

Breaking the Silence

*French Women's Voices
from the Ghetto*

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THOSE WHO WEAR THE HEADSCARF

Among the young women in the projects there are those who seek recognition in a kind of return to ethnic community life, and in particular by turning to Islam for their identity. Some of them wear the headscarf by choice in the spirit of religious practice. But others have been subjected to pressures emanating from parents, religious leaders, or the projects. As someone who is very attached to fundamental freedoms, I think religious practice is legitimate when it is a personal choice, without pressure or constraint, but above all when it respects the norms of a secular society.

It is possible, in fact, to distinguish different categories of young women who wear the headscarf. First of all, there are those who wear it because they believe that the fact that they practice their religion affords them a legitimate existence. They are Muslim, they identify themselves as such, and they have the impression of being recognized and respected. They wear the headscarf as a banner.

But there are many young women who, forbidden any outward display of femininity, wear the headscarf above all as armor, supposed to protect them from male aggression. Indeed, women who wear the headscarf are never bothered by young men, who

2. Testimony collected in the *Livre blanc des femmes des quartiers* (working paper by neighborhood women), available at Solidarity House [in Paris].

lower their eyes in front of them; covered by the headscarf, these girls are in their view untouchable. Most of the girls who wear a headscarf to protect themselves take it off when they leave the projects. They always carry a bag into which they can slip it, together with a makeup kit—they are called *filles-cabas* (shopping-bag girls). Under their “armor” they wear tight-fitting clothes, low-necked blouses, but these clothes are not to be seen in the projects. This is such a terrible thing to imagine in a free country.

Finally, the third category of women who wear the headscarf includes those whom I call “soldiers of green fascism.” In general these are women who attended university and who, behind this emblematic headscarf, fight for a social project that is dangerous for our democracy. These are not disturbed kids, troubled or searching for an identity, who wear the headscarf because it shows they belong to a community. No, these are real militants! They often begin their justification of wearing the headscarf by explaining that, in their view, it is part of a process of emancipation. It bothers me to hear them talk about freedom of expression because behind this symbol is a project for a different society than our own: a fascist-like society that has nothing to do with democracy.

In our countries of origin, now as in the past, the headscarf is not a sign of women’s liberation. Women have been attacked with acid for refusing to wear it. Algerian feminists and many other women in Muslim countries, who fought to take it off in the name of freedom, have paid a heavy price. Women of my generation—including those who are practicing Muslims like myself—have fought against the headscarf because it has always been a symbol of women’s oppression and confinement. And on

our own ground today we are still battling these “soldiers of green fascism,” who are a small minority but an extremely dangerous one.

THOSE WHO OFFER DAILY RESISTANCE

I could not round off this typology of young women’s behavior without talking about those who resist and in fact represent the majority. They feel restive in the projects’ oppressive atmosphere and resist by affirming their femininity. For young women of my generation, the fight for equality was the way we asserted ourselves, but these girls do not fight. They try to resist by being themselves, by continuing to wear revealing clothing, by dressing in fashion, by using makeup, sometimes outrageously. They want to live in a modern society, to exist as individuals, and to command personal respect on equal footing with young men.

In the housing projects there are many young women for whom makeup has become war paint, a sign of resistance. It is their way of fighting. It has nothing to do with the feminists of the 1970s who threw away their bras and led the war of the sexes! When I express surprise, they sometimes make an aggressive claim to their femininity. “They don’t want me to wear makeup? Too bad, I paint my lips with lip pencil. God gave me a body that I inhabit and value. If this bothers them, then they can turn their eyes away.”

These young women who resist are still in the majority in our neighborhood, but they pay the price every day. Guys willfully target them with their violence. They undergo daily harassment with insults and roughing up, and sometimes they are the first victims of rape. These young women’s lives are often hell.