Freedom of Religion, Women's Agency and Banning the Veil:
The Role of Feminist Interpretations in Shaping Québec Women's Opinion

by

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Muslim women’s head coverings have become a controversial public policy issue in both Europe and North America. Many European countries now regulate the wearing of headscarves or other head coverings in the public sphere, including educational institutions, public service jobs and courtrooms (Sauer 2009, 75-6), regulations that are supported by public opinion (Pew Research Centre 2010). The most prominent examples of this type of regulation are France’s 2004 ban on any ‘conspicuously worn’ religious symbols in schools, which effectively bans Muslim students from wearing any head coverings, and the “burqa ban” adopted by France and Belgium in 2010, which restricts the wearing of face-veils in public.

From a feminist perspective, the issue of Muslim women’s head coverings brings two important principles into conflict: women’s personal agency versus freedom from patriarchal religious practices.1 While there has been a good deal of academic attention devoted to the clash of rights in the abstract (see for example, Sauer 2009), along with efforts to understand the perspectives of Muslim women who wear the veil (see, for example, Killian 2003), surprisingly little attention has been paid to how women develop their thinking on the issue. The few studies devoted to the question of public opinion regarding the veil specifically, or Muslims more generally, have focused on religiosity, intergroup relations, and perceived threats as its likely drivers (Saroglou et al. 2009; Wike and Grim 2010). To our knowledge, however, no one has of yet examined the direct role of feminist arguments in shaping attitudes on this question. We extend the analysis of opinion toward restrictions on the wearing of the veil in two ways: first, by expanding the range of explanations to include the role of feminist beliefs, arguably central to the issue yet absent from quantitative analyses of opinion to date; and second, by focussing specifically on women’s opinions.2

Our analysis examines women’s opinions on Muslim women’s head coverings in the Canadian province of Québec using a public opinion survey undertaken in the midst of debate about the issue. The issue came to prominence in 2010 when a young woman enrolled in a French-language course was asked to remove her niqab in order to allow the instructor to properly assist her in French language pronunciation. Given the presence of men in the classroom, the young woman refused. Despite attempts to accommodate her unwillingness to remove the veil, her repeated refusal eventually resulted in her removal from the course. The expulsion of a second niqab-wearing woman soon followed (Wilton 2010). Media coverage of the issue suggested that there was widespread public agreement on the expulsion (Perreaux 2010, para. 3). Soon thereafter, the Québec government introduced a bill (Bill 94) limiting the right of women wearing face veils to receive or deliver services in a range of public institutions if it is deemed to limit communication, to limit others from identifying the wearer or to present a security risk (Québec 2010), the first bill of its type in North America. The ban would encompass nearly every public institution including childcare centres, school boards and public health facilities. The government defended the bill by invoking the principles of gender equality and the importance of the religious neutrality of the state, both underscored as core societal values. An online Angus Reid poll undertaken at the time revealed that 95 percent of Quebecers and 80 percent of Canadians approved of the
ban; a gender gap of 5 percentage points, with women less likely to support the bill than men, was also apparent (Angus Reid Public Opinion 2010).

Our findings reveal a number of drivers of women’s attitudes on the wearing of the niqab including generation, exposure to diversity, education, religiosity and attitudes towards immigration. The key attitudinal forces driving acceptance of the niqab in public spaces are the perception that the wearing of the niqab is freely chosen and the belief that it should be viewed as a matter of freedom of religion, two beliefs linked to feminist thinking on the issue. Opposition to the practice is motivated by the belief that the niqab is a visible symbol of women’s oppression, another key driver of feminist thinking. The tensions, however, between these beliefs and perceptions leave many women, feminists included, conflicted.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE VEIL

While there exists relatively little research investigating attitudes specifically focussed on Muslim women and face veils, there nevertheless exists a rich literature from which to draw insight. Extant research suggests that a number of various arguments are likely to shape thinking on face veils: multiculturalism, national identity, religious freedom, secularism, minority rights, immigration and Québec's place within North America. The theoretical drivers of these forces are threat perception, intergroup relations, religiosity and demographic factors, which we summarize below. Importantly, we hypothesize that women’s attitudes on the issue are likely to reflect their feminist identity and/or feminist beliefs given that the issue is one that touches on the core beliefs and values of feminist thought, and given that feminist groups provide visible and vocal cues for women’s thinking on the issue. We begin our review of the literature with feminist thinking on the issue.

THE FEMINIST DEBATE

The issue of face veils, whether the niqab or burqa, is a particularly difficult one for feminists: it pits arguments for women’s bodily integrity and freedom to choose – in this case, their clothing – against arguments focussed on the subjugation of women. Not surprisingly, the issue has provoked a good deal of debate among feminists. As Sauer (2009, 76) observes, “the headscarf is either seen as a freely chosen expression of women’s religious identity and a shield from the lustful gaze of men ... or it is perceived as a sexist religious tradition, which the Quran does not demand, and an emblem of female oppression denying women full access to the public sphere.”

These debates were played out within the feminist movement in Québec over the niqab issue and the introduction of Bill 94. Multicultural feminist accounts emphasize women’s agency and maintain that wearing the niqab or other coverings is an assertion of cultural identity. Along these lines, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University issued a statement strongly opposing the bill: “As feminists, we are committed to supporting bodily and personal autonomy for all women, as well as all women’s capacity to understand and articulate their experiences of oppression on their own terms. And it is as feminists that we oppose state interventions that promise gender
equality at the expense of women’s autonomy” (Simone de Beauvoir Institute 2010, paragraph 3).

Taking a position closer to liberal feminism, one which focuses on opposition to religious requirements limiting women’s freedoms and their ability to participate fully in society, La Fédération des femmes de Québec (FFQ), the largest feminist organization in the province, stated that the bill struck an important balance between gender equality and reasonable accommodation (FFQ 2010). Arguing that it was reasonable to expect those working for the state to have their faces visible and uncovered, the FFQ’s support for the ban was limited, however, to those working in the public sector. The blanket ban for receiving publicly available services was seen as unnecessarily hindering the social and economic integration of Muslim women and restricting their individual rights. Instead, the FFQ recommended that the government identify the specific cases where the requirements of communication, security or identification would necessitate the removal of veils by women requesting services. Other women’s organizations fully support to the ban and argued that women’s equality – a central value in Québec society –justified its introduction (see for example AFEAS 2010).

Mirroring research identifying the importance of value priorities for thinking regarding the veil (Saroglou et al. 2010) but linking these values directly to feminist arguments, we anticipate that women’s beliefs regarding the wearing of the veil will reflect the importance assigned to self-direction – women’s agency – and universalism – women’s equality (Schwartz and Huismans 1995).

We also suggest that self-identification as a feminist might shape women’s attitudes on the veil. According to McCabe, a feminist identity is a “multidimensional concept that encompasses feminist self-identification, feminist consciousness, and gender-role attitudes” (2005, 481-482). Feminist self-identification is not a prerequisite for holding feminist attitudes, especially among younger cohorts (Schnittker et al. 2003), and as a result the two concepts ought to be examined independently.

Research underscores that women are less politically knowledgeable than men (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010), and as such, they might employ cognitive heuristics or informational shortcuts to compensate (Iyengar and Valentino 2000; Popkin 1991). For some women, their feminist identity might act as such a heuristic. The complexity of the issue ought to provide an incentive for relying on their feminist identity as a shortcut to determining their attitudes on the issue. The vocal and public role played by feminist groups in the province on the issue provided sufficient cues for some women to have relied on such a shortcut. Although feminist organizations in Québec did not speak with a single voice on the bill, the dominant position was to oppose the bill on at least some of its elements, and as such, we might expect women who self-identify as feminists to reject the veil.

THREAT PERCEPTION

The essence of tolerance is “a willingness to ‘put up with’ those things that one rejects... One is tolerant to the extent one is prepared to extend freedoms to those whose ideas one rejects, whatever these might be” (Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus
of the strongest predictors of tolerance is the potential threat associated with a group or practice (Gibson 2004; Golebiowska 1999; Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus 1982). Cultural (or symbolic) threats involve the perceived threat to the values, beliefs and morals of a society; security (or realistic) threats, on the other hand, address perceived threats to the economic or physical security posed by a group (Wike and Grim 2010). Sniderman et al. (2004), for example, found a link between opposition to immigrant groups and perceived threats to Dutch culture. Others have identified a connection between a sense of national pride and perceiving immigrants as a threat, particularly when they are seen as challenging the nation-state vis-à-vis citizenship rights, although the connection varies with the political climate, social conditions and historiographies unique to individual nations (Jackson et al. 2001).

Perceived threats to Québec culture and values are likely to be linked to attitudes on the veil, given that the ban was framed as necessary for the safeguarding of the dominant Québec values of secularism and the equality of women and men. And although notably absent from much public debate on the issue, security was included as one of the justifications for banning the veil in Bill 94.

As a French-speaking minority population within a largely English-speaking country and continent, Québec's policies have concentrated on protecting the French language and culture from assimilation into the English-speaking majority. And although Canada is formally committed to multiculturalism as state policy, Québec has never officially endorsed Canada's policy of multiculturalism understood as “an obligation to accord the history, language and culture of non-dominant groups the same recognition and accommodation that is accorded to the dominant group” (Kymlicka 2003: 150). As such, multiculturalism suggests that veils, a symbol of cultural identity, be tolerated, if not celebrated, in the public sphere. Underlying the rejection of multiculturalism in Québec is a sense of linguistic insecurity. Accordingly, the working policy in the province is one of interculturalism, which argues immigrants should be integrated into a common public culture through the medium of the French language. As Sharify-Funk (2010: 537) observes, however, a “preoccupation with pure laine (literally, ‘pure wool’) Québéccers’ insecure minority status within Canada has … generated considerable ambivalence about the broader implications of multicultural policy and has at times reduced empathy for other Canadian minority groups.” Importantly, perhaps, the precipitator of Bill 94 was an immigrant woman demanding accommodation in a French language class, one of many government-funded classes offered to immigrants to encourage the adoption of the French language. Groups – and their practices – whose actions are perceived to be threats to the province’s ability to defend this ‘common public culture’ should generate more negative attitudes and their actions be less tolerated than others.

The ban on veils was also justified by the importance of secularism within the province. Where freedom of religion implies a right to worship according to the tenets of the religion of one’s choice, secularism asserts a freedom from public religion, and insists that the state be neutral on religious questions. In France, constitutional commitment to a secular state has been interpreted to mean “state representatives (i.e. providers of public services) are required to be neutral, and therefore not represent publicly any religions (for instance, they are not allowed to wear visible religious symbols, or engage in proselytizing activities)” (Barras 2009, 1238). Although Québec
does not have the same constitutional commitment to secularism as France, the concept resonates with many of its citizens. As the 2007 government established Bouchard-Taylor Commission Report noted, moreover, secularism is widely perceived in Québec as a valuable legacy of the province’s ‘Quiet Revolution’ in the 1960s, which challenged the predominant role of the Catholic Church in Québec society (Sharify-Funk 2010, 542). The Report endorsed an ‘open secularism’ model, which comes closer to the freedom of religion concept articulated above than to stricter notions of secularism such as those endorsed in France. As indicated by the bill regulating the wearing of the veil, however, secularism has trumped freedom of religion in the province. This suggests that attitudes on wearing of the veil will correspond with the importance assigned to freedom of religion.

INTERGROUP RELATIONS

How majority groups perceive minority groups and their practices – such as Muslims women in Québec who don the niqab – has been identified as a key element in understanding attitudes towards them (Henry and Sears 2002; Saroglou et al. 2009). Negative attitudes towards minority groups have been linked with subtle prejudice, the defence of traditional values one of its constituent elements (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995), and also with a set of values described as ‘the anti-immigrant hypothesis’: that is, support for conservation, conformity, and self-enhancement (Saroglou et al. 2009).

The debate in Québec about how far the province should go to accommodate religious and cultural minority groups did not begin with Bill 94 in 2010; indeed, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission was tasked with inquiring into the subject of ‘reasonable accommodation’ after several controversies involving the accommodation of minority groups. The debate has been heightened in part by the rising share of immigrants of Muslim faith to the province in recent years: making up 10 percent of all immigrants between 1986 and 1995, the share rose by 12 percentage points to 22 percent between 1996 and 2001 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2005). Thus, generally negative attitudes towards immigrants as well as attitudes regarding provincial efforts at reasonable accommodation are likely to be linked to attitudes on the banning of the veil.

A sense of unease towards Muslim groups and practices might, however, be mitigated by exposure to ethno-religious diversity. There are at least two theoretical bases for this expectation. First, the cognitive empowerment hypothesis suggests that being exposed to ethnic and religious diversity can foster tolerance (Harell 2010). The key idea underpinning the cognitive empowerment hypothesis is that exposure to diversity fosters cognitive skills, such as perspective taking and seeing the different sides of an issue, that are essential to tolerance. Second, the intergroup contact hypothesis predicts that contact between majorities and minorities can reduce prejudice by increasing empathy and reducing anxiety and perceptions of threat on the part of the majority (Pettigrew 2008; Ward and Masgoret 2006). Importantly, there is evidence that these positive effects generalize beyond the groups involved in the contact (Pettigrew 1997; Reich and Purbhoo 1975). As such, even though the odds of friendship or even acquaintance with a veil-wearing woman are very low – most estimates place the number of women in the province who wear the niqab at between 24 and 90 (Patriquin and Gillis 2010) – both the cognitive empowerment hypothesis and the generalized
intergroup contact hypothesis predict that exposure to ethno-religious diversity per se will encourage acceptance of the practice. If so, we would expect opposition to the wearing of the veil in public to be weakest on the Island of Montréal where Québec’s immigrant population is concentrated (Chui, Tran and Maheux 2009; Gilbert 2009). Along these same lines, we would expect women with less interaction in the public sphere generally to exhibit lower levels of tolerance (Nunn et al. 1978; Stouffer 1955). Women confined to the domestic sphere are likely less exposed to diversity on a day-to-day basis than women who are in the workforce or pursuing postsecondary education.

It is possible, though, that the experience of ethno-religious diversity could have the opposite effect. According to the competition hypothesis, diversity leads groups to compete for power and scarce resources (Bobo, 1988, 1999) and can be perceived as a threat to position dominance by members of the majority group (Jackson et al. 2001). The result is in-group solidarity and hostility toward outgroups. As such, opposition to the wearing of the veil would be greatest on the Island of Montréal.

RELIGIOSITY

The role of religiosity in determining levels of tolerance has been clear since Stouffer’s groundbreaking research undertaken in the 1950s (Stouffer 1955). Religiosity has consistently been found to relate negatively with tolerance for outgroups and the adoption of universalism values (Golebiowska 2004; Saroglou et al. 2009; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010). As such, we would anticipate that the religiousness of women is associated with a greater willingness to ban the wearing of the niqab in public.6

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

We have identified two additional potentially important socio-demographic correlates of opinions on the wearing of the niqab in public settings. First and in line with previous research (Echebarria-Echabe and Guede 2007; Saroglou et al. 2009; Stouffer 1955), we would expect there to be a generational pattern in support for the practice: young women who have grown to adulthood in a time of increasing ethno-religious diversity should be more accepting than older women who were socialized when society was more homogeneous.

Increasing levels of education should also make for greater acceptance of the niqab. There are several reasons to expect a relationship between education and acceptance. On the one hand, education is associated with greater tolerance (Golebiowska 1995; Stouffer 1955). Moreover, women who are more educated tend to have larger and more diverse social networks (Erickson 2004). As a result, they are more likely to come into contact with women from a wide range of backgrounds that may make them more accepting of difference (Harell 2010). Finally, higher socioeconomic status has been linked to greater tolerance given the decreased concern for perceived challenges to financial well being stemming from immigration (Esses et al. 2001).

DATA AND METHODS
In order to determine how the various potential explanatory factors influence attitudes on the veil, we draw on data from the 2010 Québec Women’s Political Participation Survey (2010 QWPPS). The 23-minute telephone survey was undertaken by CROP from June 2\textsuperscript{nd} to July 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2010. A total of 1,201 interviews were completed with women in the province 18 years of age and older who spoke French.\textsuperscript{7}

The survey contained a number of items designed to tap opinion about the wearing of the niqab (see Appendix).\textsuperscript{8} The Québec government’s response to the issue was to delineate where and when the wearing of the niqab was acceptable in public areas. Accordingly, we asked four questions regarding where the respondent believed that the wearing of the niqab was acceptable to provide a subtler capturing of the distinctions in support. The questions were designed to present increasingly difficult scenarios for accepting its donning in public: wearing the niqab while shopping; while working as a pharmacist; as a teacher in a public school; and when voting in a Québec election.\textsuperscript{9}

The dependent variable is based on responses to the four questions about the acceptability of the niqab. While the four items form an acceptable scale (coefficient alpha=.71), the scale is extremely skewed (see Figure 1). Accordingly, the scale has been dichotomized, with women who would accept the niqab in at least one scenario scored ‘1’ and those who found it unacceptable in all four scenarios scored ‘0’. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable, all models are estimated using logistic regression.\textsuperscript{10}

We begin by presenting the distributions on each of these four questions addressing the acceptability of the niqab. We then briefly examine feminist thinking on the issue. We then move on to estimate a series of regression models. The first model includes social background characteristics only, the most distal predictors of attitudes. In addition to measures for age, education, residency on the island of Montreal and privatization, additional controls for visible minority status and for working in the public sector were included to identify their potential impact on attitudes towards the veil. All of these variables were entered as dummy variables with the named categories coded ‘1’: age (under 35, and 55 and over); education (completed college or university); resident of the Island of Montreal; not a student, employed nor self-employed; non-European ancestry (excluding Aboriginal peoples); and public sector worker.

The next model adds basic identities and beliefs identified as potential influences on women’s opinions about the acceptability of the niqab in public places. Feminist identity was based on a question asking women whether they considered themselves to be very feminist (scored as 1), somewhat feminist (scored as 0.5) or not feminist at all (scored as 0),\textsuperscript{11} while national identity was captured by a question tapping the extent to which they identified primarily or exclusively with Québec (scored as 1; as zero otherwise). Religiosity was measured by women’s responses to a question asking about the importance of religion in their lives, with respondents indicating that it was very or somewhat important scored as 1.\textsuperscript{12} Finally, views about immigration were captured by responses to a question about the desired level of immigration. Respondents who indicated that the level of immigration should be reduced were given a score of 1; those who indicated it should be kept at existing levels or increased were scored 1.
The final model adds five attitudinal variables that are more proximate to opinions about the acceptability of the niqab. Two line up directly with the feminist debate: first, that the niqab represents women’s visible and clear oppression by removing their right to bodily autonomy; and second, that women who choose to wear the niqab are doing so ‘freely,’ that is, exercising individual agency as opposed to accepting the dictates of a patriarchal religious institution. A third variable taps into the possibility that support for the right of women to wear the niqab reflects a belief that it is a matter of freedom of religion. The next variable allows for the possibility that opposition to the niqab stems from a general feeling of discomfort with a religious and cultural practice that is relatively unknown in the province. These four variables have the same response categories and a common scoring: strongly disagree (0), somewhat disagree (0.33), somewhat agree (0.66) and strongly agree (1.0). One final variable captures views about reasonable accommodation and whether it has “gone too far”; for this variable, the four response categories were reversed and coded 1 for strongly disagree and 0 for strongly agree.

FINDINGS

Regardless of the scenario, a majority of respondents identified the wearing of the niqab as unacceptable (see Table 1). The near-consensus on the final two scenarios is especially striking: only 8 percent of the women sampled considered wearing the niqab while teaching in a public school to be acceptable and a mere 6 percent found it acceptable when voting in a Québec election. There was greater acceptance when the scenario involved wearing the niqab while shopping (35 percent), although only 12 percent considered the niqab to be acceptable when the wearer was working as a pharmacist.

Table 1 here

Overall, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of the women considered the niqab to be unacceptable under all four scenarios and almost a quarter (23 per cent) found it to be acceptable under one scenario (not shown). That scenario was almost always when the woman was shopping. When it came to the more challenging scenarios, the numbers dropped off precipitously. Very few women believed it was acceptable in more than one scenario and only 3 per cent of women considered the wearing of the niqab to be acceptable under all four scenarios.13

As a first step to assessing the role of feminist thinking in shaping attitudes on the niqab, attitudes on the acceptability of wearing the niqab under the different scenarios and on several beliefs were examined across the categories of feminist identification (Table 1). Only one of the four scenarios reveals a significant difference of opinion; strong feminists were less likely to accept the niqab under the voting scenario (only 3 percent agreed) than not strong or non-feminists. Significant differences were more apparent, however, when the examination shifted to arguments regarding the veil. Strong feminists were significantly more likely than not very strong and non-feminists to strongly disagree that wearing the niqab is a woman’s free choice and that freedom of religion gives women the right to wear the niqab, in line with arguments that the religious oppression is behind their decision to wear the veil. They were also
significantly more likely to strongly agree that the niqab is a visible symbol of women’s oppression and that seeing a woman in a niqab makes them uncomfortable. Strong feminists were not of one mind on these issues, however, and a significant minority in each case took the opposing view on the question. Additionally, there appears to be significant opposition among feminists in the province to reasonable accommodation: over 70 percent agreed that such accommodations had gone too far. This percentage was nevertheless significantly lower than that among not very strong and non-feminists.

The next step is to evaluate correlates of opinion on the acceptability of the niqab. As predicted, our first regression model reveals that age is a key correlate of opinion about the wearing of the niqab in public (see Table 2). Other things being equal, the estimated probability of considering the niqab to be acceptable under at least one scenario is 38 points higher for a woman under the age of 35 compared with a woman aged 55 or over. This suggests that experiencing greater ethno-religious diversity during the formative years has made younger generations of Québec women more accepting of practices such as wearing the niqab.

Also in line with expectations is the finding that education has a significant and positive impact on opinion about the acceptability of the niqab. However, the independent effect of education is much weaker than that of age. Women who have completed college or university have a nine-point higher probability of finding the wearing of the niqab to be acceptable under at least one scenario, compared with women who have a high school education or less.

Living on the Island of Montreal was predicted to enhance acceptance of the niqab, while being confined to the domestic sphere was expected to have a negative effect. Both predictions are supported. Living on the Island of Montreal boosts acceptance of niqab wearing in public under at least one scenario by an estimated eight points. Compared with women who are working or studying outside the home, women who are full-time homemakers or retired have a 10-point lower probability of considering the wearing of the niqab in public to be acceptable in at least one of the public settings.

Neither belonging to a visible minority nor working in the public sector has a significant effect on opinion about the niqab. The latter nonfinding warrants emphasis: apparently, neither the prospect of serving a niqab-wearing woman or working alongside her influences public sector workers’ opinion about the acceptability of the practice. The effect of public sector employment is negative but fails to even approach statistical significance.

The cultural insecurity that underpins Québec’s approach to integrating immigrants might lead us to expect that women who identify primarily or exclusively with their province would be less accepting of practices like wearing the niqab that are completely foreign to the traditional French-speaking mainstream. However, there is no

Table 1 here

Table 2 here
evidence whatsoever to support this expectation. Indeed, there is an almost a total lack of association between identifying with the province and attitudes on the niqab (see Table 3). What does matter is openness to immigration. The effect is both statistically robust and substantial. The probability of accepting the niqab in at least one public setting is 17 points lower for women who favour reducing levels of immigration, compared with those who would keep the level as it is or even accept more immigrants. However, only a little over a third (34 per cent) of the women interviewed wanted cuts to immigration. The modal preference was to maintain the current level.

Table 3 here

Unless results obtained elsewhere, women’s religiosity has no effect on her attitudes towards the wearing of the niqab. Similarly, it makes no difference whether a woman thinks of herself as a feminist or not. The majority of women thought of themselves as somewhat feminist (59 per cent) or very feminist (10 per cent), but this did not have an independent effect on their opinion on the issue.

Indeed, what really matter are more proximate values. Only a minority of women perceived the wearing of the niqab to be unproblematic from the perspective of women’s autonomy (see Table 1). Fully 72 percent rejected the notion that women freely to choose to wear the niqab while 77 per cent shared the view that the niqab is a visible symbol of women’s oppression. Women who believe that the wearing of the niqab represents a free choice are significantly more likely to consider the practice to be acceptable under at least one of the four scenarios (see Table 4). Strongly agreeing with the notion that women freely choose to wear the head covering increases the estimated probability of acceptance by 27 points, compared with women who strongly disagree. Conversely, construing the niqab to be a visible manifestation of women’s oppression reduces the likelihood of considering the practice to be acceptable in any of the scenarios. However, the effect is small (7 points) and of borderline statistical significance (p<.10).

Table 4 here

By far the most important attitudinal correlate of opinion about the acceptability of the niqab is the belief that it is a matter of freedom of religion. A third of the women (33 per cent) strongly or somewhat agreed with this argument. The effect on their views about the acceptability of the practice is both statistically robust and substantively strong. Strongly agreeing with the freedom of religion interpretation increases the estimated probability of being willing to allow the practice under at least one scenario by fully 41 points, compared with women who strongly disagreeing. Clearly, freedom of religion trumps all other determinants when it comes to explaining opinion on this question.

At the same time, there is also evidence that discomfort with an unfamiliar religious and cultural practice may be driving some of the opposition to the niqab. Half of the women agreed that seeing a woman wearing the niqab made them uneasy and this sense of unease influences their openness to the wearing of the niqab in public. The difference in the estimated probability of finding the practice acceptable in at least one public setting between those who admit to a strong sense of unease and those who strongly disagree that it makes them uneasy is 19 points.
Mirroring other survey data on the issue (see Herrera and Lachapelle 2010), the vast majority of the women (80 percent) strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “we have gone too far with reasonable accommodation.” And yet despite all of the public attention in recent years, opinion about reasonable accommodation is apparently not a significant factor in women’s views about the acceptability of the niqab. The effect was small and fell far short of conventional levels of statistical significance.

Finally, controlling for the impact of more proximate beliefs on attitudes towards the niqab reduces the impact of age, the importance of the private sphere and attitudes on immigrants. On the other hand, the impact of education, residence on the island of Montreal and religiosity are all increased, the latter significantly so. In line with previous findings, the more importance that a woman assigns to religion in her life, the less likely she is to find the niqab acceptable, although the effect is relatively small (7 points).

The key attitudinal forces driving opinion about the acceptability of the niqab in public spaces are clearly the perception that the wearing of the niqab is freely chosen and the belief that it should be viewed as a question of freedom of religion. However, these forces are not necessarily mutually reinforcing. Some women are clearly conflicted. Almost half (48%) of the women who believe that freedom of religion means that women have the right to wear the niqab do not believe that women freely choose to wear the head covering and fully two thirds (68 per cent) consider it to be a visible symbol of women’s oppression (not shown). Moreover, a third (34 per cent) of these women admit that seeing a woman wearing the niqab makes them feel uneasy, despite their belief that the wearer is exercising her right to freedom of religion. This sense of unease is mirrored amongst strong feminists, with one key difference being that a greater percentage – 83 percent – of those who agree that freedom of religion gives women the right to wear the niqab consider it a visible symbol of their oppression.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that a number of the drivers of views on the acceptability of the niqab among Québec women mirror those identified in the literature. A key social fault line in opinion about the acceptability of the niqab in public spaces is generational: our findings show that younger women are much more open to the practice, at least in some circumstances. The inference is that this reflects greater exposure to ethno-religious diversity during their formative years which, working through more proximate attitudes, reduces their opposition to the niqab. This is not the only evidence that exposure may matter. Women who work or study outside the home, have completed college or university, and/or live on the Island of Montreal are more accepting of the practice as well. These are all characteristics that are likely to be associated with greater exposure to members of ethno-religious minorities. Both the cognitive empowerment hypothesis and the generalized intergroup contact hypothesis suggest that exposure to diversity can make for a greater willingness to accept a practice that is disliked. The results are certainly suggestive, but a good deal more work needs to be done to sort out which, if either, of these interpretations is correct. This will require
detailed data on women’s social networks, as well as their work environments and neighbourhoods.

The ban on the niqab was hypothesized to potentially cue a number of perceived threats. One perceived threat that appears to matter relates to appropriate levels of immigration. It is impossible with the data at hand to determine whether this reflects a perceived threat to the majority culture, subtle prejudice or a general desire for conformity. Each may be at play. What is clear is that a desire to reduce immigration goes hand in hand with a reluctance to accept the niqab in public settings. Yet identifying strongly with the province appears to no discernible impact on Québec women’s views about the wearing of the niqab in public, suggesting that the particular political, social and historical context within which the debate took place minimized the link between two. And while women’s personal religiosity has a negative impact on the views about the public display of a religious symbol, mirroring findings elsewhere, this link is only apparent once the impact of more proximate attitudes are controlled.

Our primary desire what to identify the role that feminism played in driving attitudes; our findings suggest that its role ought not be ignored. Although feminists are no more or less willing to accept the niqab under most of the scenarios included in our measure, the importance of feminist arguments in shaping women’s attitudes on the question of the niqab is clear. Believing that women who wear the niqab are doing so by choice clearly makes a woman more open to the practice. Even more important is the belief that freedom of religion entails the right to wear the head covering. Feminist beliefs on both of these drivers of opinion differ from those of other women in the province and push toward opposing the acceptability of the veil. However, these beliefs do not necessarily work in tandem nor is thinking on the issue in any way “simple.” Women’s sense of unease with the practice – perhaps linked with a perceived threat to the province’s culture – makes for a greater reluctance to accept the wearing of the niqab in public places. This is paralleled by the negative impact of a belief that the niqab is a visible sign of women’s oppression by patriarchal religious institutions. Feminist thinking of these questions similarly drives attitudes towards opposition to the practice.

It is perhaps not surprising that thinking on the issue appears to be as complex as the issue itself. Discussions on the wearing of the veil elicit passionate debate that is not always easily tied to feminist identity and religious belief. And it pits equally valid values against each other: women’s bodily integrity and their right to be free from religious oppression. On this our findings are not likely unique to Québec. As immigrant flows become ever more diverse, many host societies having to grapple with the challenges of reconciling freedom of religion with gender equality. Our finding that younger women are much more open to a practice that makes many uncomfortable suggests that addressing the challenge might get easier over time. Such a prediction is tempered, however, by the reality that generational differences in thinking are less important than more proximate attitudes on women’s bodily autonomy and their religious freedoms to thinking on the issue of the veil, attitudes that are contradictory rather than reinforcing for many women.

Finally, the complexity of the issue underscores perhaps why feminist self-identification fails to play an independent role in shaping attitudes on the veil. Given that
feminist self-identification is likely to follow from rather than precede the process of working through a number of the beliefs and values examined herein, it is very unlikely that a heuristic cues or shorthands are needed. Identifying as a feminist likely means that these issues are salient ones, granted significant attention, even if not always sorted out fully nor mutually reinforcing.

Appendix

Selected questions from the 2010 QWPPS:

a) Maintenant nous allons vous poser quelques questions au sujet du niqab, c'est-à-dire le voile qui recouvre la tête pour ne laisser que voir les yeux de la femme qui le porte. Selon vous, est-il acceptable ou inacceptable qu'une femme soit autorisée à porter le niqab dans les circonstances suivantes:
   - Lorsqu'elle fait ses courses?
   - Lorsqu'elle travaille comme pharmacienne?
   - Lorsqu'elle vote lors d'une élection au Québec?
   - Lorsqu'elle enseigne dans une école publique?

b) Je vais maintenant vous lire une série d'énoncés. Veuillez me dire si vous êtes fortement d'accord, plutôt d'accord, plutôt en désaccord, ou fortement en désaccord avec les énoncés suivants?
   - Les femmes choisissent LIBREMENT de porter le niqab.
   - Voir une femme qui porte le niqab me rend mal à l'aise. Êtes-vous …
   - La liberté de religion doit permettre aux femmes de porter le niqab. Êtes-vous …
   - Le niqab représente un symbole visible d'oppression de femmes. Êtes-vous …
   - On est allé trop loin avec les accommodements raisonables.

C) Pensez-vous que le Canada devrait admettre plus d'immigrants, moins d'immigrants ou à peu près le même nombre d'immigrants que présentement?

d) Vous considérez-vous très féministe, plutôt féministe, ou pas féministe du tout?


Reich, Carol, and Mary Purbhoo. 1975. “The Effect Of Cross-Cultural Contact.”


Table 1: Attitudes and Values on the Acceptance of the Niqab by Feminist Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Strong Feminist</th>
<th>Not a Strong Feminist</th>
<th>Not at all a Feminist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wearing the niqab is acceptable when:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working as a pharmacist</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching in a public school</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting**</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing the niqab is a free choice:**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niqab is a visible symbol of oppression:**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of religion gives women the right to wear the niqab:**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a woman in a niqab makes me uncomfortable:**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gone too far with reasonable accommodation:*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N (min/max) 1142/1171 339/351 672/698 116/122

Note: The column entries are percentages. *** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05; difference tests apply to differences across the last three columns.
Table 2: Social Background Characteristics and Acceptance of the Niqab

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 35 years of age</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>(0.21)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 years or older</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>(0.22)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university graduate</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>(0.18)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident of the Island of Montreal</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>(0.18)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working or studying</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>(0.24)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible minority</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector worker</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
<td>(0.19)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke pseudo-R²</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients, with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. *** p<.001  ** p<.01  * p<.05
Table 3: Basic Identities and Beliefs and Acceptance of the Niqab

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity/Belief</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 35 years of age</td>
<td>0.72 (.22)</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 years or older</td>
<td>-0.99 (.22)</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university graduate</td>
<td>0.26 (.19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident of the Island of Montreal</td>
<td>0.32 (.18)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working or studying</td>
<td>-0.54 (.25)</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible minority</td>
<td>0.24 (.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector worker</td>
<td>-0.22 (.19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/exclusive Québec identity</td>
<td>0.02 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admit fewer immigrants</td>
<td>-0.85 (.19)</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-0.14 (.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist identity</td>
<td>-0.32 (.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.02 (.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke pseudo-(R^2)</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients, with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05.
Table 4: The Impact of Attitudes Toward the Niqab and Reasonable Accommodation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 35 years of age</td>
<td>0.46 (.24)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 years or older</td>
<td>-0.41 (.29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university graduate</td>
<td>0.52 (.23)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident of the Island of Montreal</td>
<td>0.45 (.21)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working or studying</td>
<td>-0.40 (.31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible minority</td>
<td>0.40 (.29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector worker</td>
<td>-0.06 (.22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/exclusive Québec identity</td>
<td>0.47 (.33)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admit fewer immigrants</td>
<td>-0.51 (.23)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-0.60 (.21)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist identity</td>
<td>0.18 (.33)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing the niqab is a free choice</td>
<td>1.93 (.36)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The niqab is a visible symbol of oppression</td>
<td>-0.52 (.31)†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of religion gives right to wear the niqab</td>
<td>2.90 (.33)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a woman wearing a niqab causes me unease</td>
<td>-1.35 (.26)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable accommodation has gone too far</td>
<td>-0.36 (.31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.38 (.46)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke pseudo-R²</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients, with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; † p<.10.
Islamic scholars and jurists are themselves divided over the question of whether
the need to examine attitudes separately for women is underscored by research
showing that attitudes towards the veil in Europe vary by gender (see Saroglou et al.
2009).

The niqab covers the face but leaves the eyes exposed; the burqa, on the other hand,
covers the whole body, including the eyes, with a netting that obscures them from view
while allowing the woman to see out.

Like the rest of Canada, Québec has admitted many immigrants to bolster its
population and workforce, but since the Canada-Québec Immigration Accord was
signed into law in 1978, the province has predominantly admitted immigrants from
French-speaking countries in an effort to support French language use in the province.
Reasonable accommodation refers to the obligation that private and public institutions
have to accommodate diversity in their staff and clientele so long as the accommodation
does not cause excessive disruption in the organization (Marois 2005: 2). The
Bouchard-Taylor Commission’s mandate included consulting widely on the issue, taking
stock of accommodation practices in the province and formulating “recommendations to
the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to the values of
Québec society as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society” (CCAPRCD 2007).

We might expect the impact of religion to vary depending upon the particular religious
affiliation, with adherents of minority religions being the most open to a practice like
wearing the niqab. However, the religious composition of Québec makes it difficult to
explore this possibility empirically. The province is (at least nominally) overwhelmingly
Catholic. Eighty-two per cent of our sample gave their religion as Catholic; only 3 per
cent were Protestant. Adherents of a non-Christian religion accounted for a mere 2 per
cent of the sample. The latter were the least likely to find the niqab unacceptable in all
four scenarios, but with so few cases, this effect did not even approach conventional
levels of statistical significance once controls were introduced for other social
background characteristics.

The overall response rate was 34 percent. The sample design involved the over- and
under-sampling of certain regions of the province. The data have been weighted to take
account of this.

The public debate in Québec made exclusive reference to the niqab, a type of veil that
covers everything but the wearer’s eyes. As a result this term was employed in the
survey questions.

In 2007, the issue gained prominence when public pressure led Elections Québec
officials to overturn a decision allowing veiled women to vote in provincial elections
without having to reveal their faces.

We have repeated all of the analyses using a trichotomized dependent variable (not
acceptable in any of the scenarios, only acceptable in the shopping scenario,
acceptable in at least one of the more public settings). The models were estimated
using ordered logistic regression. With only one minor exception (noted below), the
pattern of effects was unchanged.

Note that this finding holds when two dummy variables (somewhat feminist and very
feminist) are used in place of the three-point scale.

Findings were unchanged when the dichotomized scale was replaced with a four-point
scale for religiosity.
Six per cent found the niqab to be acceptable under two scenarios and 4 per cent considered it acceptable under three scenarios.

All of the estimated probabilities reported in the text were obtained using the margins option in Stata. The average predicted probabilities are calculated first assuming that every woman is under the age of 35 and then assuming that every woman is aged 55 and over, leaving the values of all other variables unchanged.

Note that the effect of completing university is no stronger than the effect of only completing college (results not shown). Similarly, it does not make a difference whether a woman has completed high school or dropped out before graduating.

Note that this effect just fails to attain an acceptable level of statistical significance (p=.12) when the dependent variable is trichotomized and the model is re-estimated using ordered logistic regression.

An alternative specification substituted first foreign born for visible minority but it failed to even approach conventional levels of statistical significance.

An alternative specification substituted support for Québec independence (sovereignty) for a Québec identity but the findings were unchanged.

Only 9 per cent of women actually favoured increased immigration. Their opinion on the niqab was no different from those who wanted to maintain the current level of immigration. Accordingly, the two categories were combined for the purposes of the analysis. Note that dropping this variable from the model does not alter the (non)effect of identifying primarily or exclusively with Québec.