

Belgium's 'Neutrality' Debate Once Again Places the Muslim Woman in the Dock

News:

On 1 April 2026, the Parliament of the French-speaking Federation Wallonia-Brussels approved new rules on neutrality in education. The decree of 2 April 2026 bans visible political, philosophical and religious signs for staff in the official education system. This means that Muslim women who wear the Hijab can no longer work in many teaching and education roles covered by the decree unless they remove it.

The measure comes at a time when French-speaking schools in Belgium have been struggling with a serious shortage of qualified teachers. In 2025, the government itself set up working groups to deal with the shortage in Wallonia and Brussels. Yet while schools need more teachers, qualified Muslim women who wear the Hijab can now find the door to parts of the public education system closed to them.

The new decree is another step in Belgium's long debate over visible Islamic dress. Belgium already bans clothing that fully or mainly covers the face in public places, a measure widely associated with the Niqab. Belgian courts have also accepted, in certain situations, rules that ban visible religious signs in public institutions and education.

Comment:

Once again, it is the Muslim woman who finds herself at the centre of a political and ideological debate in Europe. The language used is 'neutrality', but the effect is clear. A Muslim woman may be qualified, experienced and willing to teach, but if she believes that wearing the Hijab is an obligation from Allah (swt), she can be told that she is not welcome unless she removes it.

This is especially striking when schools are already struggling to find teachers. For years, Belgium has faced teacher shortages, including in the French-speaking education system. Classes have sometimes been left without a teacher, schools have had difficulty filling vacancies and governments have searched for ways to attract more people into the profession. Yet at the same time, a group of qualified women is pushed away because of the way they dress.

This exposes the contradiction. European governments regularly speak about equal opportunities, women taking part in the labour market, diversity and inclusion. But when a Muslim woman wants to work while keeping her Islamic dress, these principles suddenly become limited. The message becomes: you may participate, but only if you make your Islam less visible.

And this is why the Hijab continues to be such a major debate across Europe. It has never simply been about a piece of cloth. The Hijab is a visible sign that a Muslim woman can live, study and work in Europe while still holding firmly to her Islamic identity. She can become a teacher, doctor, lawyer or civil servant without giving up what she believes Allah (swt) has commanded. For a secular outlook that increasingly expects religion to remain private and invisible, this becomes uncomfortable.

France speaks of *laïcité*. Belgium speaks of neutrality. In other countries, politicians use words such as integration, security, emancipation or social cohesion. The words may

change, but the Muslim woman is repeatedly asked to change the same thing: her visible Islamic identity.

The Belgian case also raises an important question about what neutrality should actually mean. A state can treat Muslims, Christians, Jews, atheists and others equally without forcing them all to look the same. A teacher wearing a Hijab does not turn a school into an Islamic school. Neutrality should mean that an institution treats people fairly and does not discriminate between them. It should not mean that an individual must hide her religion before she can serve society.

There is also a clear contradiction in the language of women's freedom. Secular societies repeatedly say that a woman must be free to choose what she wears and how she lives. Yet when a Muslim woman chooses to cover herself because of her belief in Allah (swt), the state can decide that this choice is unacceptable in certain schools, jobs or public institutions. A woman is told that she is free, but only within limits drawn by secular politics.

This is why the debate around the Hijab keeps returning. It touches a deeper question that many European states have still not resolved: can Muslims take part fully in society without being required to slowly assimilate and hide the parts of Islam that are visible? The Hijab makes this question impossible to ignore because it is seen every day in schools, workplaces, streets and public institutions.

The Muslim woman should therefore not accept the idea that her Islamic dress is the problem. The Hijab is not an election slogan, a political uniform or a sign of extremism. For the Muslim woman, it is part of her obedience to Allah (swt). She should not be made to choose between her faith and her education, between her faith and her career, or between her faith and serving her community.

Allah (swt) says: ﴿وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَى اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ ۗ﴾ **“It is not for a believing man or woman—when Allah and His Messenger decree a matter—to have any other choice in that matter.”** [Al-Ahzab: 36]

The issue in Belgium is therefore bigger than one decree and bigger than one profession. It shows how the secular system, while speaking constantly about freedom and equality, can restrict a Muslim woman precisely because she openly lives according to her religious conviction. And when this happens at a time when schools are searching for teachers, the contradiction becomes even harder to hide.

The real question is not why Muslim women continue to wear the Hijab. The real question is why European politics continues to treat their obedience to Allah (swt) as a problem that must be controlled, limited or pushed out of public life.

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Source note: The factual background was checked against the 2 April 2026 neutrality decree of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and reporting on the continuing teacher shortage in French-speaking Belgium.