

This article is more than 15 years old

# Is France right to ban wearing the burka in public?

Egyptian-born columnist and lecturer Mona Eltahawy argues in favour of the proposed French ban on the burka in public; actor and playwright Stephanie Street takes the opposite view



Will President Sarkozy's bid to ban the burka in public succeed? Photograph: AFP PHOTO/ Getty Images

*Mona Eltahawy and Stephanie Street*

Sat 20 Mar 2010 20.08 EDT

 Prefer the Guardian on Google

## Your privacy

California residents have certain rights with regard to the sale of personal information to third parties. Guardian News and Media and our partners use information collected through cookies or in other forms to improve experience on our site and pages, analyze how it is used and show personalized advertising.

At any point, you can opt out of the sale of all of your personal information by pressing

[Do not sell or share my personal information](#)

You can find out more in our [privacy policy](#) and [cookie policy](#), and manage your choices by going to 'California resident – Do Not Sell' at the bottom of any page.



to defend women's rights but who are now instead sacrificing those very rights in the name of fighting an increasingly powerful right wing.

Every time I return to Cairo from New York City, where I now live, I wonder what Hoda Shaarawi, the pioneering Egyptian feminist, would say if she could see how many of her sisters are disappearing behind the face veil. Returning from an international women's conference in Italy in 1923 - yes, we had feminists that early in Egypt - Shaarawi famously removed her face veil at a Cairo train station, declaring it a thing of the past. We might not have burned our bras in Egypt but some have described Shaarawi's gesture as even more incendiary for its time.

And yet here we are, almost a century later, arguing over a woman's "right" to cover her face. What is lost in those arguments is that the ideology that promotes the niqab (the total body covering that leaves just the eyes exposed) and the burka (the garment which covers the eyes with a mesh) does not believe in the concept of women's rights to begin with.

It is an ideology that describes women alternately as candy, a diamond ring or a precious stone that needs to be hidden to prove her "worth". That is not a message Muslims learn in our holy book, the Qur'an, nor is the face veil prescribed by the majority of Muslim scholars.

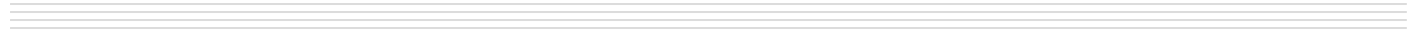
It is instead a pillar of the ultra-conservative interpretation of [Islam](#) known as Salafism. It is associated with Saudi Arabia, where I spent most of my adolescence and where it is clear that women are effectively perpetual children, forbidden as they are from driving, from travelling alone and from even the simplest of surgical procedures without the permission of a male "guardian". I detest the niqab and the burka for their erasure of women and for dangerously equating piety with that disappearance - the less of you I can see, the closer you must be to God. I defend a woman's right to cover her hair if she chooses but the face is central to human interaction and so the ideologues who promote its covering are simply misogynists.

I abhor the rightwing Muslim ideology behind the veils but I equally abhor the political rightwing xenophobes of Europe. The European political right - be it President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), his ultra-right rival Jean-Marie Le Pen (who did alarmingly well in the first round of those regional elections) or Dutch provocateur Geert Wilders - do not give a rat's ass about Muslim women or their rights: they are merely using the issue in an attempt to win votes.

The racism and discrimination that Muslim minorities face in many countries - such as France, which has the largest Muslim community in Europe, and Britain, where two members of the xenophobic British National party were shamefully elected to the European parliament - are very real. But the silence of the left wing and liberals isn't the way to fight it. The best way to support Muslim women would be to say we oppose both the racist right wing and the niqabs and burkas which are products of what I call the Muslim right wing. [Women](#) should not be sacrificed to either.

*Mona Eltahawy can be reached at [info@monaeltahawy.com](mailto:info@monaeltahawy.com)*

- This is the archive of The Observer up until 21/04/2025. The Observer is now owned and operated by Tortoise Media.





## **Most viewed**