

Headscarf ban turns France's Muslim women towards homeworking

Headscarf ban in French public service jobs turns many Muslim women towards self-employed e-trading

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A woman wearing the French flag as a headscarf takes part in a demonstration against Islamophobia in Paris, France. Photograph: Alamy

Every day Meryem Belmokhtar turns her tidy sitting-room into a workshop. She lays out the equipment on the table, puts on rubber gloves and dips into various jars to make up 250g bags of sweets. Each packet is marked with her logo, featuring a stick of barley sugar.

Belmokhtar, 39, lives in Compiègne, northern France, and manages the [Candine Halal](#) website (a pun on candy in English and *dine*, religion in Arabic), which markets the usual chocolate-coated marshmallow bears, preserved cherries and acid drops, except that hers contain no pork gelatine and are halal. In other words, they comply with Islamic dietary rules.

Becoming self-employed has been an adventure for Belmokhtar. A languages graduate, she used to work as a secretary in a laboratory. This new job is the only

way of not having to take off her hijab on leaving home each morning. With a family to feed, she needs to work, but she became so fed up with having to remove her hijab that she resigned. Two years ago she started selling sweets. It allows her to fulfil the ritual obligations and pray five times a day at the appointed hour, rather than having to catch up in the evening.

The French parliament has passed several laws on when and where women can wear headscarves. In March 2004 school staff were banned from wearing insignia or garments displaying a religious allegiance. In April 2007 the rules were also applied to those delivering a public service. There are no specific rules for private firms.

Belmokhtar is no exception, other women of similar background and religious convictions have gone into business on the net. No statistics are available as yet, but it is apparent on social networks that small websites like hers are proliferating.

Two years ago, Oum el-Benette (not her real name), 35, launched Yesmine Shop, marketing clothes mainly for Muslim women. She sells *abayas* (dresses), scarves, tunics, shawls and woollens. All the garments on her site are long and loose-fitting, in keeping with Islamic rules to preserve modesty. The faces of models are blurred or pictures are taken in such a way as to conceal their heads. She determined to uphold religious tradition which prohibits any representation of humans or animals.

On the Hijab Glam website the faces are blurred too. It is run by Magali Meignen, in her 30s, a Roman Catholic who converted to Islam 11 years ago. She says she first took an interest in Islam with her Muslim friends at secondary school. After gaining a deeper understanding of what this faith involved, she decided to make the change.

Having trained to work in sales, Meignen says she had difficulty finding a job where she was allowed to wear a hijab. She worked for three years as a teaching assistant in a school, but was subjected to the “humiliating” obligation of baring her head. She was offered a job at a call centre, but could not wear a scarf there either. In 2009 she decided to give up the idea of work, but her brother suggested she become self-employed. This was possible, thanks to the introduction of simpler rules for going freelance. She invested her savings – about €1,000 (\$1,300) – in launching the site. As she herself had difficulty finding hijabs she liked in shops, she decided to specialise in headscarves.

The urge to start a small business came to Saida B, 28, after the birth of her son. She found it difficult to buy clothes for the boy without human figures or

anthropomorphic animals all over them. In 2010 she started her own brand, Salam'Stick, initially selling decals either for decorative purposes or to customise clothes.



Muslim women in the Lyon Great Mosque, Lyon. France restricts the wearing of headscarves in public service employment. Photograph: Alamy

She started selling jumpsuits with decorative designs, or the baby's name in French or Arabic. Then she branched out into wall stickers. A range of decals – mainly featuring Muslim prayers – followed. “There was nothing like that, so I thought young Muslims might like to have a special garment or decoration,” she says.

Saida B had also tried working in a conventional company, before launching her own business. She was an executive in a service company. After training as an assistant-manager, she started work when she was 21, knowing full well she would not be able to dress as she saw fit. She gave up in 2008, as she considers it a “religious obligation” to wear a hijab.

In 2011 several female Muslim entrepreneurs launched a network to provide support for new ventures in e-trading. Akhawate Business – sisters' business in classical Arabic – now boasts more than 100 members. Its founders all ran into the same difficulties, reconciling job satisfaction with religious observance. Emmanuelle Rouy, 30, the webmistress and joint head of the network, confirms the “frustration” felt by women “unable to find work on a par with their

qualifications”.

Fateh Kimouche manages Al-Kanz (the treasure), a site for Muslim consumers. He hopes these enterprising women will help increase the economic clout of the Muslim community, pinpointing the growth sectors on which they should focus: halal food, finance, tourism, fashion, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and educational games.

The women e-traders seem to have got the message and are trying to develop the supply side, but they are operating on a very limited scale. None of them has borrowed money from a bank, in compliance with the Islamic ban on usury. They are proud of having bought equipment and funded the design of a logo or the purchase of a domain name out of their savings, generally barely exceeding about €1,000. With such a low investment in the business there will be little damage in the event of bankruptcy, but for the time being none have managed to pay themselves a proper wage. Though they are reluctant to discuss their profits, they all claim to be breaking even.

According to Kimouche, the e-traders have plenty of scope to further develop their potential. “They don’t go far enough,” he claims. “They could have their sites translated into several languages or send a dress to an American blogger who’d get them some publicity.”

They seem more interested in solidarity than in competing. Some have become friends, after exchanging tips over social networks. Saida B and Belmokhtar have never met, but they frequently chat. They have no real-life shop window, but they can promote their goods on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. They promote their sisters too, slipping their flyers into parcels sent to customers. “After all, it’s free!” Saida B says. On one occasion, 10 of them joined forces to print a joint flyer to add to their dispatches.

They all seem very happy with their choice. Only Meignen tempers this enthusiasm: “If society didn’t reject us, we could really flourish,” she says. “This way we’re a bit isolated. But whatever we do, our image won’t change. And yet we’re contributing to society, paying tax. But as we are hidden away, no one will know.”

Indeed, all of them are dubious about being able to change their image in the public eye.

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