

# The Political Representation of Ethnic Minority Women in France

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This article nuances the argument that ethnic minority women experience cumulative disadvantage within politics. Drawing on the French case study, I demonstrate a complex relationship between gender and ethnicity. The gender parity movement saw ethnicity as competing with gender and rejected claims for ethnic minority representation, but still drew attention to the homogeneity of French politics. Descriptive representation of minority women is now slowly progressing, as they simultaneously promote gender and ethnic diversity within politics. However, their inclusion is conditional on their willingness to act as symbols of secularity and assimilation. This particularly constrains the substantive representation of Muslim women.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, France, Intersectionality, Parity, Representation, Women

## 1. Introduction

Politics worldwide has long been dominated by elite, wealthy, ethnic majority men. Ethnic minority women differ from this status quo through their sex, ethnicity and (often) social background. For many years, this difference has been a disadvantage to ethnic minority women, who have had to overcome the ‘double’ or ‘multiple’ jeopardy of intersectional discrimination (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). The general rule has been that the less one resembles a white man, the harder it is to gain power. More recently, criticisms of the narrow social backgrounds of elected officials, and their consequences for representation, have begun to disrupt the status quo. New opportunities for under-represented groups, including women and ethnic minorities, have started to emerge. There is significant variation around the world in the variety and effectiveness of efforts to increase diversity within politics (Krook and O’Brien, 2010). The desire to make politics appear more representative often clashes with the vested interests of elites who wish to conserve their power.

One debate to arise within the literature is whether intersectional difference might now confer an advantage rather than a burden. The basic logic is that ethnic minority women embody two forms of diversity at the same time, thus offering a more efficient means than white women or ethnic minority men of balancing a legislature or candidate list otherwise dominated by white men (Hughes, 2011; Celis *et al.*, 2014). Hence, the ability of ethnic minority women to ‘concentrate diversity’ might become an asset, providing a visible cue to voters that politics is diversifying, while minimising the disruption to white male incumbents.

Existing research provides conflicting evidence. Various studies in the USA identify a ‘dual disadvantage’ for ethnic minority women (e.g. Hawkesworth, 2003), and Hughes (2011) argues that quotas for women or for ethnic minorities tend to disadvantage ethnic minority women unless they operate in tandem. However, Fraga *et al.* find evidence of what they term a ‘multiple identity advantage’ (2008, p. 173), and Celis *et al.* (2014), looking at Belgium and the Netherlands, found that ethnic minority women benefit in scenarios where feminisation and greater ethnic diversity are both sought simultaneously (see also Mügge, forthcoming in this issue). There are two related issues at stake here. The first is minority women’s ability to gain entry to politics. The second is whether minority women who do triumph in spite (or indeed because) of their difference from the status quo will then be empowered in their actions as representatives. There is a risk that ethnic minority women will be marginalised; used as tokens; still represent social elites; or be selected by political parties on the basis of their compliance and adherence to dominant values.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines these puzzles with reference to the French case study, which offers an interesting perspective. Officially, the ‘universal’ state refuses to recognise citizens by category, including sex and race, insisting on equality *de jure* even in the face of significant *de facto* inequalities. A long legal and political battle culminated in the French parity law, the world’s first gender quota set at 50%. In order to achieve this outcome, parity activists explicitly denied claims for representation of other marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup> Representation for women has therefore come, at least in theory, at the expense of representation for ethnic minorities (Lépinard, 2013). Yet the challenge to the status quo presented by parity has had ripple effects for other groups, and the presence of ethnic minorities within French politics has increased steadily since the passage of the parity law.

The French case is also interesting in terms of religion. The state is firmly attached to the principle of secularity (‘laïcité’), even though the state’s Catholic origins result in an unspoken bias in favour of Christians. The official refusal to

<sup>1</sup>Similar problems may also be faced by ethnic majority women, but may be exacerbated in the case of women from ethnic minorities.

<sup>2</sup>‘Ethnic minority’ is used here to refer to French citizens who are not white Christians.

acknowledge difference masks deep-rooted prejudices against minority religious groups, including Muslims, who comprise the large majority of ethnic minorities in France due to immigration from former French colonies in northern Africa. Anti-immigration sentiment lies at the core of support for the French Front National (FN), one of Europe's largest far-right parties.

France therefore provides a case study where gender equality is promoted while racial and religious differences are denied (but keenly felt). It contributes to the wider literature on the intersection of gender and race by considering what happens when the representation of the former is privileged over the latter.

Existing scholarship considers the representation of ethnic minorities in France (Bird, 2005), the relationship between parity and diversity (Murray, 2012; Sénac, 2012; Lépinard, 2013) and the place of minority women within the feminist movement (Lépinard, 2014). However, this article is the first to provide a broad overview of the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion within the particular context of French politics. The article first examines Republican universalism in more depth, arguing that gender parity initiated a normative shift that subsequently facilitated the recognition of ethnic diversity. However, the relationship between feminist movements and campaigners for racial equality is uneasy, due both to the sense that the two causes are competing, and to long-standing tensions related to religion. The argument that religion poses a threat to women's rights is supported by actors from across the political spectrum, but this creates a lacuna for the representation of Muslim women. The article considers how all this impacts on the descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation of ethnic minority women in France. Descriptive representation focuses on the low but rising number of minority women in French politics. Substantive representation considers how the interests of minority women, and especially Muslim women, have been represented, with a particular focus on the banning of headscarves. Finally, the ethnic minority women who have made it into politics are highly assimilated and secular and, as such, they serve as symbols of the universalist French Republic but do not represent the full diversity of women of immigrant origin.

## 2. The Republican challenge

French universalism, whereby all citizens are equal before the law without regard for personal traits, is contested as it is based on a male white Christian norm to which all citizens are obliged to conform (Ducoulombier, 2002). However, universalism takes no account of white male privilege, and therefore makes no allowance for differences—both biological and social—that might cause some citizens to be disadvantaged relative to others. The insistence on equal treatment rejects the possibility of redressing these disadvantages through differential treatment and positive discrimination.

Unlike the multicultural models of the UK or USA, the French universal model is profoundly assimilationist in its nature. Ethnic minorities are expected to absorb Republican norms and values, and adhere to French cultures and traditions. Universalists claim that differentiation between categories of citizen will lead to discrimination and social disintegration. However, the refusal to recognise social differences disregards deep-rooted structural inequalities within French society based on hierarchies of gender, race and social background.

The French census does not collect data on ethnicity, so the exact ethnic minority population is unknown, although it is estimated to be more than 15% (Lozès, 2011). Evidence exists of widespread discrimination against ethnic minorities; for example, many citizens with non-French names find it harder to obtain work (*Economist*, 2009), and ethnic minority groups are more heavily targeted by the police (Brouard and Tiberj, 2009). Government monitoring of discrimination revealed that 35% of private sector workers had witnessed race discrimination; more than 80% of employers, when presented with two equally qualified candidates, favoured the one who was native French; and it was more than 10 times harder for a candidate of Moroccan origin to obtain a job interview than a French candidate.<sup>3</sup> Evidence of discrimination was also found in areas ranging from housing to education and public services. Meanwhile, gender discrimination has been documented since 1995 by the Observatoire de la Parité (Parity Observatory), although the Observatoire's work focused primarily on gender and took little account of intersectional disadvantage. The Observatoire was replaced in 2013 with the High Council for Equality between Men and Women, which has a broader remit; there is not a single ethnic minority woman among its 71 expert members.

While overt discrimination is illegal, there is reluctance to mitigate the disadvantage experienced as a result of covert discrimination. Gender quota legislation introduced in 1982 was swiftly overturned by the Constitutional Council because dividing voters and candidates into categories was seen to contravene France's 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' [sic]. Parity was formulated a decade later as a solution to this problem, seeking to overcome universalist rhetoric by emphasising the natural division of the population into two sexes. Opponents of parity argued that any division of citizens into categories would lead to different groups of citizens claiming differential treatment before the law. For this reason, parity advocates distanced themselves from any other representational claims, including those of ethnic minorities (Raissiguier, 2010). They argued that biological sexual difference was the one universal difference, and could not be compared with any other category (Lépinard, 2013). As Lépinard observed, '[w]ith respect to the politics of difference, parity could be compared to a half-open door with a sign saying "women only"' (2008, p. 98). Thus, the descriptive and substantive representation of ethnic

<sup>3</sup><http://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/upload/fiches-thematiques/discri-origine.pdf>.

minority women was deliberately excluded from the debate concerning gender parity. When parity legislation was subsequently introduced in 2000, mandating parties to field 50% women candidates in most elections, it presented a significant challenge to universalism, as citizenship became explicitly gendered for the first time (Lovecy, 2000). Yet, the initial beneficiaries of the parity legislation were almost exclusively white women.

### 3. From parity to diversity

One effect of the debates over gender parity was the recognition that the universalist model was not sufficient to ensure equal outcomes. Parity drew increased attention to the lack of descriptive representation in parliament, which in turn led to mounting discussion about the under-representation of ethnic minorities. In addition, European Union directives, mobilisation by ethnic minority groups, growing ethnic tensions and events such as the riots in 2005 have all increased pressure on the political elite to be more inclusive of minority communities (Bird, 2005). The consequence has been growing numbers of ethnic minority candidates, mostly in unwinnable seats, though a few have now won electoral office (see section 4). Parity has served—albeit very slowly and unintentionally (Lépinard, 2013)—as a catalyst for promoting descriptive representation more broadly. This has created tension within the feminist movement, with some feminists fearing that debates regarding ‘diversity’ have usurped the debate on parity and drawn attention away from gender equality before the battle was fully won (Sénac, 2012). As one feminist activist argued, ‘parity is diluted by diversity’ (Praud and Dauphin, 2010, p. 36). Gender and racial equality are perceived as being competing rather than complementary to each other.<sup>4</sup> The feminist movement has also been critiqued for focusing on the concerns of privileged women while ignoring the more fundamental needs of minority women, adding to the separation and mutual distrust of ethnic majority and minority feminists (Garcia and Mercader, 2004).

The religious/secular cleavage further divides French feminists. The French state is officially secular since disentangling from the Catholic Church in 1905. Visible religious symbols are banned from public arenas such as state schools. However, the state retains some Catholic elements; for example, public holidays such as Easter and All Saints follow the Catholic calendar, and Sunday trading laws remain very restrictive. This reiterates how universalism is flawed; an officially neutral position masks an unspoken bias. Many French feminists are suspicious of religion, seeing it as a threat to women’s rights. State secularism is seen as a

<sup>4</sup>This hostility contrasts with the indifference in the UK and muted enthusiasm in the USA of women’s movements regarding questions of diversity (Evans, forthcoming in this issue).

means of protecting women from religious misogyny. In recent times, the main threat to women is perceived to come from Islam (Bereni, 2009). This poses a particular problem for Muslim women.

The relationship between Islam and feminism is a troubled one throughout Europe and beyond, and France is one of many countries struggling to reconcile gender equality with religious diversity (Siim, 2014). Certain Muslim practices, such as wearing headscarves and veils, are seen by many feminists as oppressive and an affront to women's rights, even when the women wearing these garments assert that doing so is their free choice. Heated debates about veiling saw most French feminists supporting legislation to ban the practice in public spaces (Scott, 2007; Lépinard, 2014). Islam has also been associated, domestically and internationally, with various other violations of women's rights, ranging from forced marriages, female genital mutilation and honour killings to the confinement of women and their forced dependence on men in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.

Given Islam's poor reputation for women's rights, many feminists have promoted secularism as a defence of women, including the protection of Muslim women from rights violations. Yet it is not only feminists who have adopted these discourses. Politicians from across the political spectrum have spoken in favour of secularism, with a variety of motivations. In particular, politicians on the right and far-right have used women's rights to justify and legitimise anti-Muslim discourses. Muslim women are portrayed as vulnerable victims of barbaric Muslim men, with the French state offering protection and a civilising influence (Larzillière and Sal, 2011; see also Hughes, forthcoming in this issue). This discourse is fuelled by xenophobia and both racial and gender stereotypes. Liberal feminism has been subverted by certain actors on the far right to dress up racism as a guarantor of human rights. Feminists have found themselves inadvertently feeding into discourses that demonise Muslim men while also denying agency to Muslim women.

The debate is framed in terms of liberation of women from religious and cultural oppression, rather than freedom of religious practice. As Siim argues, 'gender equality [...] is used by both mainstream political organizations and right-wing political forces as a tool of demarcation to construct a borderline between "us and them", the gender-equal majority and oppressed Muslim women' (2014, p. 120). The views of women who do not share this perspective on Islam are marginalised from the women's movement. Lépinard (2014) attributes this marginalisation to a lack of intersectional reasoning within the women's movement.

One attempt to counter negative attitudes towards ethnic minority women was a protest march that became a social movement in 2003, named 'Ni Putes Ni Soumises' (NPNS; 'Neither Whores nor Doormats'). The aim of the movement was to overturn negative stereotypes that portrayed most ethnic minority women as submissive and subservient to men, while those women who sought to assert

their autonomy, agency and/or femininity were decried within their own communities as sluts (Garcia and Mercader, 2004). The movement emerged from within the French ‘ghettos’ occupied almost exclusively by ethnic minority communities, and it was led by Fadela Amara, a Muslim feminist of Algerian origin who sought to tackle the sexism within minority communities and the racism within France as a whole. Although short-lived, NPNS achieved a high profile and challenged the stereotypes surrounding ethnic minority women.

Despite these achievements, the protests against sexual violence and sexism within the ghettos further reinforced some of the stereotypes surrounding ethnic minority men. Black and Muslim men are variously portrayed as violent, predatory, misogynist and out of control. Racial stereotypes about black communities focus on violence and sexual promiscuity, while stereotypes about Arab and Muslim communities focus on male dominance and female submission. While these stereotypes have been very harmful for women, they have undoubtedly also hurt men.

Support for a secular state acting as the protector of women’s rights has been a key condition for accepting ethnic minority women into French political life. There has been no outlet for alternative discourses challenging the notions that religion oppresses women and that ethnic minority women need the protection of the state. Women have been able to demonstrate their autonomy only through assimilation.

#### 4. Descriptive representation

France has a diverse population, with widespread immigration from former colonies, especially Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The estimate for France’s Muslim population is 5–6 million, the largest Muslim community in Western Europe (Joly and Wadia, 2012, p. 8). France also has extensive overseas territories that enjoy representation in the French parliament; some of France’s mainland residents originate from these territories.

A descriptively representative legislature in France would comprise about 50% women and at least 15% ethnic minority deputies (Lozès, 2011). Hence, ~7.5% of French deputies should be minority women. The reality is very different. Women’s representation has progressed significantly since the implementation of the parity law, even if parity itself remains elusive. Women comprised 10.9% of deputies in 1997, 12.3% in 2002, 18.5% in 2007 and 26.5% in 2012. Various factors have prevented more rapid progress, including the lack of placement mandates (most women candidates are fielded in unwinnable seats), the weak sanctions for non-implementation (a financial penalty that larger parties have chosen to absorb) and resistance from (male) incumbents. Nonetheless, women fare well compared with ethnic minorities. There is a striking lack of descriptive representation for ethnic minorities (Bird, 2005), and the French parliament is almost exclusively

white.<sup>5</sup> Recognition of the need for more ‘diversity’ led to growing numbers of minority candidates in 2007 and 2012, but most of these were placed in unwinnable seats, resulting in resentment and frustration from candidates who felt that they were being used as symbols rather than being taken seriously as politicians. France’s first ethnic minority deputy elected in mainland France, Kofi Yamgnane, served a single term from 1997 to 2002. In 2007, George Pau-Langevin became the second ethnic minority deputy and first minority woman. Pau-Langevin was elected in Paris but originates from Guadeloupe (a French territory) rather than an immigrant background. In 2012, with the left back in power, there has been somewhat greater diversity in French politics. Eight non-white deputies were elected in mainland France, representing a small but significant breakthrough for ethnic minority descriptive representation.<sup>6</sup> A further two were elected in the newly created seats representing France’s ex-pats around the world.<sup>7</sup> These 10 deputies comprised six women and four men. Excluding seats for France’s overseas territories, ethnic minority deputies hold 1.8% of seats—barely 1/10th of the numbers required for true descriptive representation. This compares to almost 7% representation at the local level, which still equates to under-representation, but the disproportion is less stark (Wadia, 2012). Similarly, women’s representation is also much higher at the local level, where the parity law is more constraining and therefore more rigorously applied. Better descriptive representation in local politics is due to the lower status of local elections, plus the proportional electoral system that places less emphasis on incumbents and is more conducive to presenting a variety of candidates. Yet, where power lies (in local executive office, particularly in prestigious roles), and where the parity law does not apply (in very small districts), equality and diversity remain elusive.

The government offers a notable exception to this rule. The proportions of women and ethnic minorities are both higher in the government than in parliament. This might appear surprising, given that government comprises a small group of powerful individuals, compared with the increased opportunities and lower power afforded by parliament. However, France has long had more women in its government than in parliament. In France, one cannot be a member of parliament and government at the same time, and ministers are frequently drawn from outside parliament. For some time, French presidents have propelled female and, more recently, ethnic minority ministers into government. The reasons for doing so are more tactical than benevolent. The government is a highly visible

<sup>5</sup>Excluding deputies elected in overseas territories, most of whom are indigenous to their territory.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.france24.com/fr/20120618-dizaine-deputes-diversite-vont-faire-entree-assemblee-immigration-legislatives/>.

<sup>7</sup>Of the National Assembly’s 577 seats, 24 represent France’s overseas territories, 11 represent ex-pats and the remainder are for mainland France plus Corsica.

way of promoting a positive and diverse image for a party, without having to face the electorate. Presidents also tend to appoint individuals with limited political capital who are therefore subservient and loyal due to their lack of an autonomous power base (Helft-Malz and Lévy, 2000). Nomination to the government has launched the careers of many of France's distinguished female politicians, and normalised the presence of ethnic minority politicians. However, the dependence on the president's goodwill means that there has been a rapid turnover of politicians entering the government in this way. A notorious example was in 1995, when 12 women were nominated to the government amidst much fanfare, only for eight of them to be sacked six months later.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, all three ethnic minority ministers nominated by President Sarkozy in 2007 had exited the government by late 2010.

Strikingly, nearly all the minority ministers appointed since 2007 are women. Under Sarkozy, the three initial ethnic minority ministers were Rachida Dati, daughter of North African immigrants, appointed to the prestigious office of Justice Minister; Rama Yade, originally from Senegal, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Human Rights; and Fadela Amara, the founder of NPNS, who became Secretary of State for Urban Policy.<sup>9</sup> Various reshuffles saw the exit of these three and the entry of Nora Berra, of Algerian descent, Secretary of State for senior citizens and then health; and Jeanette Bougrab, also of Algerian descent, Secretary of State for youth and social movements. Berra wanted to represent the UMP in the 2012 legislative elections, but was overlooked for her preferred seat in favour of a white woman; she blamed this decision on her Algerian origins and withdrew her candidacy (*Le Monde*, 2012). Bougrab, who describes herself as 'an atheist, secular and profoundly Republican' (*Elle*, 2013), earned notoriety as president of HALDE (see below), when she defended a nursery for sacking a female worker who wore a Muslim headscarf. She claimed that 'France doesn't defend women enough against the threat of Islamism' (*ibid*), and alleged to have encountered racism within the UMP (Bougrab, 2013). All five of Sarkozy's minority women ministers fitted the model of assimilated, secular women who remained marginalised within the party.

Following the election of François Hollande in 2012, the government comprised equal<sup>10</sup> numbers of men and women both within and beyond cabinet. Of the six non-white members of the initial government, five were women. These included George Pau-Langevin, along with two other ministers (one male, one female)

<sup>8</sup>Five men were evicted in the same reshuffle (a much smaller proportion of the total).

<sup>9</sup>Amara was a particularly interesting appointment because she had held local office as a Socialist candidate, and did not renounce her Socialist affiliation upon joining Sarkozy's right-wing government. She was one of several appointments designed to symbolise 'ouverture', or cross-party collaboration.

<sup>10</sup>Excluding the (male) prime minister.

originating from France's overseas territories; two ministers with North African origins; and Fleur Pellerin, who was born in South Korea and adopted by French parents as an infant. Christiane Taubira, a senior politician who represented Guyana in parliament from 1993 to 2012 and who ran for the presidency in 2002, became Justice Minister. The current government has five ethnic minority fully fledged ministers—all women—as well as one male minority Secretary of State.

Thus, in parliament as in government, minority women have fared considerably better than minority men. Ethnic minority politicians promote social integration, and women are considered 'more successful models of integration than ethnic men' (Bird, 2005, p. 439). Moreover, by concentrating 'diversity' in a limited number of individuals who tick boxes for gender and racial equality at the same time, French parties are able to appear more inclusive while still conserving a maximum number of opportunities for white men. Parity has forced parties to accommodate more women, and any further political renewal has become intertwined with feminisation rather than coming at the expense of the white men already in power. Hence, equality and diversity may sit in tandem even when quotas do not, and gender quotas may have wider reach when they disrupt norms of exclusion (cf Hughes, 2011).

While the minority women ministers are heterogeneous in terms of their class, professional backgrounds and ethnic origins, certain patterns are noticeable. With the exceptions of Taubira, Amara and Pau-Langevin, they have tended to be relatively young, attractive and politically inexperienced, owing their careers to the president while projecting a particular image of modern, emancipated, assimilated women. They have all demonstrated their competence through academic and professional achievement, 'success stories' who embody the Republican ideal of meritocracy and social mobility (Dine, 2008). They are not religious—no ethnic minority woman in national politics wears a headscarf, and these women are either single or married to white men, thus indicating a rejection of minority men (and the associated notions of control and submission). They support what Sénac calls 'Republican diversity'—whereby people from different backgrounds can contribute to the governance of the Republic without dividing France into competing groups (Sénac, 2012). Minority women politicians also support the Republican stance of secularism as emancipation for women. In sum, they are models of integration and assimilation, conforming to Western social and cultural norms. This limits their potential to act as substantive representatives for immigrant communities who are less well assimilated (Bird, 2005). The promotion of 'Westernised' ethnic minority women reflects the (racist) notion of 'on les aura par leurs femmes' ('we'll get them through their women'), sending a clear message to immigrant communities regarding which behaviours and identities are acceptable. The concurrent message of 'unacceptable' practices, such as the wearing of headscarves and veils

(detailed in the next section), is used to reinforce France's pressure on its immigrant populations to assimilate to French culture. This phenomenon is widespread in several other European countries (Mügge, 2013), but stands in contrast with the Anglo-American acceptance of multiculturalism. The pre-condition of assimilation and secularity for political inclusion meant that there has been no resistance to policies to ban headscarves from any of France's ethnic minority female politicians.

What of Taubira and Amara? Both women have come from outside the party that nominated them to government; Amara was a Socialist in a right-wing government, and Taubira belongs to the Parti Radical du Gauche (Radical Left Party). They have therefore ticked many boxes at the same time, allowing the government to look inclusive while outsourcing 'diversity' to representatives from other parties. Amara was an unexpected and pioneering choice; her landmark advocacy for minority women gave her a mandate to continue this work in government. Her rejection of Muslim headscarves and her outspoken criticism of violence against minority women within their own communities both resonated with the government's message. Her support of the government's ban on burqas (see below) gave credibility to the claim that it was motivated by concern for women's rights, helping to refute claims of racism and discrimination. Her appointment was therefore in keeping with the tactic of appointing secular Franco-Arab representatives to address 'contentious religious and multicultural issues' (Bird, 2005, p. 440). Meanwhile, Taubira's prominent position within the current government, along with her long history of anti-colonialism, has made her a lightning rod for racism, sometimes simmering just beneath the surface of French political life, and sometimes boiling over. Taubira, who is black, has been singled out for criticism and pressure to resign, has been compared with monkeys and chimpanzees, has been given bananas and, in 2013, was the subject of the following heading in a far-right publication: 'Crafty as a monkey, Taubira gets her banana back'.<sup>11</sup> This flagrant racism underlines the difficulties facing ethnic minority communities in France, and the ongoing discomfort with seeing a minority woman in a position of power.

## 5. Substantive representation

Ethnic minorities have generally not fared well within French political discourse. The emphasis on assimilation has not translated into integration, with ethnic minority communities largely living in segregated areas (Shon, 2011). Anti-immigrant sentiment is fuelled by the populist FN, who caused shockwaves in 2002 when their then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, qualified to the second round of

<sup>11</sup>In French, 'getting one's banana back' can also mean putting a smile back on one's face, but the racist intent of this headline was very clear.

the presidential election. The FN obtained 17.9% of the vote in the 2012 presidential elections, and 34% of French voters express sympathy with the FN's policies (Mestre, 2015). Le Pen, who has a criminal conviction for holocaust denial, famously claimed that '3 million unemployed French people means 3 million too many immigrants' (Shields, 1997). His daughter Marine Le Pen, who has succeeded him as party leader, has continued a strong anti-Islamic rhetoric. The mainstream right-wing party, the UMP, has co-opted some of this rhetoric to appeal to FN voters, with Sarkozy adopting a virulent anti-immigrant tone in his 2012 presidential campaign. The UMP leader from 2012 to 2014, Jean-François Copé, continued the anti-immigration theme, making controversial comments about 'hooligans' confiscating French children's *pains au chocolat* during Ramadan (L'Express, 2012).

It is within this rather troubled context that legislation has arisen to 'protect' women from the more patriarchal elements of Islam. Given the refusal of the state to recognise ethnic differences between citizens, there is limited legislation targeted directly at ethnic minority groups. However, certain policies, while sometimes couched in neutral language, have explicitly targeted Muslim women. These include banning Muslim headscarves in French schools and, more recently, banning burqas and niqabs in public places. These policies, and the response to them, highlight the various tensions in the interaction between sex and religion in France.

The issue of Muslim headscarves in schools is a long-standing component of *laïcité*. The issue first rose to prominence in 1989, following the 'affaire des foulards' (headscarf affair), where girls wearing Muslim headscarves were excluded from their schools for not respecting the secular nature of schools. Laborde (2005, p. 306) argues that hostility to headscarves was threefold in origin; aside breaching *laïcité*, they offended feminist sensibilities because they symbolised the subordination of women, and offended nationalist sensibilities because they symbolised a refusal to integrate. Because of this hostility, the ban on headscarves was enforced in an 'exceptionally confrontational way' (Lloyd, 1998, p. 68). The matter was not fully resolved until 2004, when legislation was introduced to prohibit all prominent religious symbols from state schools. Discrete symbols were still permitted. Hence, Christian students could still wear a cross under their clothing, but minority religions requiring a more visible manifestation of faith (Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans) were targeted. The 'Stasi committee',<sup>12</sup> which was set up to investigate the matter, made recommendations that would have mitigated the underlying Christian bias, such as including Muslim and Jewish high holy days as public holidays for all school children, but these were not implemented. In 2010, new legislation banned full-face veils, such as the burqa, in all public places. This time, the law was targeted explicitly at Muslim women. The rationale for the

<sup>12</sup>Named after its chair, Bernard Stasi.

bans—namely that headscarves and veils oppress the rights of women, suppress their individual identity, and contradict Republican norms—met little resistance across the political spectrum. However, for those women who do wear the veils, out of choice, religious duty or social obligation, the legislation has reinforced their social exclusion. They are now unable to access many public services and civil amenities. The framing of the 2010 legislation assumed that women had no agency in the decision to wear a veil, and that banning burqas would liberate women, not oppress and ostracise them. The women affected by the legislation were largely excluded from the debate (Allwood and Wadia, 2009, p. 162). Neither the Stasi committee, nor the ‘Observatoire de la Laïcité’ formed in 2013, included any women who wore a headscarf. Those Muslim women who were included in the debate were, like the ethnic minority female ministers, highly assimilated women who opposed headscarves. Similarly, the few civil society organisations that mobilise explicitly for minority women, such as NPNS or Les Marianne de la Diversité, are opposed to the perceived religious oppression of women.

Some Muslim women, rejecting the paternalist and racist assumptions underpinning the banning of headscarves and veils, have chosen to wear them for the first time, as a manifestation of their faith and a rejection of state control (Laborde, 2008). As these women have no political voice and are entirely unrepresented within French public life, wearing a headscarf is one of the few political statements available to them. However, many other immigrant women prefer to integrate into French society and embrace Western ideals. The conflicts of loyalty and identity within France’s ethnic minority communities add to the complexity of studying substantive representation; the diverse interests of women within these communities mean that legislation may fulfil the substantive interests of some minority women while damaging the interests of others. It could be argued, therefore, that outcomes do not reflect a lack of agency for minority women. Rather, minority women who support secular Republican ideals have been more vocal and successful in winning political support than religious Muslim women.

Despite all these tensions, there has been some progress in recognising intersectionality within France. Most notable was the creation in late 2004 of HALDE (l’Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l’Égalité), an official body charged with combating discrimination and promoting equality. Unlike other equality bodies, which dealt exclusively with specific issues such as gender or racial equality, HALDE was explicitly intersectional in its remit. As an administrative body, HALDE focused on discrimination cases and equality promotion, rather than directly influencing policy-making. In 2011, HALDE was further amalgamated into a body entitled ‘Défenseur des Droits’ (Defender of Rights), with anti-discrimination and equality promotion being housed alongside defending civil liberties and child protection issues. The body is very broadly intersectional in its remit, considering all areas of potential discrimination including sex, ethnicity,

national identity, age, sexuality, maternity, disability and religion. This collective approach helps those experiencing multiple forms of discrimination, such as minority women. However, it also raises fears that the needs of any one group will be diluted within a more generic discourse, thus watering down the impact of specific campaigns such as gender equality. The main purpose of the *Défenseur des Droits* is to enforce European equality legislation and assist in prosecuting cases where this legislation has been breached.

## 6. Conclusion

The representation of ethnic minority women in France demonstrates commonalities and singularities relative to other countries. In particular, the French case highlights the presence of hierarchies of women both between and within ethnic groups. The inclusion of ethnic minority women is often conditional on their willingness to conform, comply and to act simultaneously as symbols of diversity and of integration. Ethnic minority women are subject both to racism and sexism, and hostility between feminist and anti-racism movements has limited the capacity to represent intersectional difference within civil society. At the political level, alongside some open manifestations of racism, there has been a lot of subtle racism concealed within the universalist framework. The expectation that everyone will assimilate to a white, male, Christian norm has engendered particular difficulties for minority women. Notably, the issue of religion has created divisions within the feminist movement and among minority women. Some favour freedom of religious practice and defend women's choice to wear a headscarf, while many more oppose headscarves and other religious practices, viewing them as oppressive and a threat to women's rights and autonomy. The official discourse of universalism has sided with those who view secularism and Republicanism as safeguards of women's rights, and the inclusion of ethnic minority women into French public life has been conditional on the acceptance of these norms. As a result, ethnic minority women politicians are as much symbols of assimilation as of diversity. Certain types of minority women are gaining (limited) access to politics, while others remain completely excluded and marginalised.

The French case study mirrors Belgium and the Netherlands (Celis *et al.*, 2014), in that ethnic minority women have been more successful than men in gaining access to political office. Although parity legislation was framed as being for women only, it has exposed the false nature of universalism and made French people more aware of the lack of diversity within politics. Ethnic minority women, seen as less radical than minority men (Bird, 2005), help parties meet the demands of parity while also reinforcing secular norms against growing ethnic and religious tensions. Furthermore, selecting minority women for ministerial and parliamentary roles sends out a symbolic message of diversity while

still concentrating ‘otherness’ in as few individuals as possible, thus preserving more power for the existing white male elite. The particular influence of universalism and secularism in the French case study underlines the importance of context in understanding minority women’s access to representation in other countries. The intersection of race and ethnicity is contingent on the wider political environment.

Recent progress for ethnic minority women in France must therefore be contextualised. The picture is certainly better than a decade ago, but with several caveats. Ethnic minorities remain heavily under-represented within France, with access to politics reserved for those who conform to France’s assimilationist norms. This results in a particular and partial form of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation of minority communities. The discourses surrounding ethnic minority women, and Muslim women in particular, remain negative and full of stereotypes. France therefore still has a long way to go before it can claim to have achieved truly universal representation of its citizens.

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