

## 15. VEILED THREATS?

The niqab and burka, covering the head and face, are worn by some Muslim women. Some Muslims believe that the face coverings not only protect women from the gaze of men, but also separate women from the world so they may draw closer to God. The niqab leaves the eyes uncovered; the burka has a screen over the eyes.

In April 2011, France's laws banning the wearing in public of niqabs, masks, balaclava, helmets and other face coverings went into effect. The law makes some exceptions for purposeful face coverings such as safety helmets and carnival masks. The law also makes exceptions for women who wear niqabs and burkas in private cars and places of worship. Belgium and the Netherlands have also banned the niqab and burka in most public places.

To ensure that all students could be identified while on campus, in 2005 Birmingham Metropolitan College banned all headcoverings, including hoodies, caps, hats, and veils. In September 2013, the college lifted the ban on women wearing the niqab, following organized protests against the ban. Administrators justified the reversal of the ban, saying protests interfered with the school's educational mission.

Britain's Blackfriars Crown Court allowed a defendant to wear the niqab during her trial for intimidating a witness, but ordered her to remove it to give testimony. A Michigan judge threw out the small claims court case of Ginnah Muhammad, because she refused to uncover her face in court. In 2009, the Michigan Supreme Court upheld the judge's decision. Supporters of the right to wear the niqab in court argue that prohibition of the face covering is a denial of religious freedom and individual rights. Opponents argue that judges and juries must be able to see the face of witnesses and defendants, as well as hear their words to adequately assess their testimony. Uncovering the face is necessary for proper identification. Further, assert proponents, a victim has the right to see the face of the accused.

Some question the motives of those who choose to live in a democratic society, then demand the right to change the culture. This tension has prompted discussion on whether it is essential or discriminatory to ban niqabs and burkas in some public places such as schools and courtrooms, and for some professionals, such as legislators and hospital healthcare workers. Some predict that restrictions on religious freedom will increase the divide between groups, leading to more violence.

Those who favor a ban on face coverings in public offer several reasons. They say that such a ban prevents women from being coerced into wearing a veil. They also assert that communication of veiled girls and women is restrictive, create segregation, and prevents full membership in society. Further, those supporting bans claim that face coverings pose a security threat, as the true identity of the person cannot be discerned.

Opponents to bans on religious and cultural clothing cite the preservation of individual rights, self expression, and personal liberty as well as the protection of religious freedom. Many, including women who choose to keep their faces covered in public say that the burka and niqab are empowering. They remove the concern of sexual harassment, and force others, particularly men, to judge them on their intellect and behavior, rather than their appearance.