

Disproportionate effect of the *Laïcité*
Laws of the French Republic on minority
women

Gender and Intersectionality Report

addressed to the deputies of
the National Assembly of
France

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1. DIAGNOSIS OF THE PROBLEM OF GENDER AND INTERSECTIONAL INEQUALITY

1.1. Diagnosis and definition of the problem, policy frame

What is the policy problem as it is represented?

The policy problem we will discuss is how the *laïcité* laws in France prohibiting religious symbols, including face coverings such as the *hijab* and *niqab*, in public areas, disproportionately affect women, particularly Muslim women. Concrete evidence of this is the 2004 ban on religious symbols in public schools, deeply affecting and limiting the education of Muslim girls wearing the hijab, as this approach forces them to choose between education and religious expression. Moreover, the 2010 ban of face covering in public spaces has also had a negative impact on Muslim women's lives, as it targeted their freedom in public life.

Even though the law was framed as a measure with the aim of ensuring public security and gender equality, it actually led to the marginalisation and exclusion of Muslim women, also restricting their freedom to make personal choices. The current approach ignores the actual needs of this minority by failing to create policies that are truly representative of them. In fact, instead of having a positive impact, it pushes them into marginalisation and systemically reinforces discrimination. A very big problem is the underestimation of the complexity and various shades that there are to the issue; what is sure is that the different needs and oppression experiences in such a community cannot be reduced to the solution of a simple ban on religious symbols.

Although the policy area is complex, we believe that a logical and strongly documented approach could find ways to enable those women who freely chose to profess a religion without forcing them to any sort of renunciation on the mere basis of secularism. Whilst on the other hand trying to enable those that might be forced into a religious tradition by societal and familial expectations in their religious community of origin, to be free from any religious obligation imposed upon them.

Why do you consider it problematic?

This policy problem carries many implications, not only does it limit Muslim women's autonomy and police their bodies, but it also forces women to choose between religious expression and inclusion in the public sphere. Many women who choose to wear the *hijab* or *niqab* do so as a personal expression of faith, and banning these garments effectively excludes them from public spaces, education, and employment.

The 2004 ban on religious symbols in public schools, almost exclusively targets Muslim girls wearing the *hijab*, making access to education conditional on removing religious dress. This places an undue burden on their right to both religious expression and schooling. Similarly, the 2010 ban of face coverings in public spaces has led to the exclusion and marginalisation of women who wear the *niqab*. Furthermore, there have been instances where women who wore face coverings were fined or even endured verbal and physical harassment, further marginalising them in society.

A study conducted about the effects of the ban of religious symbols in schools promulgated in France in 2004 by Vasiliki Fouka and Aala Abdelgadir, two researchers of the Department of Political Science of the Stanford University, gathered empirical evidence that proved that the already wide gap between Muslim and non-Muslim women in education more than doubled after the ban; this could have been caused by the increasing of the rate of dropping out of secondary school to 6 percentage points more than the one of the non-Muslim students between 2004 and 2005. Moreover, they found that the ban negatively affected Muslim women also in their school performance; in fact, they observed that it took longer for the affected girls to complete their secondary school education. Finally, the study found that the veiling law widens the employment gap by more than a third, the labour force participation gap by more than half, and the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims in cohabitation with parents by more than a third (Abdelgadir & Fouka, 2019).

Additionally, these laws reinforce negative stereotypes about Muslim women, portraying them as oppressed, even when they wear religious attire by choice. By enforcing a blanket ban, the state disregards the voices of those who wear religious attire by choice and assumes that Muslim women lack agency over their own bodies.

What are the causes of the problem?

One major cause of this issue is the evolving interpretation of secularism. France's *laïcité* laws were originally designed to create a clear divide or separation between religion and the state, ensuring that no religion or religious institution could exert influence over public affairs. However, over time, the implementation of these laws has gone beyond its original purpose of state neutrality, instead it has become an active regulation of individual religious expression. Instead of upholding religious freedom, these laws have turned secularism into a tool for controlling religious identity, particularly impacting Islam. This shows the shift of the interpretation of secularism, from one that promotes state neutrality to one of state-imposed uniformity (Bienkowski, 2017).

An additional factor that adds to this policy problem, is the framing of these laws as protective measures, particularly for women. A key justification for these restrictions is the claim that they promote gender equality, however, by policing what women can and cannot wear, these laws contradict their claim to endorse personal freedom. The 2010 ban on face coverings in public spaces is officially justified on the grounds of security and 'minimum demands of life in society', yet it contradicts this by fuelling discrimination against Muslim women and

deepening social alienation (Government of France, 2017, p. 2). The flaws of the *laïcité* laws can be explained through the concepts of negative and positive freedom, as outlined by Isaiah Berlin (Carter, 2020). Negative freedom refers to the absence of external constraints on individual actions, and in an ideal secular state this would intend that individuals are free to practice and express their religious beliefs without interference from the state, as long as it does not disrupt others or infringe on their rights. By imposing direct restrictions on Muslim women, through limiting their ability to dress according to their religion, these laws violate the principle of negative freedom. On the other hand, positive freedom refers to the ability of an individual to act autonomously and fulfil one's potential, often requiring more state interference (Carter, 2020). Advocates of the *laïcité* laws' restriction of religious dressings argue that they help achieve positive freedom by 'liberating' Muslim women from patriarchal religious norms, assuming that they are coerced to wear their religious attire. Ironically, if this were the case, the laws still do not achieve positive freedom, as they replace one form of dress code from religious communities with another enforced by the state. In reality, these laws limit Muslim women's positive freedom by restricting their ability to act autonomously. This contradiction highlights an inherent flaw in the application of these laws; instead of ensuring freedom, it creates new forms of oppression. A truly secular state would protect both negative and positive freedom by allowing individuals to practice their religion as they so choose, without pressure from either the state or religious institutions.

Another cause of this issue is the emphasis put on assimilation into French society, many view visible religious expression, especially Islam, as incompatible with French identity and values (Ballard Brief, 2022). The fear of religious extremism and the spread of Islamophobia has led to the adaptation of such laws that target Muslim women, under the pretence of preserving a national identity and unity. The *laïcité* laws are being used to enforce cultural homogeneity rather than genuine secularism.

What inequalities are part of the problem? Why is it a gender or intersectionality problem? What intersections exist between the inequalities?

This issue highlights the intersection of religion and feminism in modern France. The inequalities at play are gender, religion and class to a certain extent. The bans, starting with the law of 2004, almost exclusively affect minority women, notably Muslim women, who are the most prolific users of the banned religious symbols, as small symbols such as pendant crosses were not banned. The issue is a gender issue as the vast majority of the liberties curtailed are

those for women, for example turbans, which are worn by men, are not banned besides in schools. Furthermore, it is an intersectional issue as the women affected are a minority, discriminated against, in this case, based on religion. Class also plays a limited role as the first ban applied only to public schools, and as such those who can afford to can avoid the ban by placing their child in a private school (Brookings Institution, 2004). These intersections of inequalities lead to this widely accepted discrimination pursued by the French state since 2004.

Where is the problem located?

The problem is most prominent in France, where the laws were promulgated, with spill-over effects in multiple policy areas:

- **Public Education:** The 2004 ban on religious symbols in schools targets Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, limiting their access to education.
- **Employment:** The 2010 ban on face coverings in public spaces affects Muslim women wearing the *niqab*, restricting their participation in the workforce and social life.
- **Public Spaces:** The *niqab* ban excludes women from public life, as they face fines or harassment for wearing face coverings.

However, the geographical scope is not limited to France. This issue has broader implications across Europe. Countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK face similar debates around secularism, multiculturalism, and religious freedoms (Yurdakul, 2015). France's strict secularism model influences these discussions, particularly on how to integrate Muslim communities while respecting both religious freedom and gender equality. The laws contribute to social exclusion, especially for Muslim women, and highlight the challenges of balancing religious expression with national identity and security concerns within the areas of public education, employment, and public spaces. The laws have affected Muslim women across the country, particularly in urban areas with large Muslim populations. The problem also extends to broader European discussions on the role of religion in public life and the integration of Muslim communities.

Who is responsible for causing the problem? Who is affected by or suffers from the problem?

The French government and policymakers are primarily responsible for the issue due to their implementation of *laïcité* laws, which instead of actually ensuring secularism, public security,

and gender equality, have just disproportionately restricted Muslim women's rights and autonomy.

The problem affects Muslim women the most, particularly those who choose to wear religious attire. The laws also reinforce negative stereotypes about Muslim women, portraying them as lacking agency over their choices. Additionally, broader Muslim communities suffer from social alienation and Islamophobia, as these laws contribute to cultural stigmatisation.

1.2. Justification for including the issue on the agenda and for intervening to solve this problem

As an issue with a great impact on fundamental rights, governments retain a responsibility to act and address it. As a matter of fact, France's *laïcité* laws on Muslim women directly affects some of the key principles of democratic societies, such as freedom, equality, and inclusion.

The problem of ineffective representation and limited support for Muslim women originates from structural problems in integration policies. Governments, including France, are reluctant to intervene in fear that actions addressing religious freedom may be deemed as discriminatory (Ballard Brief, 2022). However, avoiding the issue is not the solution, as it only perpetuates discrimination and exclusion even more; for this reason, it's essential that they find a balance in order to be able to respect religious freedom and guarantee equal opportunities for everyone simultaneously.

This problem requires discussion and evaluation in order to undertake the path towards successfully putting an end to the systemic discrimination that limits Muslim women's access to education and public life. Moreover, government intervention is another essential step in preventing further marginalisation and guaranteeing equal opportunities to be part of society to all citizens, independently of religion and in a way that considers the different needs and points of view that this issue implicates. So, instead of restricting bans, the focus should be put on solutions that empower women with the aim of ensuring that they can freely choose the way they want to express themselves, without forcing them to abandon their religious identity.

The failure of government action would only favour the continued perpetration of isolation and discrimination which impacts the affected women and, because of this, it's crucial for the issue to be included on the agenda.

2. PROGNOSIS: FORMULATION OF POLICY SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

2.1. Goals and Priorities

The main values that the policy proposed aims to do is promote freedom of religion and expression, gender equality, inclusion in a sense of non-discrimination and empowerment in education and employment. All of these important principles are being violated by the bans imposed by secularism, which in France is implemented in a discriminatory and unacceptable way.

There are various goals that can be identified in order to put these values into practice. For instance, reforming *laïcité* laws could be a good starting point in ensuring that policies maintaining secularism do it in a way that isn't harmful to religious minorities. With this, the goal is the protection of individual rights and to guarantee that laws respect individual freedoms and choices, while also providing support to those who may face an oppressive situation into wearing religious attire. Nevertheless, it is fundamental for these goals to take into consideration the equal access to education and workforce; this is essential to ensure that, for Muslim girls, education doesn't exclude religious expression and vice versa. Moreover, advocating for the end of employment discrimination is important.

When addressing the order of priority to assign to these goals it is necessary to keep in mind aspects such as the immediacy, and the short- and long-term effects. It is an urgent matter, as the discriminations that Muslim women have to face in employment and the fact that they are often forced out of education due to religious expression represent issues that can't keep advancing.

2.2. Identification of Policy Solutions

There are various policies that could be established in order to achieve these goals; this report identifies three policy-ideas to address the problem:

- Amendment of the *laïcité* laws (*Solution A*)
- Creation of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body (*Solution B*)
- Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment (*Solution C*).

Amendment of the *laïcité* laws (Solution A):

The policy related to the legal revision of *laïcité* laws proposes the amendment of Law 141-5-1 of 2004 about the ban of religious symbols in schools and of Law No. 2010-1192 about the prohibition of the full-face veil (*niqab, burqa*) in public spaces. The changes would be aimed at ensuring that these laws transition from being disproportionately discriminatory and marginalising for Muslim women, to still protecting secularism, but simultaneously allowing religious expression in an inclusive way. The revised laws would clarify that these bans still apply, however, only if the exposure of the religious symbol encourages violence or disturbs the public/learning environment.

Creation of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body (Solution B):

The second policy that this report proposes is the establishment of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body. It would be effective to create an independent body, tasked with the evaluation of new legislation related to *laïcité*; this would ensure that previous legislative mistakes which negatively affected minorities, such as Muslim women being disproportionately targeted, would not be repeated. The body would administer impact assessments, provide recommendations and supervise compliance with human rights. In order to ensure a fair and balanced approach it would be composed of legal and human rights experts, religious and feminist representatives, and policymakers.

Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment (Solution C):

The last policy argues for the introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment. This measure would be essential to guarantee the elimination of biases and discriminations related to religion, ethnicity and gender in the environments of education and of the workplace. In schools, the training would aim at raising awareness among teachers and directors; this would lead to them creating a more inclusive learning environment and fighting any direct or indirect discrimination they could have against students wearing religious attire. In the workplace, the training would be targeted at employers and HR sectors, so as to eliminate the possibility of any discrimination in the hiring process, preventing equal opportunities also for Muslim women.

The main actors responsible for solving the problem are the French Government and Parliament, accountable for the making of legislative amendments in order to ensure that *laïcité* laws do not disproportionately affect Muslim women. In addition, other important actors are the Ministries of Education and of Labour, assigned with the task of overseeing the implementation of anti-discrimination measures in schools and in the workplace.

The target groups of the proposed actions are clear: first of all, Muslim women and girls as they are the most affected by the bans and discrimination; a focus should be positioned also on educational institutions and employers, who are in need for training and guidance. Moreover, another target group should be recognised in the teams of law and policy makers.

The policy solution is greatly related to intersectional inequalities, since the issue involves various layers of discrimination including gender, religion and ethnicity, class and age.

Finally, from a social point of view, it aims at addressing systemic societal biases, Islamophobia and especially the role of secularism in the context of a multicultural France.

2.3. Analysis of different Policy Solutions

Amendment of the *laïcité* laws (*Solution A*):

Legal revision of *laïcité* laws would have many positive impacts. For instance this amendment would allow for a better balance between secularism and religious freedom, ensuring that Muslim women, who are disproportionately affected by these bans, are not unfairly marginalised. The revision aims to foster inclusivity while maintaining public order and safety, by allowing religious expression unless it promotes violence or disrupts public order. This would remove the barriers for Muslim women to access education and employment. On top of this, the amendments of the *laïcité* laws would also have positive impacts on other citizens who have been held back from aspects of public life, due to religious expression, for instance, members of the Jewish community who choose to wear a kippah, or Sikh men who wear turbans. On the other hand, this amendment may weaken the principle of secularism, which could lead to potential social tensions.

Creation of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body (*Solution B*):

The creation of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body would ensure that future legislation upholds and respects secularism without disproportionately targeting religious minorities. Its aim is to conduct impact assessments, prevent discriminatory policies and promote a more

inclusive and insightful approach to decision-making in legislation. However, this body may face some resistance from people who see it as added unnecessary bureaucracy or an attempt to limit legislative power. There is also a risk that its recommendations may be ignored, as it would not be legally binding, thereby reducing its effectiveness and relevance.

Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment (*Solution C*):

The Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment could help reduce unconscious bias, ensuring that Muslim women and other religious minorities receive fair treatment in education and employment. The training program will aim to foster awareness, therefore encouraging schools and workplaces to become more inclusive and diverse environments. Conversely, there may be opposition from individuals or institutions who see this training program as an unnecessary interference or as an imposition of political correctness. There is also pressure for this training to be implemented effectively, otherwise it may be seen as superficial, a waste of time and capital or even fail to produce meaningful change.

Summary of Benefits & Costs:

Amendment of the *laïcité* laws (*Solution A*):

	Benefits	Costs
Direct	Reduces discrimination and enhances religious freedom for Muslim women.	Concerns about the risk of non-secularism.
Indirect	Other religious minority groups will benefit as well.	Legal ambiguity.

Creation of a National *Laïcité* Assessment Body (*Solution B*):

	Benefits	Costs
Direct	Ensures future laws on secularism do not disproportionately harm minorities and provides expert oversight.	Fears of reducing legislative power in other institutions.

Indirect	Creation of new jobs.	May be ineffective- as its recommendations are not legally binding.
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Introduction of Anti-Discrimination Training in Education and Employment (*Solution C*):

	Benefits	Costs
Direct	Reduces bias and promotes equal opportunities for Muslim women.	Resistance from institutions and risk of ineffective implementation.
Indirect	Promotes equal opportunities for other religious minorities.	*

2.4. Comparison of the different Policy Solutions to the Problem of Inequality

	Amendment of the <i>laïcité</i> laws (<i>Solution A</i>):	Creation of a National <i>Laïcité</i> Assessment Body (<i>Solution B</i>):	Anti-Discrimination Training (<i>Solution C</i>):
Feasibility	Low: Lack of political will and fracturing of support in the National Assembly.	Low: Would also require political will.	Medium: Needs less political manoeuvring to implement.
Equity	Directly & immediately improves equity for religious minorities.	Improves long-term outcomes and prevents future recurrence.	Promotes fairness in employment and education, bottom up approach.
Need	Would be the easiest solution for a government-created problem.	Need for a body to provide oversight on law making.	Targets root causes.
Demand	From affected minorities, NGOs & advocacy groups in favour of diversity.		
Effectiveness	100% : Reduces the key problem completely.	75% : Solves the problem but not immediately.	50% : Doesn't solve the key problem.
Political Support	Only from the left-wing of the political spectrum, laws introduced recently by right-wing lawmakers.		
Economic Cost	Low to None: Only involves repealing existing laws.	Medium: Costs involved in setting up and maintaining the body.	Medium: Training would likely require funding.

Social Effect	Reintegration of women previously stigmatised by the laws.	Long-term improvement of social cohesion.
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2.5. Policy recommendation (of the preferred solution)

As this is a government-created legal problem, the only real solution lies in changing the laws concerned. This would have no economic effect, or even savings from foregone enforcement costs, and would improve social cohesion. The problem with this solution is the lack of political will, as the opposition to this law is not currently coherent in the National Assembly, which is outlined in part III, and hence the reason why we turn to other solutions.

3. POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY ISSUE AND RECOMMENDED POLICY SOLUTION: ACTORS IN FAVOUR/ AGAINST

3.1. Map of actors involved in the policy issue, favourable and oppositional, and analysis of the political feasibility of the recommended policy solutions

The implementation of laws in France involves both executive and legislative actors. At the executive level, President Emmanuel Macron (Renaissance) and Prime Minister François Bayrou (MoDem) play key roles. The President can influence the legislative agenda through government proposals, dissolve the National Assembly, and formally enact laws. The Prime Minister, along with relevant ministers like Astrid Panosyan-Bouvet (Labour and Economic Inclusion) and Élisabeth Borne (National Education), can propose bills, issue decrees, and implement laws. The Prime Minister may also use Article 49.3 to pass legislation without a vote unless challenged by a motion of no confidence. The legislative branch, consisting of the National Assembly and the Senate, has the formal authority to propose, amend, and approve laws. The National Assembly holds more power and can override Senate objections. Major party groups in the Assembly include the New Popular Front (182 seats), the Ensemble Coalition (168), the National Rally (143), and Les Républicains (45). The Senate, while influential in reviewing legislation, cannot block final decisions and is composed of diverse political groups including LR, SER, UC, and RN.

Beyond these formal institutions, extra-parliamentary actors play a critical role in shaping public discourse and influencing political decisions. These actors, though not directly involved in the legislative process, impact how proposals are received and implemented. Among the most directly affected are Muslim women, young Muslim students, and immigrant women, who may act as advocates for reforms promoting religious freedom and inclusion. Teachers and social workers are key to implementation on the ground.

Support for proposed reforms—such as amending laïcité laws, creating a Laïcité Assessment Body, and introducing anti-discrimination training—would likely come from advocacy groups like Les Hijabeuses, Action for the Rights of Muslims, and grassroots anti-Islamophobia movements, as well as progressive feminist organizations and human rights NGOs. Some EU institutions may also exert normative pressure in favour of compliance with rights standards. However, significant opposition would be expected from conservative secularist groups (e.g., Comité Laïcité République), right-wing populists (RN, Reconquête!), and mainstream secular feminists who view religious symbols like the hijab as incompatible with French secular values. Public intellectuals and segments of public opinion, influenced by cultural anxieties, could further amplify resistance. These extra-parliamentary dynamics create a contentious political environment that deeply influences the prospects of any legislative reform.

Possible Coalitions of Actors:

In the list below, you find an enumeration of actors directly involved in this report and their expected view on the matter. The actors are grouped into three possible coalitions; in favour, ambiguous and against the proposed policy solution.

- **Actors in favour:**
 - In civil society:
 - Muslim women
 - Young Muslim students
 - Immigrant/refugee women
 - ‘Les Hijabeuses’
 - Action for the Rights of Muslims
 - Grassroots anti-Islamophobia movements
 - Muslim civil society groups (CFCM, mosque associations)
 - Human rights NGOs
 - Progressive feminist organs
 - In the National Assembly:
 - New Popular Front (Nouveau Front Populaire, NFP) – 182 seats
 - Senate:

- Socialist and Related Group (Groupe Socialiste, Écologiste et Républicain – SER)
- Communist, Republican, Citizen and Ecologist Group (Groupe Communiste, Républicain, Citoyen et Écologiste – CRCE)
- Ecologist Group (Groupe Écologiste – GEST)

There is a possibility for a diverse coalition supporting repealing or amending the laïcité laws, mostly driven by motivations of religious freedom, combating discrimination, and promoting social justice. Muslim women and related civil society groups bring experiences, grassroots activism, and legal expertise, and can advocate for change through community mobilization and overall engagement. The NFP in the National Assembly and their supportive Senate groups (SER, CRCE, GEST) offer political ways of introducing legislation and adapting government policies. While a strong support base exists, success hinges on navigating political complexities and addressing concerns related to security and national identity.

- **Ambiguous actors:**

- In the National Assembly:
 - Ensemble Coalition (Centrist Bloc) – 168 seats
- Senate:
 - The Republicans (Les Républicains – LR)
 - Rally of Democrats, Progressive and Independent Group (Rassemblement des démocrates, progressistes et indépendants – RDPI)
 - European Democratic and Social Rally Group (Rassemblement Démocratique et Social Européen – RDSE)

The Ensemble Coalition, LR, RDPI, and RDSE present mixed opinions for reforming laïcité laws. Ensemble, a key swing vote, is internally divided but does focus on social cohesion, making amendments of that subject crucial. LR leans mostly toward opposition, prioritizing traditional values and security. RDPI is overall pragmatic and may support specific and targeted changes, while RDSE is moderately supportive, emphasizing human rights, liberties and European values. In persuading these actors, one will have to carefully address concerns about security, national identity, and social cohesion, while highlighting the potential benefits of reform.

- **Actors Against:**

- In Civil Society:
 - Conservative secularist groups (e.g., Comité Laïcité République)
 - Mainstream secular feminist groups (e.g., Osez le féminisme!)
 - Public intellectuals (Badinter, Onfray, Fourest)
 - Security actors (police unions, radicalization experts)
 - Public opinion (segments)
- In the National Assembly:

- National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN) and Allies – 143 seats
- The Republicans (Les Républicains, LR) – 45 seats
- Senate:
 - National Rally (Rassemblement National – RN)

The opposition to reforming France's *laïcité* laws is expected to originate from a complex interplay of concerns from various actors. Conservative secularist groups and possibly some segments of feminism publicly defend a rigid interpretation of *laïcité* as necessary for safeguarding French Republicanism and women's rights. Furthermore, security actors, such as police unions and radicalization experts, argue that the laws are necessary for preventing extremism and maintaining public order. The National Rally (RN) and The Republicans (LR) strategically leverage legislative and political platforms to block any weakening, at all, of *laïcité*, often capitalizing on public anxieties about immigration, national identity, and potential security threats. This resistance is further strengthened by actors in public opinion that express concerns about cultural change, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and distrust of minority groups. All the above-mentioned reasons highlight underlying cultural prejudices that could strengthen opposition to reforming the laws.

3.2. Political Strategy

To promote the proposed amendment of France's *laïcité* laws, a comprehensive political strategy is essential. The revision would seek to ensure that individuals, particularly Muslim women, are no longer disproportionately marginalized in public life due to visible religious expression. This includes improved access to education, employment, and civic participation for all religious minorities. While the proposed amendment upholds public order by allowing religious expression only insofar as it does not promote violence or disruption, it nevertheless challenges deeply rooted ideological commitments to strict secularism. As such, advancing this reform requires a multi-layered approach that combines political cooperation, strategic framing, legal pressure, and grassroots mobilization

1. Cooperation through strategic alliances and persuasion

The success of this policy will depend heavily on forming strategic alliances with moderate political actors who are open to reconciling secular values with individual rights. Potential allies include members of left-wing parties (such as La France Insoumise), certain Senate groups (like SER and CRCE), and civil society organizations working on educational equity, religious freedom, and minority rights. The framing here is crucial: this should not be presented as a religious concession, but as a socially inclusive policy that strengthens republican values by addressing systemic inequality, reducing dropout rates, and improving long-term integration outcomes.

Local government officials, who often interact more directly with diverse communities, will also be vital stakeholders. Engaging municipal councils in negotiation and dialogue can lead to localized compromises, for example, ensuring these schools include robust civic education

and gender equality programming to align with national values. At the same time, outreach to ambiguous or moderate actors (e.g., Ensemble coalition, Les Républicains) should emphasize that the current laïcité framework inadvertently hinders the socio-economic mobility of certain groups, particularly Muslim women, and contradicts broader commitments to non-discrimination and social cohesion.

2. Pre-emptive framing and narrative strategy

Given the predictably strong backlash from secularist organizations and right-wing parties, the policy must be embedded within a strong, proactive communication campaign. The goal is to shift the narrative from one of religious accommodation to one of promoting republican principles (liberty, equality, and fraternity) for all citizens. This reframing strategy involves presenting the policy as a way to uphold the Republic's promise of equal opportunity in education and public life.

Public messaging should underscore the policy's potential to foster inclusion and address socio-economic disparities that threaten national unity. To counter Islamophobic or xenophobic framings that link religious symbols to extremism, the campaign should spotlight voices of Muslim women who freely choose religious attire and whose lives have been disrupted by existing laws. Collaborations with scholars, journalists, human rights organizations, and secular groups concerned with civil liberties can help broaden support and bridge ideological divides.

3. Grassroots mobilization and public engagement

Lastly, grassroots mobilization is key to building bottom-up pressure and shifting public sentiment. Advocacy groups representing Muslim women, such as *Les Hijabeuses*, along with anti-racism movements and student organizations, can play a pivotal role in organizing campaigns, generating media attention, and mobilizing voters. Community dialogues can foster empathy and understanding across different segments of society.

Public storytelling should focus on the personal testimonies of those most affected, the young women excluded from education and employment due to current legislation. These narratives make the stakes of the policy concrete and human, reframing the issue around dignity, opportunity, and the right to full civic participation.

4. Conflict, legal leverage, and incrementalism

While pursuing political consensus, it is equally important to leverage legal avenues. Strategic litigation, particularly through the European Court of Human Rights or the French Constitutional Council, can challenge discriminatory outcomes of existing laïcité laws and create legal precedents that support reform. These legal wins can serve both as political pressure and public awareness tools, strengthening the legitimacy of the proposed changes.

Additionally, an incremental approach could be pursued to ease opposition. Instead of immediately overhauling the 2004 and 2010 laws, reforms could begin with targeted

amendments, such as allowing religious expression in higher education institutions, or through pilot programs in selected regions. These limited initiatives can demonstrate that religious accommodations do not compromise public order, creating empirical support for broader reform in the future.

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