



**New Insights into
Feminist Perspectives
on Banning the Face Veil**

Dr Brenda O'Neill

NEW INSIGHTS INTO FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON BANNING THE FACE VEIL

In recent years, many European countries have introduced bans that limit or prohibit the use of religious face veils, which include the burqa and niqab. **Dr Brenda O'Neill** worked with colleagues to examine the role of feminist arguments amongst non-Muslim women in Quebec on the acceptability of wearing the niqab in public spaces. This work explored some additional attitudes underpinning these arguments, identifying how these also shape the diverse beliefs of Canadian women.

Debates Following Face Veil Bans

Some Muslim women cover both their head and face with scarves and veils known as burqas and niqabs. This traditional religious custom has generated significant controversy in many countries, with parts of the population perceiving it as a symbol of oppression or mistreatment.

In 2010, France and Belgium became the first of several European countries to officially prohibit the wearing of full-face veils in public. Similar bans were then introduced in Austria, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Switzerland. These bans gave rise to several debates among both non-Muslim and Muslim women, with some arguing that women should have a right to choose whether to wear face coverings or not, and others viewing them as a symbol of oppression.

In 2010, after a young woman refused to remove her niqab in a classroom during a French-language assessment, face veil bans became a heated topic of discussion in the Canadian province of Quebec. Following these discussions, the Quebec government introduced a bill (Bill 94) to limit the right of women

to wear face veils in a number of specific public places, including childcare centres, public health facilities, and school boards.

Dr Brenda O'Neill (currently at Carleton University and previously at the University of Calgary, where the research was conducted) worked with colleagues to explore the drivers of attitudes of non-Muslim women in Quebec towards the use of niqabs and their ban in specific situations.

Collecting the Views of Non-Muslim Women in Quebec

After the Quebec government limited the use of face veils in public, several local feminist groups expressed opposition. For instance, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, a unit at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, dedicated to feminist studies, released a statement expressing its opposition to the bill, adding that the Institute supports 'bodily and personal autonomy for all women'. La Fédération des femmes de Québec and other women's organisations, meanwhile, fully supported the ban, either because they felt it was a 'balanced and reasonable'

solution or because they felt it promoted women's equality. Dr O'Neill and her colleagues examined these feminist and other arguments for and against the ban amongst non-Muslim women by analysing data collected from the 2010 Quebec Women's Political Participation Survey, representing the views of 1,201 women in the province.

Participants were asked about their attitudes towards women wearing the niqab across four different contexts – while shopping, working as a pharmacist, teaching in a public school, and voting in Quebec elections. They also provided demographic details and rated the extent to which they considered themselves feminist, Quebec nationalists, religious, and open to immigration – known drivers of various attitudes.

Participants finally rated how much they agreed with four different statements reflecting common but diverse attitudes to the use of face veils in public: that the niqab represents the oppression of women, that women freely choose whether to wear it or not, that they should be able to wear it due to freedom



of religion, and that the niqab brings up feelings of discomfort due to a lack of familiarity with the wearer's religious and cultural background.

The Importance of Background

Dr O'Neill and her colleagues found that, across the four scenarios presented, 35% of respondents accepted the wearing of the face veil while shopping, 12% while working as a pharmacist, 8% while teaching in public school, and only 6% while voting. Overall, almost two-thirds (64%) of the survey respondents felt that wearing niqabs was unacceptable in all of the scenarios presented, while only 3% considered it acceptable in all four scenarios.

Interestingly, the researchers found that while women who took part in the survey had varying beliefs about niqabs, most rejected the idea that freedom of choice and freedom of religion gave women the right to wear them. Instead, most respondents perceived the niqab as a symbol of oppression and noted that they felt uncomfortable seeing another woman wearing one.

This research offers precious insight into the factors that influence how non-Muslim women perceive the traditional practice of wearing niqabs. Not surprisingly, support for freedom of religion generally is strongly associated with support for wearing the niqab, as is a belief that its wearing is a matter of free choice. Alternatively, feeling uncomfortable at the sight of the niqab and, to a lesser extent, seeing it as a symbol of oppression, were both likely to result in opposition to the wearing of the face veil.

Dr O'Neill and her colleagues then looked at the relationship between the respondent's views and their socio-economic background. They found that younger women and residents of the Island of Montreal appeared to be more open to the use of face veils, presumably having been more exposed to and

familiar with the custom compared to older generations of women or those living in less diverse areas. Generally, findings support the view that greater exposure to different ethnic or religious groups can foster greater tolerance and acceptance of highly debated cultural practices, as does education. In addition, non-Muslim women who wished to reduce immigration were generally opposed to the wearing of the niqab in most public settings. The importance of religion in the respondent's life played a relatively minor role in shaping opinion on the niqab.

The Relative Role of Feminist Beliefs

Looking at how feminist thinking shaped participants' views was particularly instructive. Feminist identity itself influences the views of non-Muslim women on the use of face veils in public. In particular, women who identified as strongly feminist were more likely to find niqabs unacceptable, viewing the practice as a symbol of women's oppression rather than a reflection of women's agency or a matter of religious freedom.

Of the women who identified as feminists, approximately half disagreed with the idea that wearing the niqab should be a protected right, representing freedom of choice and religion. As such, non-Muslim women who identify as feminists in the province are highly divided on this issue; feminist beliefs play a key role in how non-Muslim women approach the topic but not in a single direction.

This work helps pave the way for further studies investigating the role of feminist attitudes in supporting face veils. Importantly, it highlights how divided attitudes on the issue of veiling are, even among women who agree on their identification as feminists.



Meet the researcher

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Dr Brenda O'Neill is the Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs and a Professor of Political Science at Carleton University. She holds a BA in Economics and Politics from Brock University, an MA in Economics and another MA in Public Policy and Administration from McMaster University, and a PhD in Political Science from the University of British Columbia. Before she started working at Carleton, Dr O'Neill held several academic leadership positions. Most recently, she was the Head of the Political Science department at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on a broad range of topics related to politics, gender, and the feminist movement, predominantly in Canada. Her work appears in a number of academic journals, including *Party Politics*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Political Studies*, *International Political Science Review*, and *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Dr O'Neill has received several honours and awards, including the Jill Vickers Paper Prize by the Canadian Political Science Association and the University of Manitoba Merit Award for Outstanding Achievement in Research, Teaching and Service.

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FURTHER READING

B O'Neill, E Gidengil, C Côté, L Young, [Freedom of religion, women's agency and banning the face veil: the role of feminist beliefs in shaping women's opinion](#), *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2015, 38(11), 1886–1901. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.887744>



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