This article was written in the middle of the debate on the advent of the ‘affair of the headscarf’. It is intended for those who have forgotten or denied the cause of women, including those thought to be natural allies, for those who lead by ignorance or intellectual laziness. This is an article written from having had enough of the nonsense talks at that time, in order to inform of a certain reality of Muslim women in France. Yes, the shari’a flows between the threads of the French Civil Code. Yes, girls are forced into marriage which is a crime: rape. Yes, some of our neighbourhoods are fenced in by a new social force, often encouraged by institutions and political parties under the pretext of social peace; this force is called political Islam.

The ideology which bears the name of political Islamism cannot avoid being affected by economic and political changes in the international scene, but it still primarily concentrates its attacks against women. Muslim women have to be reminded of this fact. In Afghanistan, Algeria, Nigeria and Iran, it is Muslim women that have been murdered, tortured and stoned to death.

Happily for us immigrant women or women born to immigrants, we do not have to live in this situation. It is still, however, necessary to recognise that France has been contaminated by this ideology. It does not, indeed, have the barbaric face that it shows in those other countries, but thousands of women immigrants or those born to immigrants are victims of a double discrimination: victims of racism on the one hand, and of a patriarchal and obscurantist ideology on the other.

The application of shari’a law in France

In the area of individual status, which governs personal relations (marriage, divorce), women living in France find that French courts apply to them the legislation of their country of origin.

More and more women find themselves divorced by repudiation in their country of origin by their husband, who pronounces the magic formula three times (as prescribed by the shari’a). This has simply to be validated by an exequatur in France for the woman to find herself divorced according to Muslim law, and notably deprived of all her rights to housing and to authority as a parent, including responsibility for her children. This is not a recent development. In 1990, a young Moroccan woman
aged 26, living in La Courneuve, saw her four children, all with French nationality, taken from her by their father in Morocco, who considered that his wife was showing notions of undue independence. Divorced in her country of origin, the French court awarded custody of her children to the father. The French legal system merely endorsed a Moroccan judicial decision, despite a report from French social services that was favourable to the mother. Such women can never remarry, nor live with someone else, because of religious and community pressures and also because they always maintain the hope that their children will be returned to them.

A further humiliation allowed by shari’a law is polygamy, officially banned in France, but still tolerated ‘in the name of respect for the culture of others’. The possibility of this has a great impact on the mentality of women, since they live in fear of a second marriage by their husbands. This inculcates a spirit of dependence and submission in them. There is little point in entering into religious considerations or theological explanations. Polygamy is a modern version of slavery, since it allows a man to seek one, two or three wives, and then to divorce them as he sees fit and meanwhile to exploit them as he pleases.

As the right to remain in France is only guaranteed to the first wife, any other wives have no legal status and become household servants obliged to do any tasks. Many births are declared in the name of the first wife, thus denying the rights of the mother and of the child. This increases the pressure on these women.

In this miserable situation, one can only envisage that there may be some slight improvement as regards to young women and girls, but this is to forget the scorn in which women are held. This is written in capital letters throughout our suburbs, where obscurantism reigns. It should be recalled that feminist networks have argued for a long time in favour of an autonomous status for immigrant women, enabling them to obtain leave to remain in France, independently of their husbands.

**Forced marriages and legalised rape**

There have been scandals over forced marriages. Here again, one should not underestimate the weight of pressure from families and the innocence of girls who never openly say yes or no. We need to understand how this terribly retrogressive situation has come about involving girls in France. It concerns first of all the life of young girls who, even if they have been to school, still live under the permanent control of their families and of the community in the areas where they live.

They are watched over by their brothers, by their brothers’ friends and by the people of the neighbourhood. Their movements are limited and the suburb becomes for them like a village in the depths of the country. Their parents fear that their daughters will become too French, that they are living a debauched life, because they are seen smoking a cigarette or in the company of a young boy, or because they are dressing in too ‘sexy’ a fashion. The solution of marriage is ‘proposed’ to
the girl. Few girls resist this, since the pressures on them are very great. One can make a comparison with the situation of 10 or 20 years ago, even though girls were then less inclined to submit. Because the jurisdiction of the community has expanded, the wish to save their own skins has been added to the obvious difficulty in the way of girls complaining against their families. Girls are regularly victims of violence from their brothers, which their mothers witness helplessly. One mother of five children at Drancy² tells, “My sons of 17 and 25 beat their two sisters, aged 16 and 23, practically every day, even though they are serious girls – one of them is a medical student. It really would be better for them to get married.”

These arranged marriages take place in the country of origin during the summer with a cousin, who can in this way obtain the precious document giving him the right to stay in France. The changes in behaviour as regards to marriage are not the same for all the immigrant communities. For immigrants from West Africa, marriage has become a form of legalised rape. The Group for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilation (GAMS) is leading a national campaign in educational establishments against such practices.

Young girls, sometimes very young, are ‘married’. In reality, this means rape repeated every weekend, usually at the home of the parents, but sometimes in a hotel or hostel. If the husband is in Africa, the young girl is taken there, and she can return once the marriage has been consummated. It is inadmissible that, in France, minor girls should be regularly raped by their ‘husbands’, who are often not legal immigrants but are waiting for the girls to reach their majority in order to arrange a civil marriage. Two sisters living at Saint-Denis³, one a schoolgirl of 13-and-a-half and the other aged 16, were ‘married’. No one noticed anything until they became pregnant. These girls were obliged to abandon their studies and play first the role of ‘wife’ and then that of mother. This is something that is happening in France, with rapes authorised by a religious undertaking, given in front of witnesses. One can only cry out against this backward-looking development which works against women and girls, when one considers the hard struggle that feminists carried out to obtain the criminalisation of rape. We need to ask ourselves the reason for this retrogressive development that we have been experiencing for the past 20 years in our suburbs. It is for such reasons that it is vital to deny the grip of fundamentalism and religion over our lives as women, since this grip simply strengthens the theology of machismo, of male domination.

The affair of the first headscarves

It was 1989 when the affair of the first headscarves broke out. This was two years before the Gulf War, which marked a crucial turning point for immigration. The Gulf War emphasised the confusion over immigration. This could not find any political expression, lest it might be made to seem part of Saddam Hussein’s fifth column. It should be recalled that the government had set up all the phases of its plan Vigipirate.⁴ Several Islamic associations profited from this to appear in public and
take the initiative in this argument which was being conducted in a subterranean manner. Was this something new? No.

The immigrant community or, more precisely, the immigrant communities living in France, had never lost contact with what was going on in their countries of origin and in the outside world. They can hardly be criticised for this. In the context of the economic crisis at the end of the 1970s, which hit them both first and harshly, the Islamic ‘revolution’ in Iran at first found a favourable response from among immigrants. It should be remembered that the Shah’s regime, despised by the Iranian people, but supported by the US, until it was swept away by Khomeini, enjoyed widespread support from everywhere in the world, including the French left. This major world political event had immediate repercussions in France.

The strikes of the 1980s, and particularly the strikes of the ‘Spring of Dignity’ at Citroen, saw the first demands for mosques to be established inside the workplace. Without going as far as the frantic reactions of Pierre Mauroy⁵, who saw fundamentalists everywhere, we were among several political activists and their associates who expressed our disquiet at this idea, which was held by only a minority, but was still noticeable.

The first headscarves appeared at this moment among the second generation of immigrants, and were worn by well-educated young women, notably the most politically minded on the left (one of the leaders of the march of the descendants of North Africans (beurs) wore the headscarf in 1984). The most significant development after that was the reappearance of polygamy among immigrants from the Maghreb, which had previously completely disappeared. At this period, many Moroccan and Algerian women spoke in our offices about a perceptible change on the part of their husbands: “Since my husband became unemployed, he has changed. He has gone back to the mosque, where he finds people who give bad advice and urge him to take a second wife in order to rebuild his confidence in himself.” Then came the earliest demands for courses in Qur’anic morality, which were heard within associations who organised help for homework or in municipal youth services. Such demands were met, as in Seine-Saint-Denis, in the Nord, where accommodation or special periods amid existing activities were arranged.

The Islamist movement was build up through the targeting of certain districts, where there were strong concentrations of Muslims, besides poverty, unemployment, precarious living conditions and drugs. This cocktail of poor living conditions was fertile ground for the development of shadowy obscurantist ideas, just as it was for the development of the racist ideas of the National Front.

The closeness of Algeria

In this context, the Islamist movement worsened the living conditions of immigrants and particularly those of women. Unfortunately, few associations have had the clear-
sightedness to denounce this development with a view to protecting the immigrant population from political Islamist pressure. These pressures became stronger with the arrival of the FIS in Algeria, where the repercussions were swifter and deeper.

Algeria is close at hand, and immigrants travel – that is the parable. The young people of Algerian origin, whose history and that of their parents has been stolen, who are told they are French, but who find themselves rejected and excluded, have become enthusiastic about this new version of history, while feeling united with their despised brothers in Algeria. The Islamic networks exploit this in order to improve their organisation and start recruiting from amongst those immigrants who have recently become graduates. Mutual aid associations have sprung up to help provide for the necessities of life. One can begin to observe how their work is directed specifically towards women.

In the Nord, young Frenchmen converted to Islam are sent off door-to-door to talk particularly to women. If the parents are impressed by these young men with blue eyes and blond hair, who can speak perfect Arabic, they still remain prudent and warn their children: “We are Muslims and we teach you about our religion just as our parents taught us in their time.” Their daughters are keen participants at conferences and discussions and start to assume a certain status. In the region of Douai, they have been joining parents’ associations, women’s groups and para-municipal bodies, exerting a degree of influence over young girls. They see themselves as having a mission to bring ‘morality’ back to districts abandoned to 60 years of communism, and thus of lack of belief, with a view to re-Islamising it.

When the FIS was dissolved in Algeria in the early 1990s, some of its militants found asylum in France, particularly in our districts, and they strengthened the fundamentalist aspects of Islamic movements in these areas. The pressures being exercised have changed in nature, moving from the private sphere to the public arena, but always working against women. Thus, many associations have received ‘visits’, and women who attended their meetings have been threatened for going to courses in literacy. Campaigns of intimidation have been launched against the brothers of girls who have been to dances or the theatre. Their brothers have been accused of being idiots. Rumour-mongering has been fostered against the alleged loose morals of feminist leaders in local districts. They are alleged to be atheists and, therefore, necessarily criminals and prostitutes.

For years at La Courneuve, racist and sexist insults have gone together in a permanent atmosphere of intimidation. Some women were followed to their homes and received anonymous letters, before two women activists were physically attacked in 1994, under the pretext that “they were debauching Muslim women by making them learn French”.

In the Nord, the same association (one has to laugh about this) found itself the victim of attempted sorcery, designed to spread fear amongst women and discourage them from entering their premises.
The complicity of the left

The activities of the Islamists are by no means new, but we had to wait until 1994 for a measure of acknowledgement of what was happening, when the attacks at Marrakesh took place, in which two French citizens from La Courneuve were involved.

Many of our commentators and friends on the left, who had been too busy threatening Algerian victims of fundamentalism with the International Criminal Court and fighting for the recognition of political refugee status for those who were persecuting them, became aware that such things could happen in Europe.

We started to be heard when we talked about the existence of political Islamism in France, which covered several cities, and about the fact that many young Frenchmen were enrolling in Bosnia and Afghanistan and also that there was indeed a degree of complicity within the services of the government who gave asylum in France more readily to Islamic militants than to progressive activists who were really under threat. Yes, there was such a complicity in several municipalities controlled by the left. They preferred to buy ‘social peace’ by making arrangements with Islamist associations and by making accommodation available, as happened at La Courneuve, Nanterre, Stains, Drancy, etc.

In recent years, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the war in Iraq have been further events that have encouraged young people to turn towards fundamentalism, even more so after the events of 9/11 strengthened suspicions against the Arabs, enabling Bush and Berlusconi to provide a platform to all the scoundrels on the planet about the clash of civilisations.

It is necessary to remind ourselves of several truths concerning Islam and about religion in general

It is unfair to condemn one fifth of humanity, particularly since the evil of fundamentalism has touched every religion. The Christian Church lived under the sign of a permanent inquisition during the period of holy war, which provoked expressions of hatred and the Crusades. Judaism, however much it has been a victim of persecution, has conducted its own persecution against Palestinians, whether they are Christian or Muslim. Hinduism has gone astray and has become bloodthirsty towards its Muslim minority. This should not prevent us from criticising or even blaspheming against religion, without, however, insulting the followers of religion, something that we have done in the case of the headscarf.

We should hold on to our feminist positions, and not appear ‘holier than thou’, nor feeble, even less blameworthy, but should assume all our responsibilities, while remaining united with immigrant women who are the first to suffer in this situation.
Headscarves and the forced submission of women

We are opposed to all form of headscarf, whether worn in Tehran, Kabul, Algiers, La Courneuve, Lille or Marseille, whether it covers part of the body or the whole of it, since all the headscarves in the world say one single thing: the forced submission of women to a programme for their oppression.

We have analysed this phenomenon among immigrants, and we are aware that for many women, the headscarf does not always have the same meaning. For the women of the first generation, it means above all a tradition of the countryside. And then – let us be honest – these women are so rarely visible that few people have really asked about how they are confined within their community. It was necessary for their daughters not to follow their example, but to adopt a style from outside the Maghreb for a debate to be launched in French society. These adolescents sometimes wear a headscarf in order to please their parents, especially if these are recent immigrants. They have the intention simply to gain some confidence, but soon find they are trapped. If wearing the headscarf is at first used as a means of obtaining permission to go out, the family circle regards it as a means of repression, and it becomes impossible for the girl to take off the headscarf, since going out without it is regarded as a sin and an insult to Islam. And so the headscarf as a means of showing one’s identity soon becomes a headscarf that is an obligation. And with the multiplication of Islamist associations, and mosques where lessons are given, one soon sees more and more very young girls as ‘apprentices of the headscarf’.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, one can see more and more young girls, under 10 years of age, in the housing estates on their way to religious courses, headscarves on their heads. This apprenticeship in wearing the headscarf is being carried on under the impulsion of the surrounding community, to encourage the girls to demand ‘their’ headscarves when they approach the age of 14. This search for ethnic identity among adolescents is encouraged by the women, and its supporters ought to be accused of racism.

This use of women from the earliest age is one of the aims of political Islamism. The Islamists have an army of militants at their disposal for this purpose. Not all immigrant women become victims, and the immigrant community, like the rest of French society, is split by contradictions. Even if the immigrant community in its great majority belongs to the working class, one can find among them opinions from the right, the left, the extreme right – just as one finds rich and poor. This is the reality we have to deal with.

Political Islamism has been able to manage this, and among the militant girls are to be found university graduates who fight for Islamism in the political field. We have to regard them as political opponents.
Moral re-Islamisation among women divided among themselves

These militants work very hard to make Muslim women and their families feel culpable over their children’s failure at school and over their delinquency. No direct accusation is made, but everything is suggested. In addition to the important psychological and moral help they provide to the poorest women, they provide material and financial help (by looking after children and paying for holiday homes).

One of their objectives in the urban areas is moral re-Islamisation. They have had success here with a ban on non-\textit{halal} meat, after enormous pressure had been exerted on the parents. Several years ago, parents who did not eat non-\textit{halal} meat themselves encouraged their children to do so in school canteens: “Eat, and if God wills, He will forgive you.” This is all finished. In the Nord, there are school canteens where hungry children stuff themselves with salads and sweets because of this ban.

No child in an urban area eats any chocolate without reading what kind of animal fat it contains. More radically minded people go further and forbid the eating of cheese, because it is a fermented product. Fewer and fewer girls go to leisure centres, or if they do go, they stop doing so at the age of puberty, because they are increasingly required to go to the mosque. The same phenomenon can be seen in classes for snow sports, open air classes or language courses, to which parents increasingly do not want their children to go, on the pretext that the buildings are shared between the sexes. This situation is getting worse, and one is aware that the mothers have been ‘worked on’ by militant women.

The month of Ramadan is the main time for recruitment. Women activists visit women at home, particularly those living in difficult circumstances: divorced women, rejected women, prostitutes and criminals. These latter categories find a certain acceptance in Islam, and women activists score extra points during the fasting month of Ramadan, by criticising backsliding believers and unbelievers, and condemning any atheists from their standpoint of veiled women. So one can say: “It’s just too bad for them, let them sort themselves out. That veil they want – it’s their own free choice.” For them perhaps, but we have to stop them contaminating other women, since the distinction between ‘wished for’ and ‘obliged to’ or ‘chosen’ is a narrow one in places where there is no social mix and where girls are in danger of being quickly thrust under political Islamism.

Veiled women present a real danger to those who are not veiled. In literacy classes, there is a majority of unveiled women who are ready to make jokes during pauses between classes and to talk about men. During one such course at Drancy, a veiled woman came in. This meant a swift return to moral order and complete silence. Discussion turned to religious matters, even though she had made no such request. It was enough for her to appear with her headscarf for the rest of the group to be terrorised. The presence of a single veiled woman imposes a so-called ‘respect’,
which prevents any open discussion. This adds to the pressure on anyone who wants to take a contrary line.

As for cigarettes, that is another matter, since veiled women oblige other women in any group not to smoke, even though there is no ban on smoking in Islam. They simply say that it is not a proper thing for women to do. So all this leads us to oppose all headscarves, and to do this not only from a Republican point of view, but also from a feminist one.

**Direct consequences concerning women’s rights and the validity of the law on secularism (**laïcité**)**

We need to tackle the question of the headscarf from the angle of political Islamism and its direct consequences for women’s rights. We are aware that shari’a law nowadays succeeds in passing through the mesh of French law, by means of bilateral agreements and legal exequaturs, and that forced marriages are on the increase. What is going to happen in the future, if we lose the battle over the headscarf? The urgency lies in the fight to defend secular (**laïque**) state education, even if this fight should not make us forget the deficiencies in the current condition of state education, since what damages the school is not something cultural, but much more the reflection of existing social movements to exclude people.

Having said that, we do not believe that it is discriminatory to require a veiled girl to take off her veil when she reaches the entrance of her school. In 1989, we opposed the exclusion of three girls from school at Creil, since this exclusion had been made by a school head well-known for his rigid attitude to the law. In addition, the controversy began in the context of a France influenced by the rise of the extreme right and of anti-Arab racism (this period was a lethal one for dozens of young immigrants from North Africa). Together with the feminists, we thought that modernity would triumph over ignorance.

We were wrong, and the trap closed over women. We were not fanatical supporters of a law, since we knew from experience that a law could not settle everything. All sorts of laws against racism have not succeeded in abolishing racism, but at least they enable victims of racism to defend themselves. If most people do not need to concern themselves over forbidding genital mutilation, this is thanks to the law that forbids such a practice. It follows from this that we hold that the law in favour of secularism (**laïcité**) is the best way to provide support to women and girls who oppose being contaminated by fundamentalist ideas.

No law provides a panacea and we continue to fight for a proper social policy for deprived urban areas, concerning education, employment and social housing, so that children are not transformed into apprentice fundamentalists. The state needs to be active in these matters and not simply act through the police. And in reply to all those who argue that this is a law laid down from the right and therefore a racist
law, we reply that the law to accept abortion was a law of the right and of a minister of the right, Simone Veil. This did not prevent the feminist movement and all the left from saluting such a feminist triumph.

If laws can help us to construct equality between men and women, so much the better, since equality between the sexes leads to democracy, and if there is any place where that can be learned, it is at school.

**Building an anti-sexist and anti-racist world**

We are against the fundamentalists, for whom the battle over the headscarf is a step to test the forces of secularism (*laïcité*) and then to go further towards a ban on sport or of any mingling of the sexes.

We are also against those who support the ‘rights of men’, and who claim to want to support the culture of others. This means a position of cultural relativism which chooses to express itself in this way: “So long as they veil their women in the quarters where they live, in the schools their children attend, genitally mutilate their daughters, beat their wives or rape them, that is their business; it isn’t ours.” This is a neo-colonialist attitude, very far removed from the spirit of internationalism that many of them claim to support.

As for those who come from the ranks of immigrants, whether intellectuals or not, who have decided to support the veiling of girls, we reply in the name of liberty by asking them not to forget their comrades murdered by barbaric mobs in Iran or in Algeria, who have eviscerated pregnant women and decapitated babies. Before talking of liberty, it would be right to ask those who claim to support this ideology why they have never distanced themselves from those who perpetrated Muslim genocide in Algeria in the name of Islam.

We have made a decision to support an anti-sexist and anti-racist world, which knows no barrier between colours and sexes. This is why we have decided to work for the most far-reaching form of secularism (*laïcité*) that is linked with anti-racism, which should apply to everyone and serve as an antidote to all forms of fundamentalism.

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**Endnotes**

4. Vigipirate is a national urban security plan.
5. The first Prime Minister of the new socialist President François Mitterrand.