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Muslim Women Resist Stereotyping

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In France, Many Try to Balance Their Faith's Traditions With Secular Society

By Elizabeth Bryant
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PARIS -- Like most young French women, Wafa Ben Salem goes out to movies and dinner, dates men, albeit usually with a chaperone, and is an avowed fashion maven.

But it's not hard to see how she stands out with her form-covering clothing, a headscarf tied under her chin and her pledge not to engage in pre-marital sex.

"I'm Muslim, and it's been taught to us in our religion, and I believe in this," said the 24-year-old university student from the southern French town of Cagnes-sur-Mer.

Like many young Muslim women here, she is trying to strike a balance between personal empowerment -- "I'll meet men before I get married to decide which one is right for me" -- and tradition -- "But I'll keep my virginity until marriage."

A series of highly publicized incidents involving Muslim women has reinforced popular perceptions that an intolerant, sexist brand of Islam is on the march in France, home to Europe's largest Muslim population.

Yet religion experts, and many Muslims, caution against easy stereotypes. Far from submissive, they say, Muslim women are looking for a fit between their faith and the highly secularized society around them.

Nonetheless, recent incidents have fed the perception that women are living under the thumbs of men.

Last month, a court in the northern city of Lille annulled the marriage of two Muslims after the husband alleged that his wife was not a virgin. People were outraged when Justice Minister Rachida Dati initially supported the ruling.

More recently, the Council of State, the country's highest administrative body, upheld a ruling that denied citizenship to a Moroccan woman who wears a burqa, contending that her "radical practice" of Islam was incompatible with French values. Urban Affairs Minister Fadéla Amara, a practicing Muslim, called the veil a "sign of oppression of women."

There were also widespread media reports about a surge among Muslim women seeking surgery to reattach their hymens to give suitors the illusion of virginity and a Muslim husband who refused to allow a male doctor to perform an emergency Caesarean section on his wife.

Yet the reality, some say, is different from the perception.

"The large majority of Muslims tinker," said Franck Fregosi, a sociologist who has written extensively on Islam in Europe. "The girls will try to go out with boys but hide it from their families. And most of them have a normal life. Some will have sexual relations before marriage. But they will still try to preserve appearances so their families won't know."

Young women, Fregosi said, also struggle to break free from the cultural traditions of their immigrant parents,

including shunning arranged marriages.

"Their priority is to have a pious husband, not a cousin or another man chosen by the family," he said. "And that is something new."

Religious anthropologist Dounia Bouzar sees two factors at work: a "return to belief" but also a "questioning of the Western model, of the woman who knows what she wants with her body. A lot of young girls are wondering whether that really means more liberty."

Most French Muslims are hardly pious practitioners of their faith. A 2006 survey by the CSA polling agency found that although nearly nine in 10 Muslims observe the holy month of Ramadan, only 17 percent go to mosque regularly. Separately, the CSA poll found that 91 percent approved of equality between the sexes.

The dress and habits of France's Islamic community of 6 million, many of them immigrants from Turkey and North Africa, strikes a particularly sensitive chord in France.

In 2004, the French government banned students from wearing conspicuous religious symbols in schools. Although the edict included large Catholic crosses and Jewish skull caps, it was the Muslim headscarves that sparked the most controversy.

More recently, town officials in the village of La Verpilliere forced Mayor Patrick Margier to rescind his decision to allow separate swimming pool hours for women, after the matter stirred local furor. Amara, the French urban affairs minister, called the pool rules a "dangerous" reflection of pressure by religious fundamentalists.

But the mayor said he stands by his original decision.

"This wasn't about a threat to secularity," he told [Le Monde newspaper](#). "The 50 women who participated were of all ages and nationalities, in swimsuits without any distinctive (religious) signs. We wanted to reach out to them, and I regret people aren't more tolerant."

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