

# Meet the “Muslim Rosa Parks”: How France’s pools have become the latest site of a civil right battle

They call themselves the “Muslim Rosa Parks”. A group of women from the southern French city of Grenoble have launched [a series of “swim-ins” in public pools across the city](#), after Muslim women wearing full length swimsuits known as “burkinis” were systematically denied entry to the pools.

Arriving in small groups, the women deliberately flout existing regulations by taking a swim in what they describe as an act of protest against discriminatory policies.

The city of Grenoble is not alone in prohibiting the so-called “burkini” in public pools. Across France, Muslim women in full length swimsuits are routinely denied access on the grounds their dress code infringes rules of hygiene and/or security.

In 2016, local mayors in several French cities banned women in full length swimsuits from attending public beaches — a ruling subsequently overturned by France’s Council of State for breaching [“fundamental freedoms”](#). And France’s recently passed [“anti-separatism” bill](#) flirted with an amendment to prohibit the “burkini” in public pools on the grounds of [“secularism and the neutrality of the public space”](#). Though subsequently rejected, the debate rages on.

According to French legal academic [Rim-Sarah Alouane](#), the law in France currently only permits exclusions from public spaces, such as pools, on very limited grounds — namely hygiene or security. [Previous edicts](#) from France’s human rights body have stated that no specific rules can be imposed that would “directly or indirectly prohibit the wearing of the burkini without ‘demonstrable’ reasons to do so.” But a spokesperson for the city of Grenoble said that while their considerations were based on hygiene and security, they were not basing their decisions on particular studies and had not produced any at the local level:

“Taous H.” is a mother of six and social worker who has lived in Grenoble for over 15 years. She says she has fought her entire life to simply be

allowed to exist in peace in public spaces in France, where she says her identity as a visible Muslim is continuously contested:

My struggle began long before the protests we are doing here at the pools in Grenoble. I've been turned away as a mother from my child's school trips on account of my headscarf, I've been refused entry to a private lake where ducks and fish are swimming, but I, a Muslim woman, can't! I once paid 200 euros with my family to visit a waterpark and was told once inside that I wasn't allowed to use any of the slides. They tried to throw me out like some kind of a criminal. I'm policed everywhere I go.

In 2018, Taous and a collective of concerned citizens, including feminists and local activists from the group *Alliance Citoyenne* ("Citizens Alliance"), began writing to the mayor about access to the pools for women in full length swimsuits. In May 2019, the group began what would evolve into a series of "swim-ins" at pools across the city, the women chose deliberately to flout what they consider to be discriminatory rules and enter the pool. Some, for the first time in over ten years. [Footage of their joy as they enter the water](#) contrasts with the anger and panic as security staff and then armed police are called to haul the women out.

As Taous described it:

For many women, our struggle for access to pools might seem like their last concern — they say to me that we have bigger fish to fry, like discrimination in employment and housing — but I say our wellbeing is a priority. It is just as important as access to work. Having access to the pool is vital in the eyes of our children.

Taous, who in September 2019 was the first woman in her working-class community to join the otherwise all male diving club. So thrilled was she at the prospect of being able to one day swim with dolphins — a lifelong dream — that she framed and hung her first dive certificate on her kitchen wall. But it wasn't to be. After the first session, the instructor called her to say the pool had banned her from attending due to her full-length swimsuit. As a way around the ban, he suggested she purchase a 200 euro neoprene diving suit which essentially covers the exact same parts of her body.

With each protest, the women say the policing response has become tougher:

Last time, the police outnumbered us. They literally sent 15 police officers to a pool over 6 Muslim women trying to take a dip. They arrived pointing their tear gas canisters at us — this army of huge armed men to try and stop us swimming. It's totally surreal. They treated us like they'd uncovered a huge drug gang and seemed to be trying to provoke us.

For “Julie”, a feminist activist from a local collective *NousTouistes38* who also participated in the “swim-in”, the police response wasn't simply disproportionate, it also had racial undertones: “as soon as the women got in the water — they asked everyone to evacuate the pool. It has echoes of racist stereotypes that people from immigrant backgrounds are dirty, it felt really violent.”

Julie added: There is clear discrimination as soon as we arrive at the pool too. No one says anything to us, but as soon as a veiled woman arrives, there is immediately a police officer waiting for her and they don't even question whether it is discriminatory. After all, it doesn't go without saying that she will definitely be wearing a burkini — but she is immediately treated as a threat. Not to mention the discrimination of controlling what a woman can wear. We are not treated the same.

Julie and her colleague “Rosie” are feminist activists who believe in the need to stand in ally ship with visibly Muslim women — but both on the left and in feminist circles, they remain a minority:

For Taous and others, the cyclical debates over their dress code are profoundly wearing: “I cry a lot, I get very tired of it all. Everywhere I go I'm made to fight for my right to be there.” For the women involved, the elephant in the room is France's latent Islamophobia — the constant scrutiny of Muslim practises and mores which provide the fodder for prime-time talk-shows and political debates, and which feminists Julie and Rosie say has seeped into the fabric of France's social life: “It's all symbolic — the way Muslim women are treated, to simply try and swim in a pool – the violence with which they are met — for us it's symbolic of a wider discrimination and islamophobia they experience – it is one stone in the edifice but it is not a singular struggle.”

**[Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.]**

Taken from <https://www.myriamfrancois.com/>, originally published in ABC on Tue 17 Aug 2021, written by Myriam who is a journalist and research associate at the [Centre of Islamic Studies, SOAS](#)

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**Things to think about:**

1. Why are these women describing themselves as the Muslim Rosa Parks?
2. Why do you think this issue has garnered support from some feminists and women in general?
3. Do you think the UK could also have a ban like this in the future? Why? Why not?
4. Do you think this is a battle worth fighting? Why? Why not?
5. What is Islamophobia?

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