**DOI:** <a href="https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.">https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.</a> **Received:** 4 August 2024, **Revised:** 27 August 2024, **Publish:** 6 September 2024
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# Representation of Muslim Women in Youtube Media: Laïcité Policy and Human Rights in France

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Abstract: This study focuses on the representation of Muslim women in France within France24's YouTube content, particularly concerning Laïcité policy and human rights issues. It analyzes perspectives from politicians, historians, and members of the Muslim community to understand the impact of Laïcité on Muslim women's rights. Muslim women in France face tensions between secular values and their religious identities, often resulting in feelings of isolation and marginalization. The research employs the Netnography method with a content analysis approach to explore this topic on France24's YouTube channel. Findings indicate that France24 plays a central role in presenting diverse perspectives and complex situations. The coverage highlights the effects of Laïcité on Muslim women's individual rights, emphasizing potential limitations on their religious identities. The public's understanding of Laïcité and its influence on Muslim women is analyzed based on the presented content. This provides a comprehensive depiction of how views on Laïcité policy are reflected in media platforms and how it affects the perception and individual human rights, particularly for Muslim women in France.

Keyword: Laïcité, Secularism, Muslim Women, Human Rights, Youtube

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, France has been dominated by Catholicism. However, after the World Wars, the influx of immigrants transformed France into a country that features a diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religious beliefs that are still preserved today, alongside the indigenous French people. The presence of Islam in France dates back to the 8th century, enriching the diversity of beliefs in the country, shaping its cultural and social landscape to this day. According to data released by the French National Statistics Agency (Insee), Muslims made up around 10% of the French population from 2019 to 2020. It is estimated that based on 2022 population data, the number of Muslims in France will reach 5.7 million inhabitants, which is equivalent to about 8.80% of the total French population as a whole (Zuraya, 2023).

The lives of Muslims in France continue to be characterized by pressure and discriminatory treatment from the secularist system known as Laïcité. Laïcité is a principle or concept in French politics and law that emphasizes the separation of state and religion, which was affirmed in a 1905 law. This concept is the cornerstone of the French state and part of its identity. The principle in the French system states that religious beliefs should be placed outside the public sphere, meaning that religious practice in a private setting is still permitted, but the state will not openly support or favor a particular religion in a public context, in accordance with the principle of non-discrimination (Mazher Idriss, 2005).

As early as 1989, controversy arose over whether Muslim girls could wear the hijab in public schools. Then, in 2004, France officially banned the conspicuous display of religious symbols within public schools, and in 2010, the ban was extended to face coverings in public places (Kelly, 2020). While the ban was intended to maintain neutrality and equality of individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, it has been a source of controversy for some religions, particularly Islam, and a challenge to Muslim women in fulfilling their right to freedom of religion.

The policy of banning religious symbols impacts the daily lives of Muslim women in France. Many feel pressured and forced to choose between practicing their religious beliefs and participating in public life. This creates a complex social dynamic in which Muslim women must navigate between their religious identity and the demands of state secularism. The tension between the concepts of secularism, individual rights and freedom values in the context of French public policy regarding the burqa and niqab ban, while highlighting a critical view of the policy from the point of view of the protection of individual rights and religious freedom (Cohen-Almagor, 2022).

In November 2022, National Education Minister Pap Ndiaye announced the Laïcité plan to prevent students from wearing clothing deemed to be associated with religion in French public schools. The move involves surveillance of students with instructions for school staff to pursue and report students who wear certain clothing as well as sanctioning those who refuse to change. Hebh Jamal, an advocate, sees this ban as part of a series of actions by the French government targeting the Muslim minority under the pretext of protecting the principle of secularism or Laïcité. He states that France's commitment to secularism, originally aimed at freedom from religious influence, has morphed into a system that he believes is misguided. The original concept of separation of church and state, which was intended to prevent the imposition of religious dogma, is now considered no longer the basis of official action (Zahrotul Oktaviani, 2023).

It is not uncommon for laïcité to be used as a legitimizing tool by French authorities to commit acts of racism, especially when the issue of terrorism is on the rise, French authorities label people who are devout to their religion as radicals (Asrif & R., 2020). The growing Islamic revival is often seen by the secular majority as a threat to the integrity of French culture as well as to the secular values of freedom, gender equality and tolerance that characterize France and Europe as a whole (Fernando, 2009).

This policy creates stereotypes and prejudices against the Muslim community, where religious practices that should be protected are instead perceived as a threat to national security. In this context, Muslims who openly practice their religious beliefs, such as wearing the hijab or niqab, are often under suspicion and closer scrutiny. This has led to a deep sense of insecurity and discrimination among French Muslims, especially for women who are the main targets of the policy banning religious symbols.

Fitri Solihin expressed her views on how the application of Laïcité rules and policies adopted by the French government towards Islam have generated controversy and raised questions regarding the success or failure of the concept of cosmopolitanism in managing religious and cultural diversity in France (Sholihin, 2021). Solihin emphasized the importance of open and inclusive dialogue in managing religious and cultural diversity in

France. He suggested that the government and society need to work together to find a more balanced approach that respects individual freedom while maintaining social harmony.

Questions continue to arise regarding the fulfillment of the basic rights of Muslim women in France. In his article, Francesco Alicino underlines the importance of understanding the role of freedom of expression in the context of Laïcité and how France is responding to this in an increasingly culturally diverse society. He also highlights the need to find a balance between freedom of expression, religion and human rights (Alicino, 2016). With a more inclusive and flexible approach, France can maintain the values of secularism while still respecting individual rights, thus creating a more harmonious and diverse society.

Syifa Radhityani Esmano and Airin Miranda in their research show how the Laïcité policy stipulated in the 1905 Law not only causes negative impacts such as discrimination, physical and verbal violence, but also reflects a lack of tolerance towards the Muslim community in the French educational environment. They emphasized that the Laïcité policy during the Macron administration did not succeed in achieving the main goal of the Laïcité principle towards the Muslim community in public educational institutions (Esmano & Miranda, 2022).

The complex phenomena experienced by Muslim women in France in relation to the struggle for their rights becomes an experience that can be felt by fellow Muslim women even though they are not in the same location. News coverage of th neir plight creates empathy as well as criticism of Laïcité's policies. Such information is easily accessed through the internet, where YouTube, as one of the main platforms for disseminating media content, plays an important role in shaping these narratives.

With the emergence of the YouTube platform as a major source of information and entertainment, it plays a significant role in expanding or disseminating various discourses or conversations on various topics. Mass media, especially in the digital realm, has a huge influence in shaping people's views and opinions (Kartikawati, 2018). In this context, social media is not only a tool to disseminate information, but also a platform to mobilize support or protest against a particular issue. Social media and public opinion go hand in hand because social media facilitates the dissemination and discussion of important issues, thus influencing public views and actions (Syarief, 2017). In this study, the author seeks to explore how the international news channel YouTube France24 provides a comprehensive perspective on issues related to Muslim women, laïcité, and human rights.

This research not only focuses on the possible negative impacts that may arise, but also seeks to find opportunities to better respond to them. By conducting a more in-depth investigation, this study hopes to provide a more thorough understanding of how YouTube can play a positive role in supporting Muslim women's human rights and overcoming unfair stereotypes.

## **METHOD**

This research uses Netnography research design, Netnography was introduced by Robert Kozinets in 1998, which is defined as "the study of social networks through online interactions." This research alternates field studies with computer-based communication specifically through the internet (Sugiyono, 2015). This research will use a content analysis approach to explore and analyze various videos, comments, and responses related to the topics of Muslim women, Laïcité, and Human Rights on YouTube France 24. Data will be collected from a number of news channels, vlogs, and other relevant content. This study will focus on media narratives originating from the international news channel YouTube France 24.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### The Context of Social Media and Youtube

Throughout human history, people have used various communication media to overcome long distances between each other, distances that could not be reached by simply speaking at a normal distance. The emergence of these media has also brought about rapid cultural change. The strong influence of the media has affected people's attitudes and behaviors (Rahmatika et al., 2021). This culture is manifested in what is referred to as Media Culture, which comes in the form of images, sounds, and spectacles that shape the structure of daily life, and can even dominate one's leisure time.

YouTube, since its launch in February 2005, has become a very popular video-sharing application with over a billion users, almost equivalent to 33% of the total internet users. Unlike traditional media, YouTube gives its users the ability to interact, engage, watch, collaborate, and most importantly evaluate their own communication systems. The app allows videos in a variety of genres, not just limited to music, but also including movie trailers, video games, sports, user content, as well as recorded programs. This social media popularity advantage has given a boost to social collaboration and participation on a large scale. YouTube facilitates content to be viewed, shared, embedded, and discussed (Kellner & Kim, 2010).

Time magazine honored YouTube as the Best Invention of 2006. Video content has grown in popularity on social media platforms, and according to JakPat survey in 2021, YouTube is the most used social media platform by all social media user groups (JakPat, 2021). Dwi Kartikawati highlights the power of the media in its construction of reality, which is a reality shaped by a system managed by the media itself, with one of its goals being to benefit financially from audiences consuming the various types of commodities on offer (Kartikawati, 2018).

YouTube has two important roles for its users, namely as a content creator and content seeker. Content search is an intuitive user activity, allowing them to search for specific videos according to personal satisfaction. While in content creation, users create and share their own videos to specific individuals, groups, or society at large. Content creation in an online environment is often referred to as user-generated content, which allows users to convey their opinions, thoughts, and creative works to others through digital platforms (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017).

YouTube France24 is an international news channel that broadcasts live 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is accessible to 521.7 million households worldwide. The channel presents news in French, Arabic, English and Spanish, providing a French perspective on global news through a network of 160 correspondents in almost every country (France24, 2023). France24's YouTube videos can provide a variety of viewpoints, analysis, and commentary on these issues, Various videos can influence people's perceptions of Laïcité policies and their impact on Muslim women.

France24 in reporting news related to the slogan Liberté Égalité Actualité, which emphasizes freedom, equality, and actual news, highlights their role as an international news media that features inclusive representation, dives into the complexity of situations, and gives minority voices a chance to be heard in the public sphere (Maula et al., 2021). Through the YouTube platform, France24 seeks to illustrate the impact of policies on Muslim women in France, fight for justice, and bring a deeper understanding of minority viewpoints on controversial issues surrounding Laïcité and human rights.

### Laïcité's relevance in France24 Youtube Media

In French secularism: Anti-religious or safeguarding freedoms? delivered by Florence Villeminot, a France24 journalist, presents a comprehensive overview of the role of laïcité in

French life. Laïcité is a fundamental principle at the core of the French Republic's identity. It underscores the importance of a strict separation between the affairs of state and religion. Since it was passed into law in 1905, Laïcité has grown into a deeply sacred value in French society, rooted in the Enlightenment movement and the values of the French Revolution such as freedom and equality (Rootham, 2015). However, in the context of France's growing religious diversity, particularly with the emergence of Islam as a second religion, Laïcité has become complex. Ramazan argues that French Laïcité policies tend to emphasize the separation between religion and state affairs and a uniform national identity. This creates tensions in policies related to religious freedom and individual expression in an increasingly multicultural society (Kılınç, 2019).

This principle requires religious neutrality in the public sphere, leading to the banning of religious symbols in public places such as schools and the prohibition of headscarves, veils, and other religious signs (Mazher Idriss, 2005). This created intense debate as many perceived that these bans targeted Muslims and were considered anti-religious acts. Moreover, there is a perception that while Islamic symbols are banned in the name of Laïcité, Catholic cultural heritage is still present in French daily life, leading to criticism of double standards. Jean-louis Bianco, President of the National Observatory Secularims, argues that the purpose of Laïcité is to set limits, but limits in general, against people who call for hatred or who want it.

The series of terror attacks that have taken place in recent years, including the Charlie Hebdo attack, have created tensions in the understanding of French values that are accused of being threatened from within. The debate around Laïcité also shows two different approaches, between advocates of stricter enforcement of secular laws and those who champion a more flexible and inclusive Laïcité. Amidst this controversy, the majority of French people are keen to protect and defend the values of Laïcité as an integral part of their national identity, and many are in favor of stricter enforcement of this concept. This issue reflects the complexity of France's culturally rich and historically diverse identity, yet it still strives to preserve and protect the principle of secularism that is considered an essential part of its national motto: liberté, égalité, fraternité, Laïcité.

In the report Laïcité: Is French state secularism too extreme?, the main focus is on the concept of Laïcité and how it is applied in an increasingly multicultural French society. In an interview with Jean François Kahn, a writer, he argues that Laïcité is the basis that allows for unity and freedom amidst the diversity of society. His statement emphasizes that Laïcité is an element of agreement that recognizes individual freedom, while still maintaining unity among diversity. Channel France24 also featured views from the Muslim community regarding Laïcité. There was a segment highlighting the discontent and feelings of marginalization felt by some members of the Muslim community in France due to the implementation of bans on their religious symbols. Khaled argues that these bans, such as the headscarf ban, create a sense of alienation and lead to a feeling that their freedom of expression and belief is restricted by France's secular rules (Beydoun, 2008).

In presenting this information to France24 viewers, there is an attempt to provide a balanced perspective between the views of figures such as Kahn who emphasize the benefits of Laïcité in creating unity and freedom, and the views of the Muslim community who feel the negative impact of the application of Laïcité in their daily lives. There is an attempt to show both sides of the perspective in order to provide a more complete picture of the complexities of implementing Laïcité in France.

There is potential to highlight the attempt to show Laïcité as a tool for unity and freedom without fully exploring or highlighting the controversies that may arise from its application to the Muslim community. Greater emphasis on views that favor Laïcité in creating unity might lead to a reduction in detailed information on how this application affects Muslim individuals and communities in particular. This may give the impression that

conflict or discontent from the Muslim community is only seen as a side effect, rather than the core of the problems that may occur in the implementation of Laïcité in France. According to Inés Valdez, it is crucial to create a situation where Muslim women and others can engage in their own practice of freedom. It also highlights that policies that support individual freedom and facilitate interaction with different worldviews are more beneficial than policies that restrict or suppress one particular view (Valdez, 2016).

## **Human Rights Perspective**

France has a long history of asserting and protecting human rights. Under the French legal system, the discussion of highly respected individual rights began with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen) in 1789. The declaration stated that all individuals are born free and equal in their rights. Despite being the pinnacle of human rights advocacy at the time, the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 was characterized by political instability that sometimes led to the protection of these rights being neglected. The great influence that French philosophers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau had in shaping ideas about human rights, including individual freedom and the separation of powers in society, played an important role in shaping the concept of human rights (Bogain, 2017).

Internationally recognized human rights principles have also influenced French history, with its participation in the formation of international declarations on human rights. Although the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic of 1795 was short-lived, it affirmed individual rights as part of the French legal framework. With the passage of time and political and social developments, France continued to reform in order to strengthen the protection of human rights, most notably by adopting the Constitution of the Fifth Republic in 1958 which recognized and incorporated human rights as a central element in the modern French legal system (Bisset, 2020).

However, in recent years, there has been intense debate in France regarding the rights of individuals, especially the rights of Muslim women, particularly in the context of freedom of expression, gender equality, and freedom of religion. France has faced various controversies regarding human rights, especially regarding the rights of Muslim women. Policies banning the wearing of certain clothing considered to be religious symbols in public places, such as the niqab or burqa, as well as bans on religious symbols in schools, particularly the wearing of the hijab by Muslim schoolgirls in 2004, have raised questions about religious freedom and the religious identity of Muslim women. In addition, France's efforts to maintain strong secularist values, especially in restricting content deemed insulting or offensive to religious values, such as cases of blasphemy against Islamic religious symbols, pose a dilemma between freedom of expression and the protection of religious values (Adrian, 2006). While secularist values are meant to protect individual freedom, this approach can also come into conflict with religious freedom, sparking complex debates in France around the rights of Muslim women and human rights as a whole.

On Content European rights body pulls pro-hijab campaign after French outcry, talking about The non-governmental body of the Council of Europe, made up of 47 member states, has issued a campaign against hate speech, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslims. The campaign includes visual material that sparked protests from the French government, notably a video featuring women with and without headscarves and messages promoting beauty and freedom in the context of headscarf wearing. France, which officially adheres to the principles of secularism, asked the Council of Europe to remove the video, claiming that it actively promoted headscarves, which are against the law in France. In response, the Council of Europe has deleted the tweet containing the video and plans to present the project in a more appropriate way, while on the other hand, the partner in the project, FEMYSO,

criticized the French government and supported the right of individuals to choose the clothes they want.

According to Alison Bisset, France's veil ban contradicts the Articles of at least three international human rights documents. Article 1.1 of the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, as well as Article 2.1 of the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, affirm that individuals have the right to express their religion in both private and public settings, without fear of discrimination (Bisset, 2020).

All of these cases illustrate the complex debate between individual freedom, secularism, the rights of Muslim women, and human rights as a whole. Understanding human rights in France requires a balance between individual freedoms and secularist values that are considered essential in French society. In its legal framework, France has adopted an approach that emphasizes secularist values as an important part of its identity. However, this has also led to debates about the extent to which such restrictions are in line with human rights principles, especially the rights of individuals stemming from religious beliefs, such as Muslim women.

Pascale Péan says France must protect its religious minorities, not ignore them or limit them to the private sphere. Without state protection (which starts with recognition), the human rights of Muslim women in France become meaningless. How can Muslim women in France (especially those wearing headscarves) have a true claim to human rights? One of the reasons why it is so important for France to conduct a census on religious and ethnic identity is to be able to analyze the data and see that this ban excessively discriminates against Muslim women (Péan, 2017).

The role of the media, public discussions, and the advocacy of human rights groups play an important role in shaping public awareness of these issues in France. However, dialogue and cooperation between the government, civil society, and religious groups can be key to achieving an adequate balance between individual human rights and respected social values in France.

## Representation of Muslim Women on Youtube France24

There is an interesting conversation in France24's YouTube video 'We, the French Muslim Women' uploaded in 2016, which took place during François Hollande's presidency as the election period approached. In this conversation, the tensions experienced by Muslim women in France are revealed. They feel isolated in the country where they live. It discusses interviews conducted by Lida Hestel, a French Muslim woman who expressed the feeling that their voices are rarely heard. The interviews included women from different backgrounds and ages with a variety of life choices, ranging from devout to non-observant, veiled or not. While these differences existed, one commonality that stood out was the feeling of exclusion in the countries where they lived.

Some women expressed concern and discomfort, both in relation to potential terrorist attacks and humiliation from the local community. This was capitalized on by politicians who used the issue of national identity in their political campaigns, leading to debates about what it means to be a French citizen. Patrick Boucheron, a historian, highlights that the tendency towards national identity in France is a relatively new phenomenon that has been exploited by politicians. In this context, it can be seen how the issue of Muslim women and French identity has become an important discussion in the country's politics. According to Mayanthi's article, Muslim women in France are often faced with a complex paradox. They are expected to conform to the secular values of the republic, yet remain identified by their religious identity. This view reflects the tension between secular republican values and religious identity, which contributes to the tension in the view of Muslim women in France (Fernando, 2009).

The content of "France to ban wearing abayas in schools" released in August 2023, the then French Minister of Education Gabriel Atal announced the policy of banning religious clothing such as abayas in French schools by stating that the government was testing France's secular values. This decision was made in the context of increasing attacks on the principles of secularism in France, especially regarding the wearing of religious clothing such as abayas. This issue has led to mixed views regarding Muslim women in France. On the one hand, this policy can be seen as part of an effort to strengthen secular values and maintain the separation between religion and educational institutions. However, on the other hand, for some Muslim women, this ban can be seen as a restriction on their freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

In the content entitled "France abaya ban: Very divisive debate on clothing worn by some Muslim women" September 2023 discusses the controversy that arose due to the government's ban on the use of long clothes such as Abaya in French public schools. The highest administrative court upheld the government's decision despite the Council of State's rejection of complaints that the ban was discriminatory or potentially inciting hatred. Annete Young said there have been claims from some opponents of the ban, asserting that it does not represent the entire Muslim community, and that even high-ranking bodies such as the Council of State have provided support to young women affected by the ban, highlighting the importance of respecting individuals' right to religion and expression of their beliefs without being blamed for terrorism.

On this issue, there is a battle between secular and religious views, with some seeing the ban as an endorsement of the secular approach in France, while others see it as a stigma against Muslims, especially women and young girls. According to Raed Abilmouna, the issue of the ban raises the issue of a fatwa in favor of the mandatory wearing of the headscarf. The fatwa argues that Muslim women should use constitutional and legal means to change laws that the French government considers unjust, as well as keeping the issue in the media. In addition, she proposes forming alliances within and outside of France to jointly fight for human rights, unite as a community in one solid front, and continue to pray to Allah (Abilmouna, 2011).

Discussions on the representation of Muslim women in France in the context of Laïcité policies reveal complex conditions. Muslim women in the country experience tension between the secular values of the republic and their religious identity, which often makes them feel isolated and ostracized. The policy of banning religious clothing, such as the hijab and abaya, has been a topic of controversy that has generated mixed views. Some see it as an attempt to defend France's secular values, while others consider it a restriction on freedom of expression and religion. A report from France24 highlighted the impact of the ban on the individual rights of Muslim women, emphasizing the potential restrictions on their religious identity. In addition, the politics of national identity in France also came into focus, with politicians utilizing it in their political campaigns. This discussion reflects the complexity of the relationship between Laïcité policies, human rights, and the representation of Muslim women in France in an evolving context.

In the context of the controversy surrounding Laïcité and its impact on Muslim women in France, France24 through its YouTube channel seeks to provide inclusive and balanced representation. They feature diverse viewpoints from French society, especially Muslim women, to provide a deeper understanding of the complexity of this issue. France24 seeks to present multiple perspectives in highlighting the impact of secularist policies, particularly the ban on religious dress in public places, on the freedom of expression, religious identity, and individual human rights of the Muslim minority. Hamed al Hasni in his piece states how several international news networks such as the BBC, Al-Jazeera, France24, and Russia Today promote common political and cultural values in the context of human rights, trust in

the UN Refugee Agency, as well as the value of individual liberation where enforced obedience is not a desirable quality (Al-Hasni, 2021).

France24's coverage of the content highlighted the impact of the ban on the rights of individuals, especially Muslim women, and how it could be seen as discriminatory. They emphasized that the ban inhibits the freedom of expression and the right to religious identity of Muslim women in France. However, in providing coverage, France24 also sought to show the various views of the different parties involved in the debate, including those of the government or those in favor of the policy.

#### **CONCLUSION**

YouTube France24 presents diverse viewpoints from various parties regarding France's Laïcité policy, especially regarding the ban on religious symbols and the identity of Muslim women. The portrayal of Muslim women in France24's YouTube media brings out the complexity of issues related to the Laïcité policy. They reflect important questions of religious freedom, human rights, identity, as well as evoke discussions about the extent to which the state's secularist policies should affect the lives and rights of individuals, particularly Muslim women, in France. The views portrayed on Youtube France24 encompass the conflict between individual freedom and secularist values, with a focus on the rights of Muslim women. While this coverage highlights the discriminatory impact of the policy, YouTube France24's attempt to present multiple viewpoints creates a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of this issue in France.

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