

Women and Public Space

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Comentarios

The debate over the veiling of Muslim women and girls has been ongoing for almost twenty years now. The debate first emerged with the French controversy of L'affaire Foulard in 1989, when three Muslim girls were expelled from their school for wearing headscarves¹. In recent developments, France has approved a law banning the wearing of full-face veils, such as the burqa or niqab, in all public places and in Spain, the city of Barcelona has announced a ban on full Islamic face-veils in some public spaces such as municipal offices, public markets and libraries². A variety of reasons have been put forward for imposing such bans, such as security, the preservation of the principle of secularity, and perhaps more importantly, the abolition of a piece of clothing that is perceived as a symbol of patriarchy and female subordination. However, if we assume that women wearing the burqa are indeed being forced to do so, a possible consequence of the burqa ban could be these women's further withdrawal in the private sphere and disappearance from public view, since getting around in public places without the burqa will be deemed unacceptable and shameful from their oppressors. So the ban could end up exasperating the very problem it is supposedly trying to solve.

Furthermore, as philosopher Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, sexist practices, are alive well in all western societies, and by choosing to ban only this one, the opponents of the burqa are being inconsistent, betraying their fear of the different³. In a similar vein, political scientist Anne Phillips is concerned that women's rights are being usurped by conservative forces, as a means for justifying restrictive immigration agendas, while real support for minority women remains a low priority⁴. Indeed, one has to wonder how such bans will actually improve the life of immigrant women, and why this rather superficial issue arose to the center of the public debate over multiculturalism. In any case, as Nussbaum comments, in a liberal democracy, the way to deal with such issues «should not be by removing freedom, but through persuasion and example»⁵.

1.Sarah Song, *Justice, Gender and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 173.

2.BBC News Collaborators, *The Islamic Veil Across Europe*, BBC News, 15 June 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5414098.stm>

3.Martha Nussbaum, *Veiled Threats?*, NYTimes.com, 11 July 2010, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/veiled-threats/>

4. Anne Phillips, *Gender and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, pp. 2-3.

5. Martha Nussbaum, op. cit.

It is curious that the issue regarding burqas or niqabs has made it to the front pages when the number of women wearing them is so scarce: between 400 and 2000 women in France and only 6 reported in Spain. Here are some other significant figures: the crimes committed by women wearing a burqa/niqab, the number of women who have filed a complaint for being forced to wear one or the number of suicides committed by these individuals is zero. If it is an issue of "women's dignity" then I believe it should be each woman's choice to wear or not a niqab or burqa.

Great piece. It is well documented and with successfully hierarchized information, despite the limited space to develop on an issue with so many bibliographic references and points of view. Moreover, the tone is moderate and unbiased, trying to show the core of the testimonies. I personally agree entirely with Nussbaum's arguments because the majority of the points discussed in this debate intend, unfortunately, to be based on metaphysical or moral arguments.

Education is always better than prohibition. Western societies have moral problems, the right direction is always difficult to find, but we must never lose sight of the right direction: the balance between personal rights and civil society. We constantly question others, but the North is always in the North.

Tema eterno e irresoluble el del relativismo cultural. Como principio y como método: las cosas no son lo que parecen; o con el viejo aforismo de Nietzsche: una verdad simple es una doble mentira. La metáfora del velo que oculta se puede aplicar a los que ocultan su intolerancia y su miedo a lo distinto convirtiéndose en adalides de las libertades y de las igualdades.

Oneluna
Down to zero

JordiV
Ray of light

joRGe_boNito
Always

Apineda
Desvelar el velo