam and Muslim women. For example, in the Netflix Show Elite, a Muslim woman is portrayed taking off her hijab for a white boy. And this girl is essentially portrayed as being saved by this white boy. Nearly every attempt to "represent Muslim women" has ended in something like this.

Mackenzie: YES, I watched that show.

Mariam: Yes, and the reality is, the large majority of Muslim women are normal women, that wake up every day and go to school, hang out with their friends, spend time with their family,

travel and do many of the things everyone else does. For once, it would be nice to see a Muslim hijabi women on in the media where the focus of the show isn't on how she's "struggling with her religion" and just on how she has a normal life just like everyone else. Because if all people are seeing is misrepresentation and false narratives then that's all they're going to believe.

Mackenzie: Yes! Like why can't she just be existing like every other character and not just made to be struggling with her religion and strict parents, every, sing, time?!

Mariam: Mhm. Also, to continue answering your question, I touched briefly on how when I first put on the hijab, I felt like people treated me differently and almost as though they thought I was less approachable for some reason. I think this is a common trend for a lot of students that are "different" in school. Therefore, we need to change this. If you see anyone that is different then you make an effort to approach them, to talk to them, to make them feel comfortable. And let's teach the future generation of kids to do the same. Because I know that if people would have made an effort to get to know me back in junior high or even high school, they probably would have realized that many of the preconceived notions they had about Islam and Muslim women are not true.

Mackenzie: I can see that for sure, I think sometimes too, people struggle with how to approach what is foreign to them because they don't want to make you feel uncomfortable or say the "wrong" thing, that's something I have struggled with, but that's why educating people on other religions and cultures is so important and eye-opening. Even having this conversation with you, I've learned so much and that needs to be the norm. But yes, sorry, continue.

Mariam: No worries. But, yeah, we need to be speaking up against these discriminatory laws even if they are not happening in our country. We need to speak up against these laws BEFORE they potentially become implemented in our countries. We need to speak up against discriminatory laws in other countries, particularly in countries that we have relationships with because it is very important to make it known that we are against these laws. For example, here in Canada, one of our provinces Quebec has a history of attempting to implement similar restrictions on Muslims to those implemented in France. One recent example is bill 21. Therefore, we need to speak out against these laws before they become implemented. We need to make sure we are taking preventive measures to avoid discriminatory laws.

And lastly, especially for those of us living in very multicultural cities, I think we should all make an effort to learn about the cultures and religions that surround us. It will come in handy when it comes to your future careers or any interactions you may have. We all live together in this world and to a certain extent we have a responsibility to dig a little deeper behind all these false narratives.

Mackenzie: I completely agree with you, and I thank you so much for your insight. That's all my questions, so I'll let you get back to your studying.

Mariam: Happy to help and to hear people speaking about such an important topic.

Interview Analysis Report

Before and after the interview we messaged back and forth over Instagram. I told her a little bit about my project and what questions I'm hoping to ask, as well as letting her know that she did not have to answer any question that she did not feel comfortable answering. She expressed to me that she felt comfortable with the topics I proposed and was happy to hear that people were talking about such an important topic. The interview itself went extremely well. I think I was more nervous than she was, but once we started talking, I relaxed a lot because I could tell how open she was. Also, she would mention things that I felt strongly about, and it would make me basically jump out of my chair or get chills hearing her express what her religion means to her. It was special. Furthermore, Mariam did answer all my questions, very in-detail and thoughtful, which is greatly appreciated. She made me feel comfortable asking her questions and was so open to telling me about anything I wanted to know. I hope that I helped make her feel comfortable as well talking about something that is so dear to her heart because she could tell how passionate I am about this topic. There were no major technical difficulties, and everything went smoothly. After the interview, she messaged me on Instagram, sending a post about Bill 21, which she had mentioned during the interview. She also sent me two voice memo messages letting me know that if I needed clarification on anything she said to just let her know and it would be easy for her to send back another voice memo explaining it.

The use of this interview in the context of my project is mainly to provide background information of the Islamic faith and to hear first-hand from a Muslim woman who wears a hijab. As a non-Muslim woman, I don't want to speak for these women without hearing their experiences and thoughts because that is what really matters. If I'm not taking that into account, then I am just as bad as French legislators who are making laws on behalf of Muslim women

without their desire. This whole interview was so interesting to me, but there were a couple moments that really stood out. Firstly, hearing Mariam talk about the ways that her religion is more "subtly" a part of her everyday life, as in it's the reason she eats healthy and is kind to her body and that it pushes her to be a kinder person. This was moving to me because often Islam has so many negative connotations and to hear about all these amazing parts of it was so refreshing. Next, when she said:

> it is explicitly prohibited in our religion for this to be forced upon someone […] the concept of intentions and doing things for the sake of God alone is very important in Islam. Therefore, if you are going to complete any religious obligation it needs to be done for the sake of God in order for that act of worship or religious obligation to be accepted. And this is no expedition to hijab. Therefore, hijab needs to be something that a woman chooses to do on her own and purely for the sake of God. Not something that she is forced to do.

This was very important to learn and is useful for my project in helping to combat against the French government's belief that all Muslim women who wear a hijab are being forced to do so. Lastly, when we began to talk more about France in particular and the impact of their laws, it was really powerful and made me even more excited and passionate about my project. I also think this section will be most useful for my project.

Mariam answered all my questions and all parts of these questions. The evidence that this interview allowed me to gather is information about Islam, but more so feelings and emotions surround her connection to her religion and her feelings about the laws in France, as well as how we can work to combat Islamophobia. In general, the interview didn't make me re-think my project, it made me more enthusiastic about it. It did, however, give me the idea that I could also

consider a podcast format for the project where I would continue to interview a variety of people, including many different Muslim women in order to see how their perspectives may align or differ from each other. This interview will also allow me to expand my project as Mariam has offered to get me in contact with some other people who may offer insightful experiences as well. She has some Muslim friends who choose not to wear their hijab, so it would be interesting to compare and contrast their thoughts and feelings to Mariam's.

***This information will be turned into one concise article on the website.*

French Nationalism and the Ban on the Muslim Veil

ABSTRACT

Pride and nationalism are key parts of the French identity. What happens, however, when someone, who is in fact French, is made to feel like they are not? Secularism in France claims to promote equal rights and freedom of conscience, but it is discriminatory against France's Muslim population, and in particular Muslim women. With growing cultural diversity, France fails to provide for a large number of its citizens as secularism is exclusionary and leaves its Muslim population with the sentiment that they are second-class citizens, or perhaps, not even French at all. The pride and nationalism behind France's "Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité" doesn't extend its hand past ethnic distinction and racial discrimination. France's current manifestation of secularism does not allow for multiculturalism and says to its citizens that there is only one way to "be French." In prohibiting "all clothing or other attire displaying religious worship" from being worn in schools, the French government is essentially forcing Muslim headscarf-wearing girls to choose between their religion and their education. This article will focus primarily on Muslim girls' forced assimilation and the discrimination they face. The contradiction between who a Muslim girl is expected to be at home and who she is required to be at school leaves her isolated, unable to turn to her teachers nor her family for help.

"Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité": the motto backing the pride and nationalism of France. With a rich and complex history, France is a beautiful and celebrated country, home to immense tourism and much immigration. Because France is a secularist country, it promotes the freedom to practice any religion -- or no religion at all. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs explains that, due to growing cultural diversity in France, secularism is important now, more than ever before, as it "enables all citizens, whatever their philosophical or religious beliefs, to live together, enjoying freedom of conscience, freedom to practise a religion or to choose not to, equal rights and obligations, and republican fraternity." Not everyone agrees that secularism allows for freedom of religion, however, as many feel that certain policies in place are discriminatory against minority religions. In particular, Law 2004-228, which prohibits "all clothing or other attire displaying religious worship from being worn in schools" (Ministry for Europe, n.d.), creates an immense challenge for Muslim girls who are not allowed to wear their hijabs to school. This article will examine secularism in France, exploring its relationship with

French nationalist identity. Focusing specifically on Law 2004-228, this article will shed light on the truly discriminatory nature of French secularism, especially with regards to its impact on the lived experiences of young Muslim girls.

As France seeks to define what it means to be "French," significant historical events affect how the country intentionally and unintentionally defines itself. For France, a history of colonialism in Africa shapes their understanding of Muslims. That is, in the 1960s and 1970s, many European nations turned to their old colonies to recruit labor; for France, that was North and West Africa (ÖzyÜrek 2005, 511). As this region is majority Muslim, it can account for the beginning of a large Muslim population in France. The result of the lingering past of colonialism is a subconscious, or even conscious, understanding of the colonies and their inhabitants to be "lesser" than the colonizer who sought to "civilize" them while exploiting and enslaving their people and their resources. Furthermore, France's strong sense of nationalism can be traced back to the French Revolution, where modern-day France was established, solidifying what it meant to be "French" (Carlyle, 2002; Kedward, 2006 qtd in Croucher 2008, 210). As French-Muslim citizens do not have the same sense of heritage in France's extensive history of revolutions, they do not necessarily share in other French peoples' ways of understanding and appreciating what shaped France to be the way it is today. The past can have a powerful force in the present as collective memory of shared stories or historical events produce a contemporary "connection to particular interpretations of the past" (Irwin-Zareck 1994, qtd. Galbraith 2014, 29-30). The history that is most present in peoples' everyday life is drawn from personal connections to the hardships of said person's parents or grandparents, or even a specific location that they feel attachment to (Galbraith 2014, 44). What many French people may fail to recognize, however, is that "African conscripts (les tirailleurs) fought and died for France in the French army during

both world wars, and many more toiled on French soil as exploited manual laborers afterward" (Keaton 2006, 62). Despite the fact that many French-Muslims can tie their history to France, other French citizens may draw on their personal histories in different ways, thus telling themselves that French-Muslim do not share a history in France, and subsequently they cannot be as "French" as other citizens. Since many French citizens hold pride in the creation of their republic, they may not view other aspects of their history as equally important or as equally influential in shaping modern-day France. Therefore, they weigh certain historical ties as more meaningful than others, discounting French-Muslims' experiences.

In more recent years, Europe has endured several terrorist attacks by Islamic extremist groups, which has created additional negative connotations and islamophobia toward Muslims. With over 50 attacks, nearly 300 killed and 1,000 injured, just in the past decade, France has faced some of the most horrific terrorist attacks in all of Europe (Fournier 2021). Many of these attacks have been linked to Islamic extremist groups, like the January 2015 attack linked to Al Qaeda, for example (Onishi 2020). Unfortunately, and unjustifiably, the link of terrorist attack to Islamic extremist groups creates an association of terrorism with Muslims. The threat of violence adds a further level of sought after justification to force assimilation of French culture onto immigrants. As France experiences "a rapid influx in immigration from nations that are predominantly non-Western and non-Christian," French Christians are "afraid of losing their French culture and identity to encroaching minority populations (ethnic and religious)" (Croucher 2008, 210). As issues surrounding race, ethnicity and religion conflict with France's commitment to secularism:

> "the misguided assertion by the French government that it must quickly control the spread of Islamic ideas, in schools for example via Law 2004–228, or else face further

> terrorist attacks or a diminishing of a French identity, illustrates the conflict between Islam and Christianity and the inability of a government institution to control identity formation and negotiation effectively. Both of these issues are visually represented by the hijab. This increasingly important symbol (the hijab) and its effect on the formation of French-Muslim identity cannot be underestimated" (Croucher 2008, 211).

As France struggles to define itself, it suppresses minority religions and attempts to justify its actions and anti-Muslim sentiments on the basis of terrorism. Actions of extremists, however, cannot be used to define an entire religion of people. Some believe that the true fear doesn't even lie in the increase in violence, but rather, the fear lies in the fact that a carefully crafted nation-state has now diversified and is seen as a threat to France's long-coveted national identity (Keaton 2006, 2). If France wishes to continue committing to its promise of freedom of religion, then it must support all its people, not just Christians. Afterall, it is the responsibility of the French government to support all its people, not to push blame onto those who are reshaping what it means to be French in this day and age.

Though secularism is in place to allow freedom of religion, in practice, it often leaves minority religions at a disadvantage in comparison to the majority-Christian followers. Though it is true that Law 2004-228 does not explicitly single out any religion, postpubescent Muslim girls are required by religious obligation to cover their hair in public, whereas, in comparison:

> "Christians are not compelled by doctrine to wear crosses. In this sense, the law which ostensibly aims to promote equality among citizens by eliminating religion in public space becomes blatantly assimilationist and limits the freedom of expression among observant Muslims and Jews" (ÖzyÜrek 2005, 510).

Therefore, Muslim girls are significantly impacted by this policy as it prohibits something that their religion requires. Muslim students who have refused to remove articles of their faith have even been expelled from school. The French government, however, does not believe that these expulsions are discriminatory because expelled children may pursue alternative schooling methods, such as home schooling, correspondence courses, or private schools (Singh et. al 2014, 1). Though there are alternatives available, it does not ensure equal access to education for these children. As most of these children are from immigrant families, or are immigrants themselves, they are often at higher poverty rates, living in the French "projects" and would not be able to access such resources (Keaton 2006, 61). Furthermore, their parents may not be able to speak French, and therefore they do not have access to a French education, or possibly any education at all, which, in turn, leaves them even more isolated from their peers (Keaton 2006, 141). As the International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination (ICAAD) explains "children expelled from school under the Act face the stigma of being excluded from mainstream French society […] Thus, far from upholding the pluralistic ideal of secularism, the Act disadvantages minority religions" (Singh et al. 2014, 1-2). Unfortunately, though in its nature Law 2004-228 is discriminatory, the French Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights both "make a distinction between the right to conscience, which is inalienable, and the right to expressions or manifestations of conscience, which can be subject to restriction" (Fernando 2010). Therefore, despite the ban on religious attire disproportionately affecting those who practice minority religions, like Muslim girls, the ban is not legally discriminatory.

Despite Law 2004-228's legal nature, it is still unethical as it does not, in reality, allow for freedom of religious expression. Those whose religion requires religious displays often associate these demonstrations with their sense of self and their identity. Not allowing

individuals to have a sense of their own identity can have a significant impact on their well-being and understanding of themselves. To illustrate, research by Stephen Croucher "examines how Muslims living in France construct, and negotiate their identities in the wake of Law 2004-228" (Croucher 2008, 199). From conducting interviews with Muslim women in a variety of French cities, Croucher found that, for many French-Muslim women, the hijab is a vehicle through which they can assert aspects of their identity:

> "these women identified four broad functions/reasons for the hijab in France: to blend their French, Muslim and North-African identities; to help them feel comfortable or secure in their bodies while out in public; to aid in feeling a closeness to the Prophet Muhammad and to the Muslim community; and it provides a silent way to protest and identify themselves as Muslims to others. The hijab is a way for French-Muslim women to assert cultural uniqueness; it helps explain the collective nature of this particular community 'under attack,' and is a symbol of an identity crisis gripping France and many of its people" (Croucher 2008, 210-211).

By the French government prohibiting such an essential part of these womens' identities, it is forcing them to assimilate to this new, narrow-minded definition of what it means to be "French." Even more so, many of those who choose to veil, or partake in a similar religious practice, do not view this display as an option, rather, they view it as a duty (Fernando 2010). Not only does the hijab serve several functions in the establishment of so many Muslim women's identity and comfort, it is also simply viewed by many as a responsibility that they must uphold -- positive benefits aside. Through the headscarf-ban, the French government is stripping Muslim women of their identity and comfort and attempting to excuse its actions under the false pretext of secularism.

In prohibiting veils from being worn in schools, the French government is essentially forcing headscarf-wearing Muslim girls to choose between their religion and their education, leaving them stuck between the contradicting expectations of their religious teachings and their French secularist expectations at school. French headscarf-wearing Muslim girls "expose fundamental contradictions between that highly abstracted notion of universalism and the lived reality of ethnic distinction and racialized discrimination against people of non-European origins and of color" (Keaton 2006, 4). Regardless of the fact that secularism intends to provide freedom of religion, in practice, it is in fact doing the exact opposite. It is extremely taxing for these young girls to maintain the contradiction of their expectations as a Muslim woman, and the realities they experience in school, where such practices -- like fasting, praying, and vieling -- are "deemed disruptive or unacceptable in secular public space" (Keaton 2006, 146). Beyond the issue of veiling, Muslim girls suffer many more difficulties at school leaving them at high risk of failing or being expelled. Their secular education often contradicts with what they learn through their religion, and certain requirements -- like swimming in gym class -- contradict with their religions requirements for modesty (Keaton 2006, Ch. 5). It is imperative that the French government does not create any more obstacles for these young girls who are already in a constant tug-of-war with their religious expectations and French societal expectations. Already stigmatized and mistreated, "these girls are penalized for the politics of others, people who would sacrifice the girls' education to their own beliefs, thereby reducing the girls' life chances in a credential-driven society. Already, those in the outer cities receive a woefully inadequate education, and it is only further compromised by this law" (Keaton 2006, 183). Muslim girls should not have to be in a constant battle with society and their sense of self to simply receive equal access to education.

Law 2004-228 is not secularism, rather, it is forced assimilation of minorities, backed by racism and islamophobia. France is trying to very narrowly define what it means to be 'French,' telling certain people that because they look different, because they dress differently, because they are not Christian, they are not French. Yet, many of these people were born in France or have lived in France since they can remember, and can even trace their family history to fighting for France in both world wars. Rising immigration and diversity pose a threat to the clearly defined French national identity, but who has the right to decide what it means to be 'French'? The ban on Muslim women wearing their hijabs serves as a clear display of the true nature of secularism, trying to maintain this narrowly defined national identity. Even further, this law contradicts the exact principles it is claiming to uphold as it does not allow for freedom of religion for Muslim girls who desire to veil at school. As children of often poor, immigrant, minority families, these girls are already at an extreme disadvantage from their Christian counterparts. It is unjust to create yet another obstacle that these girls must endure simply to receive access to education. Though secularism is an important French principle, banning children from wearing their religious attire to school and expelling them if they refuse to remove it, does not enforce religious freedom, rather it strips individuals of their identities and acts as yet another barrier to their already unequal access to education.

Works Cited

Croucher, Stephen M. 2008. "French-Muslims and the Hijab: An Analysis of Identity and the Islamic Veil in France." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 37 (3): 199–213. doi:10.1080/17475750903135408.

Fernando, Myanthi L. 2010. "Reconfiguring Freedom: Muslim Piety and the Limits of Secular Law and Public Discourse in France." *American Ethnologist* 37: 19-35. https://doi-org.libdata.lib.ua.edu/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01239.x.

Fournier, Gaëlle. "A Painful Project for France: A Museum on the Ravages of Terrorism." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, March 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/europe/france-terrorism-museum.html.

Galbraith, Marysia H. "We Have Always Been in Europe': Deploying the Past to Shape the Present." *In Being and Becoming European in Poland: European Integration and Self-Identity*, 27–55. London: Anthem Press, 2017.

Keaton, Trica Danielle. 2006. *Muslim Girls and the Other France: Race, Identity Politics, and Social Exclusion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. 2021. "Secularism and Religious Freedom in France." *France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*. Accessed April 17, 2021. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france.

Onishi, Norimitsu. "Charlie Hebdo Republishes Cartoons That Prompted Deadly 2015 Attack." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, September 1, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-cartoons-trial-france.html.

ÖzyÜrek, E. 2005. "The Politics of Cultural Unification, Secularism, and the Place of Islam in the New Europe." *American Ethnologist* 32: 509-512. https://doi-org.libdata.lib.ua.edu/10.1525/ae.2005.32.4.509.

Singh, Tejinder, Hansdeep Singh, Jaspreet Singh, and Ranjit Singh. 2014. "When Discrimination Masquerades as Equality: The Impact of France's Band of Religious Attire in Public Schools." Issue brief. *International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination*. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/FRA/INT_CCPR_ICO_FRA_17451_E.pdf.

Existing Between Two Conflicting Cultural Models: The Mental Health Impact of Secularism in France on Muslim Girls

Secularism in France claims to promote equal rights and freedom of conscience, but aspects of policies aimed at promoting secularism are discriminatory, especially against Muslim women. In prohibiting "all clothing or other attire displaying religious worship" (Ministry for Europe, n.d.) from being worn in public spaces--specifically schools--the French government is essentially forcing headscarf-wearing Muslim girls to either choose between their religion and their education, or to maintain two contradictory identities. The conflict between who a Muslim girl is expected to be at home and who she is expected to be at school is representative of two conflicting cultural models. The Muslim religion's expectations for women can be seen as one cultural model that exists in opposition with another cultural model: expectations for secular women and secular education. The inconsistent expectations and information placed upon these young girls can leave them feeling isolated and lost as they are unable to turn to their teachers nor their families for guidance, which can have a negative impact on their mental health. Using cognitive anthropological methods, anthropologists can study the possible negative impact on the mental health of Muslim girls in secular schools in France experiencing contradicting expectations from two different cultural models.

Building off of existing research by Snodgrass et al. (2014), and Dengah et al. (2019), a cognitive anthropological approach to studying the impact of the banning of the Islamic veil, will not only provide information on this specific topic, but it will also provide valuable information about the impact of living between two conflicting cultural models. Snodgrass et al. (2014) develops a concept of "cultural dissonance," using Dressler's "cultural consonance": "an individual's consistency with his or her culture," and adding Leon Festinger's "cognitive

dissonance": psychic tension associated with conflicting beliefs and attitudes" (Dressler and Bindon 2000, Festinger 2003 [1957] qtd. in Snodgrass et al. 2014, 482). Using this theory, Dengah et. al (2019) studied the "impact of cultural consonance and dissonance on mental health among Utah and Mormon women" (439). His study illustrates the increased stress associated with consonance in two conflicting models, explaining that "cultural dissonance arising out of the attempt to live up to two or more incongruent styles of life may be nearly as distressing as not being consonant with either [cultural model]" (Dengah et. al 2019, 454). As these young Utah women attempt to traverse the conflicting expectations they are presented with, it will influence "their cultural positionality (or dislocation), which, in turn, will shape their mental well-being" (Dengah et. al 2019, 445). It is in this same sense that Muslim girls in France are caught between conflicting models of their religion and their secular education, but even more so as they are not even given the choice of whether or not they can adhere to their religious beliefs while completing a public education. Cognitive anthropological methods and cultural dissonance theories could be used to explain "health processes in contexts of cultural conflict such as might be experienced by ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants, and otherwise socially marginalized individuals," like Muslim girls attending public schools in France who "might feel compelled to embody in their belief and behavior potentially competing and even incompatible cultural norms defining success and the good life" (Snodgrass et. al 2014, 497). As such a study about the mental health impact of Muslim girls in France being prohibited from wearing their religious attire to public school is similar to Dengah et. al (2019), it is clear that using similar methodology is an efficient, effective, and useful way to study their conflicting cultural models.

Though there has been much interest and research into the ban of the Islamic veil, a cognitive anthropological approach can expand this research in order to provide clear insight into

the effects of the ban, specifically on the mental health of young Muslim girls. To illustrate, research by Stephen Croucher "examines how Muslims living in France construct and negotiate their identities in the wake of Law 2004-228, a French law banning the wearing of the Islamic veil in French public schools" (Croucher 2008, 199). Croucher offers a review on existing literature about Islamic identity and the hijab, providing a history of veiling and an explanation of identity, focusing particularly on the cultural aspect of identity. For his research methodology, Croucher conducted interviews with 42 Muslim women in multiple different cities in France. These open-ended interviews were conducted to "gain an understanding of the hijab and Muslim identity," by asking "a multitude of questions about their life experiences, family, religion, perceptions about France, and other issues that organically developed during the 'conversations'" (Croucher 2008, 203-204). Croucher analyzed the transcripts of his interviews using Glaser & Strauss (1967)'s grounded theory approach to find any patterns that arose (Croucher 2008, 204). Though his research provided interesting and engaging findings, providing quotations from some interviewees, his study could be greatly improved using cognitive anthropological methods. Croucher's research is qualitative, but if he had used techniques such as freelisting and pile sorting, his research could have been quantified and empirically supported. For example, Croucher asks "how does the hijab function as a tool of French-Muslim female identity?" (Croucher 2008, 203). If he had formatted this question for a freelisting, asking "please tell me all the things that are a part of French-Muslim female identity" he could have then determined the saliency of the veil and any other contributing aspects to these women's identities. Croucher could have also directly compared secular and Muslim women perspectives if he had taken this approach and would have been able to determine the level of cultural consonance or dissonance among these women. As he is only gathering personal accounts from Muslim women, he is

lacking the duality of being able to compare and contrast the experiences of secular and Muslim women. Croucher provides personal accounts and feelings, which are important and interesting, however, if he had reformatted his questions and performed a freelisting and pile sort, his findings would be significantly more tangible.

The importance of this research is to provide evidence as to whether or not secularism allows for equal access to education, and to determine if it has any negative mental health repercussions for those directly affected by the policy. Cognitive anthropological methods can provide data that could be used to support individual and organizational efforts to lobby against Law 2004-228. It can allow for the removal of the personal opinions and feelings of lobbyists in order to provide empirical data showing the mental health impact of the ban. A cognitive approach can concise and focus on a specific issue surrounding this policy: the educational and psychological impact on young Muslim girls in public schools. Concentrating the issue around a vulnerable group in France can help foster more empathy and understanding from those in support of the ban. If the French government cannot be swayed to remove the ban on the hijab, even after its truly discriminatory nature has been presented, perhaps they can be swayed by empirical evidence of their direct impact on the mental health of these young Muslim girls.

Works Cited

Croucher, Stephen M. 2008. "French-Muslims and the Hijab: An Analysis of Identity and the Islamic Veil in France." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 37 (3): 199–213. doi:10.1080/17475750903135408.

Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. 2021. "Secularism and Religious Freedom in France." *France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*. Accessed April 17. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france.

Dengah, H. J., Elizabeth Bingham Thomas, Erica Hawvermale, and Essa Temple. 2019. "'Find That Balance:' The Impact of Cultural Consonance and Dissonance on Mental Health among Utah and Mormon Women." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 33 (3): 439–58. doi:10.1111/maq.12527.

Snodgrass, Jeffrey G., H. J. Dengah, and Michael G. Lacy. 2014. "'I Swear to God, I Only Want People Here Who Are Losers!' Cultural Dissonance and the (Problematic) Allure of Azeroth." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 28 (4): 480–501. doi:10.1111/maq.12116.