

Wearing the Face Veil in Belgium

Views and Experiences of 27 Women Living in Belgium concerning the Islamic Full Face Veil and the Belgian Ban on Face Covering

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1. Lay-out of the Research

Belgium adopted a legal ban on face covering on 1 June 2011.² Parliamentary discussions had started in the previous legislature, in the spring of 2010. At that time however, local bans were already in place in most municipalities where women wearing the face veil resided. From an academic perspective, it was striking to find political discussions demonstrating at the same time a nearly unchallenged consensus about the need for a ban, and a complete lack of knowledge about women who wear the face veil in Belgium. Similarly striking was the complete absence of the voices of women wearing the face veil in this debate.

The current empirical study is part of a broader research project that includes also research documenting local bans and examining the bans from a human rights perspective.³

The main purpose of the research was to check some of the apparent hypotheses of the Belgian legislator from the perspective of the women wearing a face veil in Belgium. Analysis of the *travaux préparatoires* revealed three main motives behind the ban: improving (subjective and objective) safety, guaranteeing communication and social cohesion, and protecting women's rights.⁴ An academic paper engaging with this research question, will be published elsewhere. The current report is a presentation of the findings of the empirical research as such.

The empirical research consisted mainly of semi-structured in-depth interviews, aimed at getting insights in the lived realities of the interviewees. The interviews included questions on how and why the women started to wear the face veil, and on their experiences while wearing it. In addition, we wanted to know how the women related to the local and (pending) general bans, and to the arguments that were put forward to introduce these.

We interviewed 27 women between September 2010 and September 2011. As the work of the legislator 'caught up' with the research, 14 women were interviewed before the adoption of the legal ban, 13 after its adoption. Since discussions about the ban were focused on the perceived need to make women stop wearing the face veil or to prevent them from starting to wear it, we included also women who had actually stopped wearing it, and women who were seriously considering starting to wear it. 12 women we interviewed were wearing the face veil at that time; 10 had worn it but had stopped wearing it; 2 wore it occasionally (one of whom had worn it full time in the past), and 3 were

¹ The authors wish to thank Jogchum Vrielink (KULeuven) and Giselle Corradi (UGent) for their valuable assistance in crucial phases of the research.

² The Act of 1 June 2011 'to institute a prohibition on wearing clothing that covers the face, or a large part of it' was published in the *Belgian Official Journal* on July 13 and entered into force 10 days later.

³ Publications include Jogchum Vrielink, Saïla Ouald Chaib and Eva Brems, 'Het 'Boerkaverbod' in België', *NJCM-bull*, 2011, 623 – 638; Jogchum Vrielink, Saïla Ouald Chaib and Eva Brems, 'Boerkaverbod : juridische aspecten van lokale en algemene verboden op gezichtsverhulling in België', *NJW*, 2011, 398 – 414; Jogchum Vrielink, Eva Brems and Saïla Ouald Chaib, 'Il divieto del «burqa» nel sistema giuridico belga', *Quaderni Di Diritto E Politica Ecclesiastica*, 2012, 161-191 ; Jogchum Vrielink, Saïla Ouald Chaib and Eva Brems , 'The Belgian 'burqa ban' Legal aspects of local and general prohibitions on covering and concealing one's face in Belgium' in *The Burqa Affair Across Europe: Between Private and Public*, Ashgate 2012.

⁴ See the above-mentioned publications.

considering starting to wear it. All three had already experimented with the face veil, either in Belgium or abroad.

In addition we organized two focus groups in April and May 2012 – one in Brussels in French and one in Antwerp in Dutch, in which 9 women participated, two of whom had not been previously interviewed for this study.

Among the women who were wearing the face veil at the time of the interview, 8 wore it for more than 10 years, 2 between 5 and 10 years, and 2 minors had started to wear it recently. Among the former face veil wearers, 1 woman wore it more than years, 6 wore it between 5 and 10 years, and 2 women wore it for less than one year.

We interviewed 14 women who live in the Brussels region, 8 living in Flanders and 5 living in Wallonia. The women in Brussels in most cases know of the existence of other women in Brussels who wear the face veil, and in some cases are befriended with some of them. However the women we interviewed in Wallonia and Flanders have a closer relationship with each other, either a family relationship or a closer friendship with regular home visits to each other.

The interviewees are relatively young: 10 are in their thirties (31-40); 7 between 25 and 30; 4 between 18 and 24; 2 are minors; 2 are women were in their 40s and 2 are over 50. The majority are married. It is to be noted that (at least) 5 of the interviewees are married to a convert (3 Belgians, 2 men of African origin).

Most of the current and former wearers we interviewed are 2nd generation immigrants of Moroccan origin, who speak French or Dutch. A few are first generation immigrants, only one of which did not speak Dutch or French. This interview was conducted with the help of an interpreter. Five are Belgian (4)/French (1) women without a migration background who converted to Islam. Of the 3 potential wearers, 2 are converted Belgians and one is of Moroccan origin.

The identification and contact of women who wear the face veil was a lengthy process that was initiated through contacts within the Muslim community in Belgium and continued through the snowball method, initiated from different angles simultaneously. We noticed a clear increase in potential interviewees' willingness to be interviewed after the adoption of the legal ban on face veils.

This is qualitative research. It has not attempted to count the number of women wearing the face veil in Belgium. Nor does it make any claims to representativeness, even though a significant percentage of the relevant group was reached.⁵ To underline this and to resist readers' tendency to 'quantify' the qualitative results, the current report avoids talking in numbers and uses instead terms such as 'most', 'many', 'several' or 'some' (in declining order).

As this research is about the voices of the women concerned, we have chosen to present ample quotations. These have been minimally edited.⁶

⁵ Before the ban, estimates of the number of women wearing the face veil in Belgium mentioned numbers from 200 to 270. The number of 270 is based on statements made by representatives of the *Centre d'Action Laïque* during the hearings on 13 November 2009 of the G erin extraordinary parliamentary commission that examined the French legislative proposal (A. G erin, *Rapport d'information fait en application de l'article 145 du r glement au nom de la mission d'information sur la pratique du port du voile int gral sur le territoire national*), 26 January 2010, 74). By contrast, the Centre for Equal Opportunities estimates that there are approximately 200 women wearing face-veils in Belgium (J. De Wit, "Kamer keurt boerkaverbod goed", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 2 April 2010). There are no official figures on the precise number of women wearing face-veils. From the interviews, it appears that after the ban, the numbers have shrunk significantly.

⁶ In particular, 'eh' and other hesitations or interjections have been deleted to improve readability. Where part of the quote has been cut (always for reasons of abbreviating the quote), [...] is used.

2. Which veil?

Most interviewees wear/wore a face veil that leaves the eyes visible; those who motivated this choice, referred to safety (seeing where you walk), the need to breathe easily and the wish to have eye contact. Three women reported generally wearing a face veil that covers the eyes as well, lifting the veil in front of the eyes only to have a close look at something 'as a person would put on her glasses'. Two women reported alternating between the two options.

Some women reported that they fabricated the face veil themselves, or had it made for them; others that they got it as a gift, or that they asked friends who travelled to Mecca to bring one. Several women reported a preference for a face veil in a colour (not black), sometimes adapted to their outfits.

The large majority of women use the term 'niqab' to indicate a face veil that leaves the eyes free. For the version that covers the eyes, they use the term 'sitar'. One woman used the (apparently Berber) term 'litem' and several French speakers used 'voile intégral'. All but one interviewee reject the term 'burqa' to indicate what they wear. Two women mention that they had never even heard that word before the discussions on the 'burqa ban' started. They oppose the term, because it refers to a specific type of (Afghan) dress that differs from what they wear, and because they see the use of the term burqa as a way of linking them to Afghanistan, Al Qaeda and other negative images of Islam.

3. Starting to wear the face veil

Though some women started to wear the face veil only in their thirties, the large majority of the interviewees started in their teens or early twenties.

Some of the interviewees attended school when they started to wear the face veil. Three interviewees report taking off the face veil right before entering the school premises. Two interviewees changed to home schooling after starting to wear the face veil and obtained their secondary school degree in that manner. One interviewee started to wear the face veil when she stopped school, before obtaining her degree.

All interviewees describe the decision to start wearing the face veil as a well-considered and free decision. They consider it a crucial matter that the wearing of a face veil should be an autonomous personal choice. Several emphasize that from a religious perspective, this has to be an autonomous decision, as Islam explicitly prohibits pressure in religious matters.

Well as I said in religion one cannot force a person to do something. There is a quranic verse that says 'no constraint in religion'. So religion is a personal choice, one cannot force or oblige a person to practice religion or to wear something she does not want to wear, so I say to myself, one cannot oblige it, I don't think that any good practicing Muslim could oblige a person to wear a niqab or anything else. (interview 8)

3.1. From headscarf to face veil

Almost all interviewees wore the headscarf for some time before wearing the face veil. Some experienced a gradual process in which step by step, they evolved toward 'the right clothes'

(interview 17), or in which the face veil was a ‘prolonging of the headscarf’ (interview 7). For other women, wearing the headscarf had not been a comparable conscious decision. However, several women referred to the time they wore a headscarf without covering their face as relevant in the sense that this is when they learned to face negative outside reactions to their religious dress.

I lived my religion in a very negative way in school; I was not free to follow my religion as I wanted, which was wearing the hijab. [...]We were really in a small corner, a small that were always mockingly nicknamed terrorists. (interview 9)

One has always this little resistance because in the school environment one cannot wear the headscarf etcetera. So well despite everything, when you really want something you do it so I put on the headscarf despite its implications and then, well it's a pathway, it's step by step (interview 4)

In school while I was allowed to put on a headscarf, there was in fact never any respect for me compared to other pupils; I was called names in class or the teacher said ‘you're going to explode a bomb’, on account of my hijab and so on. And when I go to the school head the first thing I hear is ‘change yourself, and then this won't happen’. (interview 12)

3.2. Personal trajectories

The decision to wear the face veil is not described as a moment of revelation or as a break with their previous lives, yet as a personal trajectory of deepening and perfecting one's faith. For the large majority of interviewees, starting to wear the face veil was the result of a process of some length. This involved in many cases the study of religion through books, television, tapes, or discussions with fellow believers. Some women went through a phase of experimentation in which they wore the face veil occasionally, or in which they wore it only abroad.

For some interviewees, wearing the face veil was a wish they had cherished for some time before taking the step. Several women narrated that before they wore the face veil, when they saw a woman wearing it, they felt a strong attraction for its ‘serenity’ and ‘beauty’.

If you just look at someone who wears the niqab, I think that is very beautiful, I think she really has ‘nur’ (light). [...]Before, I was also very modern, I was really very modern on the street. But when I saw a woman who wore the niqab I just kept watching, I just kept following her with my eyes. Really the whole time, sometimes that was really an hour. But then I got such a beautiful feeling, she looks so beautiful. (interview 11)

Some women take a face veil wearer in their close environment as a model, and one interviewee reports that her first face veil was a gift from a friend. Yet others did not know anyone personally who wore the face veil before they started wearing it, and none report efforts of persuasion by other women. Similarly, none of the interviewees see their veil as a message to the outside world— It is something they do for themselves and for God. Proselytism is far from their minds. When asked, none of the interviewees want to encourage other women to wear the face veil, even though some

say they would be available to help women who have taken the step or who have a strong desire to do so.

3.3. Reasons for wearing the face veil

The main driver to start wearing the face veil appears to be a desire to excel in piety. Several women mention the wives of the Prophet as an inspiration. Some interviewees interpret the wearing of the face veil as a religious obligation. Yet the large majority does not see it as an obligation, but rather as a voluntary commitment to a higher level of Islamic practice. All interviewees state that they do not follow any particular school or tendency in Islam. They want to be as pious a Muslima as possible, by applying not only mandatory religious rules, but also the rules that are ‘recommended’.

Well actually, it was more, how to say, not approaching perfection but rather approaching the model of the mothers of the believers; rather like that I'll say. Reading the hadith and all that, there were hadith that described the way in which they wore it, the fact that they resembled ravens. There is a hadith that talks about that, so it was completely covering according to the interpretation; so it is that in fact what motivated me. [...] Well I was stubborn in all that was religious, I really felt like doing things properly [...] so really approaching the prophetic model and all. It was really in that perspective, to perfect oneself in one's religion; it was that in fact my goal and that went also through the vestimentary among others even though the most important is behaviour and other things that go along with it. But so it was ... things that I felt capable of doing to approach myself to the ideal religious model between quotation marks, that was for me a thing to do. (interview 10)

We believe that you get good points from Allah. Hassanat we call that. Indeed when you do it, you're in a higher rank with Allah. (former face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)

In that sense, wearing the niqab does not stand alone, but is part of a life project that considers Islam as ‘a lifestyle’.

K: for me, my religion is my life code [...] I mean to say I wouldn't do anything that is not in relation to religion

S: And it is not only in the part you see on the outside, it can also be in behaviour. For example, we will not insult anyone [...]

K: I wore my veil first on the inside before I wore it on the outside. For me, the veil on the inside is the first thing. My veil is my chastity, it is my behavior, it is my politeness, it is my respect. That's my veil.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

In addition, several interviewees emphasize chastity as a motive for wearing the face veil: the wish to protect oneself from the gaze of men, and to reserve one's beauty only for one's (actual or future) husband.

We apply make-up, we do our hair, so it actually changed absolutely nothing, we just made a choice to preserve our body and our beauty only for our husband (interview 25)

Well I don't know, there are people who need when they go out in the street to not feel the gaze of men, because to them they feel dirty (interview 26)

Hmm, actually to hide my beauty (laughs very loudly). To hide my beauty actually (can't stop laughing). No no actually also for everything. Also when I am in the street to be honest. Now I wear a jilaba, a big headscarf [...]It is really something that you just hide your looks just only for your husband. And also for the 'mahram', for example the father or the brother of the mother and so. That's all in fact. (interview 11)

For some women this is more a 'practical' matter of avoiding unwelcome male attention, which they say to experience from Muslim men in the public space if they go around uncovered.

I have put it on to have peace, being Belgian, having blue eyes etcetera, it was a bit difficult for me, [...] automatically when I went in the Arab-Muslim neighborhoods of the capital, I got comments by men: 'are you a Muslima, are you a Muslima...' Second question was: 'are you married?' and that disturbed me already a little. And after years like that, you got the impression really that men were outside to look for women to marry and that certainly was not the right method, because if it was a girl of their origin, they will send someone of the family to ask and I thought that maybe also, because she is a convert, they do not know where to go ask, but there should still be a certain form of respect. You find out which mosque the person frequents, who she meets, you go talk to the friend of one of her girl friends etcetera, you don't directly like that... I know it is a lack of respect. So at a certain moment that really troubled me (interview 3)

Some women however reject the harassment motive:

S: more men touch me with the niqab than without niqab

Z: In England I experienced the opposite... it excites the imagination of some people...

[...]

N: Also it's really boosting the ego of a man, to think that a woman would wear the niqab for that

[...]

S: and of the woman too, I think

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

Three interviewees state that they started to wear the face veil because their fiancé or husband asked them to and they agreed voluntarily with this request.

Well first of all I wanted to get married. So I met a person who was converted to Islam. And one of his conditions was that I had to wear the niqab. A thing I have not thought about. [...] It was for me a good thing you see, there was nothing bad in it, it was a way of protecting his wife, so I really took it that way. And I put it on immediately to please him. (interview 18)

He had told me before we got married... [...] 'listen, you see, I would like... if you agree, that you wear the niqab when we marry'. I had no objection at the time. (interview 23)

My ex-husband was rather keen on the face veil. And he asked me to wear it, I accepted. So from one day to the next I wore it, I wore it for 13 years. So without ever taking it off until today, now I am divorced and I took it off, because I had originally put it on really to please him. It did me no harm I mean to say, I lived rather well with it. Now you see there is no reason to wear it anymore. (interview 24)

3.4. Husbands

When asked, none of the interviewees know of any case in which a woman was obliged –by her husband or anyone else - to wear a face veil. One woman says she knows women whose husbands tried to make them wear it, but they refused and did not wear it. However, several interviewees know women who would like to wear a face veil, but refrain from doing so because their husband does not want them to.

Several women negotiated with their future husband the right to start or continue to wear a face veil after marriage.

In fact I always had such a dream to wear a niqab, but it was always difficult at home because it was not allowed. Because they are always worried, because there is a lot of racism, maybe they will do something to you or whatever. And so, I had in fact nobody's support. So when I got married elhamdulillah I got the support I needed from my husband and then I took the step to wear it. Yes that is something I really wanted purely for myself so I had really told my husband 'look if I want to marry you I intend to wear a burqa or niqab, do you agree?' My husband said at first 'yes that is your choice if you want that, in fact you choose it yourself'. But elhamdulillah he supported me a little bit. (interview 12)

Most women report that their husbands supported them in their choice to wear the face veil. For some women, the idea that this would please their husbands very much seems to have played a role in their decision making, without there being an actual request on his part.

I got married, we were first married in the Islamic way, that is to say I lived with my parents, while my husband lived also in the house of his parents, and it was something my husband really held very dear. While at the time, it did not interest me at all, and I did not see myself at all wearing the veil. So my husband respected my choice. And step by step in our spiritual advancement together, I started to think about it and to really think about it very very strongly, and so, even before I lived with my husband, the month of Ramadan, or a few days like that, just like that, to try it, I put it on. And I really felt good with it. First it was at the exit of mosques, from time to time, or when I went to a conference, so it really started like that, little by little. And I really felt a very great well-being. My husband never wanted to pressure me, for him it was something that he held dearly, that he loved a lot, but [...] the wife in the wearing of the face veil has to feel really very well in what she does so it is not something ...

[...] And so, when we started living together, I presented the matter a little bit as a surprise. The first time we went out together, I was ready, prepared to go out, and, arriving at the ground floor, I took out my sitar and I put it on. So my husband was pleased and I was also very pleased (interview 19)

Even if they had not sent such signals, some husbands were happy with their wives' decision:

My husband was surprised, but he said 'if you wear that, you can do that if you want it yourself, but don't think you have to do it for me. If you want that, it is a nice extra, but don't think it is mandatory'. (interview 14)

Some other husbands seemed to consider the matter as something that did not concern them very much.

It was not that he was in favor and it was no that he was against it either; it had to stay my choice in fact. So he accepted and that's it. And afterwards he also accepted that I took it off. (interview 27)

And we talked about all and nothing and once we happened to talk about that. And I told him 'I would like to wear it one day, why not'. And so he was surprised but nothing more. (interview 1)

Several women report that their husbands initially opposed the idea yet they managed to persuade them.

Well you see I got married at 19. So when I wore it, my husband was not too much in favor that I wear it, but I explained him. I told him, you see, you took me with the niqab and so it's OK. And I even showed him some books, so he read them, he understood why I wore it, and afterwards he took it well. (interview 8)

In the beginning, my husband was not much in favor. Because ... I would say he was a little bit less into practice at that time. I think it is more at that level. Then in the end he let me do what I wanted. At first he really did not want it. In the end he let me in peace (interview 25)

In some cases, the reason behind his attitude appears to be that he is worried about the hardship life with a face veil would cause to his wife, in others the reason seems to be related to his own interests: in one case a woman who had abandoned the veil wanted to wear it again, but did not do so because her Algerian husband feared that he would be considered a terrorist if his wife wore a face veil.

3.5. Family

Some interviewees report supportive reactions on the side of their parents and in-laws.

Yes in my family they are very much practicing. [...] My sister in law she's the wife of my brother here in Belgium. She is a Belgian convert. She also wears the niqab until today. And she also did it in Mecca, they encouraged me. [...] And even with the mother in law, the mom of my husband, they accepted that, the family of my husband as it is a Belgian family and we explained her and all, they accept that with pleasure. Yes I go shopping with her and she was pleased. (interview 2)

Yet most interviewees experienced negative reactions from their close family to their decision to wear a face veil. Three interviewees state that their family never knew that they used to wear a face veil.

For my family that was very difficult for them, they really had a hard time accepting it because they took it as a breach with society, with the evolution of women. (interview 25)

My mother did not know the niqab too much and thinking at first that it was my husband who imposed it on me, she was very scared in the sense that she wondered why this change [...]. She was a little bit surprised (sighs) because for her... well she thought it would close the doors for many things for me and I would not be able to enjoy social life (interview 1)

Even my in-laws, though Muslims, in the beginning they did not understand, honestly they have not... [...] Now vis-à-vis my family, they never knew. Already the headscarf was a bit of a problem, they have not always understood and they still do not understand. (interview 27)

In some cases, however, the negative relationship with family members preceded the decision to wear the face veil and was based on their religious lifestyle in general.

3.6. To conclude

Overall, in the women's narration of how they started to wear the face veil, their agency appears as a strong and determining factor.

Several women show a remarkable degree of individualism and single-mindedness.

So there, I had to impose myself. I am the way I am, they have to accept me with it or else they do not accept me at all (interview 9)

If I now want to start wearing the niqab, that is really something I want for myself. For me. (interview 11)

That was something that had to be with me and I added it. So now I am complete. (interview 12)

This should not come as a surprise. While for some women the anticipation of a positive reaction from their (prospective) husband is one of the key motives for their decision, all women who take the decision to wear a face veil in Belgium know that they are likely to encounter negative reactions from

their loved ones and/or the broader public. This context may be expected to lead to a certain auto-selection among potential wearers.

4. Daily life

4.1. How it feels

The interviewees state that in itself, wearing the face veil engenders positive feelings: satisfaction, joy, happiness, and pride. There are also frequent mentions of feelings of protection, safety and freedom, in particular in connection with the avoidance of unwanted male attention. Finally, women mention feelings of inner peace and spirituality.

Tranquility, peace, as if I am reborn (interview 17)

I feel free like the air (interview 5)

That I am very proud that I am one of the women who want to wear a niqab. (interview 12)

I felt something really strong... an interior joy [...] I really always had a smile deep inside, given that it is an action for God. So I think that... Allah has lifted my faith at that moment thanks to this niqab, and I was really happy, so I went out like that in the street, I had no fear whatsoever, no anxiety. (interview 18)

There is a surprising thing, because I did not put it on for that reason at all, but once you put [...] the face veil over your eyes, you have the impression of being alone with God in the street. It is a sensation I was not expecting [...] I completely forgot I was outside. There were comments, that is true, but I was alone with God, I did hDihir all the time, invocations, I called to God, I recited the names of God, [...] you don't pay attention to the things of life, the 'dunya', it passes completely over your head. (interview 3)

4.2. Social Interaction

Some women indicate that their choice to wear the niqab implied a choice to withdraw from a number of activities. This appears to be part of a choice for a more rigorous Islamic lifestyle overall.

At the same time for myself in my faith, I feel that there are a lot of things I move away from when I wear that. [...] I don't listen to songs anymore, I avoided mixed company and that added a lot for me. And until today, even when I took it off, I stayed in my habits that the niqab left me. A lot of positive things it left me and I am pleased with that. (interview 2)

Thinking about it, I did not experience wearing this veil as something natural. That is to say, I organized my life in function of that wearing of the niqab, and so that face veil created barriers to all activities I had before. [...] Because I considered that a woman who wears the

face veil could not just go to a curio market... from time to time, I liked to go bargain hunting a little. Well it was... I thought it was not possible. (interview 19)

Yet many state that they live a normal life, with some women saying that they would live a less social life if they could not wear the face veil, because they would not feel at ease in a number of circumstances.

Also for contact outside, I saw it as easier to wear my niqab. If I did not wear the niqab I would have found it difficult to go out and address the teacher, doctor, cashier or others. (interview 7)

When you wear the niqab you have more freedom. Going out more, bringing the children to school more often. (interview 17)

However, many women also report avoiding certain activities outside the house or avoiding as much as possible to go out on their own, because of fear for aggressive reactions of others, or of confrontation with the police (cf. infra).

Two of the interviewees had a job while they were wearing the face veil. They took off the veil at work. A few others were involved in voluntary work within their communities: lectures and support to Muslim women, and childcare.

Yet overall, the types of social activities the interviewees mention, mostly relate to their roles of mothers and housewives: accompanying the children to and from school, taking the children to the park, shopping and errands, talking to neighbors, going to the market, going to the post office or other administrative offices, going to the hospital... Several women mention the use of public transport, driving a car, day trips and foreign travel.

I am outside a lot because I have activities outside. I take the kids to their diverse activities they have in the week, they have several. (interview 1)

So we took a week in the Ardennes, we went to France, we went everywhere, I mean to say we were never embarrassed to go where we wanted and I wore my face veil. (interview 24)

I took the bus, I went to the union - I am the one who does all the paperwork- to the mutuality, the daughter I have, who is disabled [...]I was at the doctor's all the time; I took the bus, I took the taxi ...(interview 6)

I buy and I act like everyone. It does not hinder me to do anything. I mean to say, If I want to go shopping, to take my children to an amusement park – well it is true, there one is the little black animal, the little attraction of everybody, but for me that does not hinder me to do anything.(interview 9)

Yes, some people were laughing then, 'hey a woman in niqab on a motorcycle', but I do not think it stops you, the other people in fact stop you from doing certain things, but not yourself, ... so I think you can integrate completely in society and you can do everything when you wear that (interview 14)

At the time I lived in a neighborhood of old people [...] And these people recognized me without any problem and they acted toward me as if they saw whoever else in the street [...] We were good neighbors, and I remember that when we moved, the old people were even sad because they told us: 'Oh, we knew you so well and we knew that we could count on you, that we could ask you something'. There was even an old lady, who lived upstairs where I lived, and whose children did not visit her. And she told me, 'it is so good of you, that you come and visit the elderly', because I visited her from time to time with my children. So it does not stand in the way of anything at all. It is enough to want to accept the difference and to understand that behind that face veil, there is a person who is completely normal. (interview 25)

4.3. Communication

Several interviewees expressed a self-image as very open or sociable persons. Many women state that from their perspective, communication is perfectly possible.

Look at YouTube: the sisters cozily together. Why is social contact less? It is not that you no longer have a mouth because you wear that. (interview 16)

We live together, so we should not close ourselves. The woman who wears the niqab, she should not close herself and the fact that she goes out in the street, well, she does not close, she goes out in the street so she goes into the world, so go and talk to her (interview 1)

As I am so in the habit of wearing it, I do not especially feel the fact that I have it on, so I talk to a person as I would without it. So when I am in a shop, when I need anything, I go and ask it, I mean to say, in fact I don't feel that I have it on. I have the habit so for me, it is not a barrier at all in fact. (interview 4)

Me, as I told you, I talk to everybody, everybody sees me laugh; they answer me in the same tone if they want. When they don't want, that's another matter. (interview 9)

But my voice they can still hear, does it matter whether it is behind a veil or a wall [...].I am very social and here, the environment where I live, everybody knows me. I talk to them with the niqab and I am very social with the people, even with non-Muslims and with the Jews. I can interact with everybody, you can hear me, it is only my face that is covered. But we can still have a good contact and get along well. (interview 12)

It does not change the content of your conversation with a person, it's like when you are on the telephone. They say you are not recognizable, but you're not recognizable on the phone either. (former face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)

Yet several interviewees also indicated that there appears to be a communication barrier on the side of others. Some women show understanding for this reaction.

As soon as you go out in the street, well, you expect to have contact with people. It is them who close the doors (interview 2)

It's true that it is us who have to go to the others, that is true [...] It is us who have to take the step; it is true that the people don't make the effort to come to us. (interview 7)

Yes, I think also, now, thinking back, I think there is actually an image - closed, sectarian-when covering completely the face, because the people in general... Well, when you smile to the people, they immediately have more sympathy and all that. And there, I could be smiling, but they did not see me, it was a bit bizarre, you know, I mean I think I must have transmitted an image a bit closed. (interview 10)

And I think that the human being... the fact of not seeing the person, it is something scary, I can understand. [...] In fact it limits from the other side of the barrier, but not from us. (interview 18)

For me there were reactions that I felt as if I did not exist. [...] So as soon as I was with him [her husband EB] it was to him they talked in fact, I did not exist anymore, I was an Afghan woman ... I certainly did not speak French. (interview 19)

The face veil, I would say, creates this... [...] visual barrier at the level of the people, so one wants to say to the people, that we stay human beings behind that piece of cloth. We can stay equally charming, polite, cool, we understand, we can make jokes, no problem. And you come to, I remember, to make big smiles under my niqab so that my eyes would smile, so that the person in front of me would see that in the end I was not a monster, or that I was a human being. I am a person behind it [...] I made a social effort yes, I mean often I did. Often I squeezed my eyes really tight so that they would see that I was laughing. (interview 24)

Several women relate stories of situations in which people addressed an accompanying man, rather than talking to them. They express frustration at being ignored .

I remember being in the emergency wing with my small baby, and that the doctor at the time talked only to my husband. Absolutely only to him, and despite that she addressed himself only to him, It was me who knew everything concerning my child, his state, his fever, and so it was me who answered, but despite that, when she talked, she talked only to my husband. (interview 19)

K: At the airport, when you go to customs, the customs officer says 'can I see your wife?' So he says 'Well, ask her, I am not the one you should ask'. And that all the time, all the time. And when they talked to me, they looked at him, because they didn't see me- They saw my eyes but they didn't see me. So it was all the time 'Could we say..'. 'But talk to her, she speaks better French than I do, talk to her'.

*N: Me too one day with my brother, a policeman came to my brother: 'you know, sir, there is a law that says that the lady cannot walk around like that' and all that. My brother is a lot younger than I am, he is 9 years younger, I changed his diapers, so he looks at me [...] 'But talk to her'. And I tell him 'why don't you talk to me?'
(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)*

Some interviewees have experienced that they engender a sense of fear in some other people. They link this to the negative image of the face veil that is projected by the media. Several women state that this fear disappears when they can establish contact.

I understand completely that people are scared [...] I understand completely, it is normal, it is covered, it is hidden, you don't know what is underneath. At first sight, it's shocking [...] yes I understand because this is what they have been shown in the media. (interview 5)

In the shops I have not often come across difficulties with the cashiers or similar things, I just had once with a client... she jumped when she saw me... And to relax the atmosphere a bit, I told this lady, 'please excuse me, I did not want to frighten you'. She tells me: 'o, you are kind', in fact [...] it is sufficient to have good behavior to show to others that our difference is not an obstacle for a relationship. (interview 26)

C: Sometimes children are a bit scared because they don't know, they have never seen etcetera, so I go to the mother, and say 'listen, Madam, do you think it might reassure your child to see that underneath I am a normal woman?' [...] So I go to the child, I lift my niqab and I say 'you see, I am like your mum'

N: I do the same thing

[...]

C: Then the parents thank us because they see that in the end [...] we want to live in the society.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

A few women have the habit of lowering their veil in some circumstances to facilitate face to face communication.

At the municipality I take it off of course, or at the post office [...] I unveiled my face because, well, I need to be recognized of course, I think it is self evident to go to present oneself to the municipality or what. (interview 10)

I know to hide my eyes when I need to hide them and when I want to show my eyes, when I am in front of a person where I can talk to her, and that I estimate that it is the moment to lift it a little bit, so that they see my look, I do it [...] When I am in an office and there are only women, no worry, I take it off automatically, ... so when I arrive in a public office where there are men, well I still try, toward the lady who is in front of me, to show my look, because well, if you smile or you react with the eyes, well, she can see that I have understood or that I have smiled at her or that I have answered her smile (interview 5)

4.4. *Stories of Positive Interactions*

Many women report positive contacts with anonymous other people. Sometimes these are simply stories of being treated like any other person.

In particular in the school, with the teachers or even the directors, well one day I arrived with a pie in my hand, I said good morning to the entire pedagogical team ... The director looked completely normal, he was in front of me, I was in niqab, and I really did not see that I disturbed them, for him it was a person like any other in front of him. (interview 7)

Yes yes, that still exists. It's true, when I am with the little one in his buggy and someone holds the door for me, or someone plays with him, small things like that, yes. [...] Sometimes they look at me but when I start a discussion for example in a waiting room, well, they see in the end that I am not the monster they thought. (interview 9)

Making claims to specific arrangements for the accommodation of their face veil is far from the women's minds. Yet some interviewees experienced such accommodation in some contexts, which made them very happy.

When I went to my municipality to make my identity card or whatever, they told me simply to stand a bit on the left where there was [...] a small dead corner [...] and to identify. (interview 4)

Once at the forum, we were in an office where there were several offices, and I had to come back another time, and when I come back the next time, I find an office for me alone, they had prepared an office only for me. And then I explained to the lady, I told her she need not have done that. She told me 'no, I prefer to be with you like that, so you can take of your niqab'. And I thanked her for that gesture, I was really pleased. (interview 8)

Also, several women told stories of how a conversation with an initially suspicious stranger turned into a positive exchange, an actual encounter.

I met people in a supermarket [...] who told me: madam, we don't know why you wear that, why you cover entirely. I came closer to a gentleman, I explain him what the religion says. It is not mandatory mandatory but if it you do it by yourself... He told me 'maybe it is your husband who forced you'. 'You see, I do my shopping all alone, and I drive all alone, there is nobody with me'. And he was satisfied. I explained Islam to him a little bit, I explained him a little why and all... [...] You can arrive at a point where you will be satisfied. (interview 2)

Last week when I was in the hospital, the wife of the imam here, she wears it. [...] It lead to a discussion and in the end they ended up in each other's arms, it was a Christian and a Muslim. [...] Immediately it was "my poor lady" [...] And she immediately: "why poor?" [...] And she says: "Why does your husband oblige you to wear that?" "But my husband does not oblige me! It is me who obliged my husband to accept that I wear it." [...] Then the other she took her

hands, the nurse, saying: "well if it is your own wish, well, it is magnificent". And she had tears running; she took her in her arms. (interview 3)

Once even I was near a shop and there is a man who comes really close to me and says 'I really want to take off your niqab'. And I say to him: yes, and why? He: 'ah, madam, do you talk?' 'yes of course I talk'. 'say your husband passes here now and sees you talking to me?' I tell him, 'but there is no problem, I have my mobile phone in my pocket, if you want I can even call him'. He says, 'that is great, I never knew that a veiled woman could talk to a man and that she could defend herself'. I say, 'I can defend myself, I can talk, I can even explain to you'. By the way, the conversation lasted more than half an hour and in the end he tells me, 'it is one of my best days'. (interview 8)

A few women show a sense of humor in their interactions with other people who show their discomfort.

Yes, it happened to me (that she frightened people, EB), but I used to make it into a joke. I said 'don't worry, I don't bite, I never swallowed little kids all raw', in fact they were persons with kids [...] Well, the children, with them you can quickly de-dramatize, because there are masks, there is carnival [...] With children sometimes in the subway, I lifted 'kikoo, kikoo' (laughs) (interview 3)

Sometimes I pass in front of a person or a small group that stops and looks at me, and arriving in front of them: 'o, good morning everybody' (interview 9)

4.5. Stories of Aggression and Discrimination

Yet one of the most striking findings of this study are the numerous reports of aggression the women confront from anonymous people in shops and public places. Most of this is verbal aggression with occasional physical aggression. For many women, these were not isolated incidents, but a fact of daily life, engendering a strong sense of insecurity.

I felt aggressed all the time, as soon as I went outside [...] people making signs of throat cutting or a rifle, things like that. (interview 10)

When I am alone I never feel safe, because I am called 'Al Qaeda' or 'wife of Osama Bin Laden', or things like that or threats... Really racist remarks you get [...] In any case you don't feel comfortable, because they say also really ugly expressions. [...] Like 'goat, go back to your country', or 'what's that, people running around in curtains'. (interview 12)

There are nasty ones. There are some when I pass like that and they me, they do not even talk to me, they spit. Yes with the niqab. They see me like that and they say 'ooooiiiihhhh' and they spit in front of me (interview 2)

Some incidents in particular made a deep impression on the interviewees, because of a specific sense

of injustice, because of their intensity, or because of the presence of their children. Several interviewees relate that they defended themselves against these aggressions. Sometimes a certain pride in their reaction appears to be the reason for remembering a particular incident.

In a Delhaize, a woman threw a box at me, saying 'go back to your country'. [...] Yes, a big one. [...] There was something in it and she threw it at me and said 'you can't walk here like that' (current face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)

There are specific cases like the time when I was aggressed by a rather big man... - I am not very tall, I measure less than one meter sixty- who did not hesitate to come and aggress me while I was with my children, [...] in fact I passed with my children, they came from their sport activity, I went to fetch them, and I went to the stop of the bus I had to take, and that man was already at the bus stop. And he simply said, 'here we are in a democracy, you do not have the right to hide like that'. I did not answer; I went to take a seat, so I asked my children to sit down. And when I passed, [...] he came, he tore my veil away. So he tore with his two hands. I know that my children were crying, so he scared my children. [...] and there was a lady who defended me, and I defended myself [...] because he came back, to continue to aggress me. (interview 1)

Once, I recall until today, I had gone to the Colruyt with my daughter who was still a baby, in her buggy. And when I was in the Colruyt there was a man who followed me, he followed me until I arrived at the cashier. So there was a man on one side and a woman on the other and they were really nasty you know, I cried. [...] I really don't see why they aggressed me while I had done nothing to them, I was with my baby and it really hurt me you know, until today. (interview 27)

It was at a bus stop [...] well in fact I was on the telephone with the pediatrician of my daughter, so I was talking to the pediatrician and she was shouting at me. She was in front of me and she shouted 'what is that?' And I had to hang up on the conversation with the doctor. And I say 'Is it me you are talking to?' and she said 'yes', and I said 'Is there a problem?', she said 'What is that what you wear?'. I said to her 'It's a veil', She told me 'you have to take it off; it is prohibited, what is that, it is submission'. I said 'listen'. 'No, we fought for so many years for women's freedom'. And I say to her 'it is really nice if you fought so many years for women's freedom, so now leave us the freedom to do what we want'. ' (laughing) 'if that is the goal, leave us that freedom to do what we want, whether I wear a veil or whether I wear a headscarf or whether I want to go out, I say, women who go out half naked where you see almost everything [...] I say, that is freedom for them, do you tell them anything?' But I tell her 'no, but we decided to cover, the opposite of those who want to undress, I tell her, that is also part of freedom.' She told me 'If you want to dress like that, you have to return home'. I tell her 'I am at home, I feel as much at home as you'. She told me 'no, I visited Jordan, I visited Egypt, the women there are obliged to do this'. Well, I told her, 'excuse me, we are neither in Jordan nor in Egypt, I tell her, we are free to do what we want to do, and I tell her, luckily'. Well she did not agree, she was not pleased. (interview 5)

Several women emphasize that they are particularly worried about the impact of such public incidents on their children, as well as that some aggressors address themselves directly to the children.

What has always been the most difficult thing for me, is when they managed to touch my children. I have 4 children and when I visit my mother, at her building there are these elderly Belgian ladies who, when I arrive, on purpose close the door [...] they block the elevator... you could film that, it's funny because they run like that... [...] But the problem started when she started to address my children; she told my daughter, it was the day of Eid [...] my daughter was dressed in traditional Moroccan dress. And she said to my daughter [...] 'why are you dressed like a monkey?'

(Brussels focus group discussion)

Some women reported that when they reacted to an instance of aggression, some of the bystanders seemed to treat them as the aggressors. This was the case for a woman who hit a man after the latter had torn off her niqab, as well as for a woman who turned around to talk back to an old man who had pushed and insulted her.

Even without the occurrence of incidents, some women report a feeling of unsafety, related to a tense atmosphere in their environment.

K: As soon as I was alone, it could be simply in a waiting room in a hospital, I felt aggressed...

S: ...oppressed.

H: Strangely enough you feel at the mercy of people in fact. Despite the fact that [...] we have a personality that is...

N: extrovert. Yes, you're open to others, sociable.

H: approaching people, no problem. And there, strangely, how one feels ...diminished.

S: You feel weakened in fact.

H: It's an unbearable feeling, really unbearable.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

Some women stated that they experienced more verbal aggression from women than from men. Several stated that they experienced aggressive reactions also from Muslims.

Yes I have had comments from women who wear a headscarf (interview 4)

They were two women who had immigrated, which I am not. It was a totally surrealist painting, when they told me in Arab 'we did not come from Morocco to see that here'. Well, go back to Morocco, I was born here, where do I go?

(woman with Moroccan roots during Brussels focus group discussion)

Many women report that they experience fewer or less serious aggressions when they are accompanied by their husbands than when they go about by themselves.

It is really cowardice for me, against a woman alone, who walks and does not harm anyone, well, I saw it was less when I was in the company of my husband (interview 19)

They really start to threaten that way. But when I am with my husband, they usually don't because I have a protector with me (interview 12)

It was often when I was alone. People are less scared to aggress a woman alone than one in company, simply (interview 10)

Several women experienced an increase in aggressive reactions. Some of them are talking about an increase since the 9/11 attacks, which they link to the association that is made in public opinion between Islam and terrorism. Others point to the introduction of local bans or to the national 'burqa ban' debate and its mediatisation as the time when aggressions started to increase. They think that the negative image of Islam in general and of the face veil in particular that is projected in the media seems to give people permission to react in an aggressive manner.

H: Then came 9/11.

K: Ah yes, that played a big role.

H: It really played a very big role [...] Suddenly everyone had legitimacy to do whatever they wanted toward us.

K: There was also the police rule.

H: Yes [...] that is when I started to wear it only part-time, not only because I was concerned about the police; it was more a feeling of insecurity in relation to the people. [...] I know myself and I am not big and strong enough to face the racism of the people.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

Moreover, it appears that many people now refer to the ban in their interventions vis-à-vis women who wear the face veil, acting as a kind of vigilance police.

People from the neighborhood in fact come and tell me it is prohibited. (interview 13)

For me, the concern with this law is that it has a double punishment [...] The first punishment is that it hinders us [...] to have a real active social life, to drive, to go out, to work... [...] And the second punishment is that all the citizens feel invested with a heroic mission [...] to make sure the law is respected.

(current face veil wearer during Brussels focus group discussion)

In addition to the stories of aggression, several interviewees had stories of discrimination on account of their wearing the face veil.

(talking about a curio market, EB) well they had a bit the right to send us away, to not sell to us, or to be simply nasty [...] Because you are really in front of private citizens who afford themselves [...] to criticize and with the pretext that they do not see your face, to not sell you their merchandise (interview 19)

But of course you come across racists who actually address you differently, for example sometimes in hospitals when you enter, they say no. Do you understand that? That you are not welcome, and the examination is not in the way they do for other people without a veil. Another way of examining, quick quick, he does not look at you, he keeps everything short and then lets you go. (interview 12)

K: simply at the reception in a hospital, when you present yourself there for a consultation...

H:... you will not be treated like anyone else

S: ...you need to be psychologically prepared

K: you're not treated; they don't even look at us. There are hospitals where we are not even served, even though we have an appointment [...] Such things are really difficult in daily life.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

I had enrolled my daughter in a school, she was 2,5 years old, so when I had the secretary on the phone, very nice, I had asked to visit the school, because you see I am a mom who is committed to the education of my children and I want to know in what establishment they go to school. 'No problem, we will arrange for a visit of the school'. So I arrive, the first day, I leave my child in the school, she enters the class, I go to the office of the director to find the person who is supposed to make me visit the school, 'ah, eh, Madam, but that will not be possible'; 'Can I know why?' 'You cannot come to fetch your child in that state' [...] I went to fetch her immediately and said 'no worry, my daughter will not come here'.

(Brussels focus group discussion)

Several women report that fear of aggressive reactions causes them to avoid certain activities and places.

There are trips that I say if I go there, there will be only Belgians, no no no, they will think I am bizarre [...] they will start again to wonder 'why does she wear that? Why is she like that? [...]if they asked them to me I can answer in a friendly way but they will be asked from afar; So I said, they will not understand, and I avoided many places.(interview 2)

Some women shifted to part-time wearing of the face veil for the same reason.

So before, I wore it everywhere, all the time, now sometimes. [...] In order to have a bit of a social life, to go out with the family, with my husband. Well it depends on the place, but at certain moments I take it off. [...]Because now it leads to quite a lot of aggression against me, a lot of reactions, and when my husband finds it hard to bear, sometimes he tells me to take it off because it becomes difficult for him, ...no it is more for me, to be more at ease, you know. (interview 4)

5. Abandoning the face veil

Among the women who abandoned the face veil (ten interviewees), most did so out of fear. Four women refer to fear of the aggressive reactions of people on the street, and two refer to fear of being found in violation of the ban.

*Gradually as the law was voted [later corrected in the sense that it was a local ban that was adopted, EB] I was arrested several times by the police, I had no life anymore, because my husband [...] worked a lot at the time, he left at 7 am and came home at 10 pm, I did not go out, I had no life, my children were at home all the time, to do my shopping I needed to wait until someone could drive me in a car, same thing to see a doctor, it was hell. [...] It was not feasible. It's either the unsafety vis-à-vis the outside world that totally lacks respect for us, or vis-à-vis the authorities, who have no respect either
(former face veil wearer during Brussels focus group discussion)*

*You feel like a criminal while you're just expressing your belief. I mean, you don't feel safe. And I needed to go to the hospital and things like that. I didn't feel safe to take public transport. And you get ugly glances and you hear abusive words. You hear things that I really could not bear.
(former face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)*

The others have individual reasons: the decision to take up a political commitment, splitting up with the men for whom they wore it (two women), and the feeling after a trial of a few months that it was not a suitable choice.

For all three interviewees who would like to start wearing the face veil and have experimented with it, the ban of the face veil is among the reasons why they did not take the step.

A few women report also a change in their interpretation of the religion— either as an additional factor leading toward their abandoning the face veil, or as a subsequent development.

Afterwards when I took it off, it's also because in deepening the matter of the veil and all that [...] I realized there are several opinions, that there were a lot of divergences and that some hadith for example described the moving of an eyebrow by one of the wives of the prophet, so I told myself 'well maybe she did not cover her face all the time'. Well it is more that, you know, I told myself in the end it was not an obligation (interview 10)

Well, as far as I am concerned, I tended a little bit to close up, so [...] I was very sad, very stubborn on certain things, on certain principles. Maybe [...] I should have worn it in a more open way, that is to say, to wear it with more cool, more fun. [...] Of course, that comes with the years [...] because of being confronted with certain situations. You have a tendency to put a little more water in your wine. [...] I think there is an understanding that happened gradually, that is to say you think you have understood everything in the beginning and in fact you realize that when you scratch a little, ... the religion is so vast, it is so rich that finally you know nothing. And when you go a lot further, you realize that in the end you are... maybe in an extreme. (interview 24)

After having given up the face veil, some women report feeling bad, missing their face covering.

Today if I do not wear it, it is because I am alone. I am alone with two children and unfortunately I have to assume the role of head of the family. And already to work or for my studies, I have to take off the veil. So it is not coherent, I cannot wear it today. But I have among my goals to wear it one day. Because that feeling I need to recover it. It was really... magnificent [...] Today I am sad not to wear it now. [...] I was elevated you know, I felt elevated among society, among the women, I felt a bit more (laughs). No but it's true, it's really something that... macha'allah I would like to relive at any time before I die inch'allah. (interview 18)

That would really be my dearest dream (to wear it again, EB). But I think, as I said, I don't know if it is within reach of all women. You really need a lot of character strength. You really need that to be able to live it well, to be able to be up to it, you need really a lot of strength. (interview 19)

I miss it and I don't miss it. I miss it in the sense that... you know, it was my personal choice and I simply would like to wear it. And I don't miss it because of the people and their nastiness (interview 27)

For those women who stopped wearing the face veil out of fear, generally the husband was first to suggest that she stop wearing it.

It was not so hard for me, except of course some days when I felt less strong but I was not afraid, it did not hinder me to go out. [...] The concern was rather my husband who found it difficult to cope with all that. (former face veil wearer during Brussels focus group discussion)

Only one woman reports that her husband objected to her taking off the face veil:

He did not want me to wear it, and when I wanted to take it off... but him, it is more with respect to the gaze of people. For him it is more... he had his little wife, well preserved that nobody really knew what she looked like, and then from one day the next, to tell himself that all his friends could say: that's my wife... (interview 25)

6. Gender views and patterns

Autonomy and Strength

The large majority of the interviewees come across as very autonomous women, who made a personal choice and go to great lengths to pursue it. Several women indicated that it takes a strong woman to wear a face veil in Belgium.

Well I can tell you that all the sisters I know who wear the niqab and those I knew in Brussels before, they were rather women who feel good about themselves. To the contrary, who have

a reply ready when they get a comment in the street, who will not be trampled upon (interview 3)

In contradiction to the idea that a Muslim woman who wears the face veil would be a submitted woman who has not much to say in the couple, who only obeys blindly what her husband tells her...to the contrary, I find that a woman who is completely veiled [...]for me it is a woman with strength, it is a woman who has an enormous self confidence. [...] You need it enormously, to be able to live the fact of wearing the face veil, to be able to live it well, to feel complete, to be up to the society in which you live (interview 19)

As their ambitious path is a religious one, these women value submission to God, yet reject submission to other human beings.

Personally when I decided to wear it, and when I read in my Quran, and I read my hadith, I say yes! I am submitted, but to Allah, so I would never be submitted to a human being. (interview 5)

For me, it is purely out of submission to God. Because I don't think I would be ready for such difficult efforts for another person than God. (interview 21)

Directly as well as indirectly, many women show annoyance at the fact that outsiders assume they are being suppressed or dominated by their husbands, and in particular that they are assumed to be forced to wear the face veil.

So even without the niqab, they talk always about submission to men. Women, when they pray, it is submission to men, when they wear the veil it is submission to men, if they don't work, it is submission to men. [...] They never say it is the woman's choice. So I think, I would really really like to change the mind of the people. (interview 18)

If you really want to create equality (of women EB) with men, you have to stop pointing them with the finger for everything they do. Come on, always thinking they do not think by themselves, that they are influenced by their husbands and that. At that level the mentality would have to change you know. (interview 10)

It's really really humiliating, and degrading for the personality of a Muslim girl – I know what I'm talking about – to hear say morning and evening 'it's the men who submit you, it's the men who oblige you, it's the men...' it needs to be said, there is a moment when it needs to stop. We are girls, we are born in Europe, we grew up, we went out, we lived, we have a critical mind, we can judge, we can... Why would we be more apt to be dominated by a man? (interview 23)

After my first interception by the police, I phoned an organization that defends the rights of persons, and they told me 'Listen, Madam, given that you are stuck, that you have been controlled etc., if you want, we can talk to your husband.' I told them: 'Why do you want to talk to my husband?' 'So that he would let you take off your veil' 'Excuse me? You want to talk

to my husband, but it is not him who wears the veil, and it is not him who tells me whether to wear it or not, I am the one you should talk to'
(Brussels focus group discussion)

In addition, several interviewees took offence with reactions suggesting that they were stupid or in need of enlightenment or education. Their own image of face veil wearers is very different and partly based on countries where women wearing a face veil work in important functions.

They think that those women who are veiled or wear a burqa that they are all stupid women. But that's not the case, the women who wear a burqa are all women who studied, are all women who have something.[...] Because for example if you go to Arab countries, there the women all wear a niqab, one is a doctor, one is a lawyer, one is that [...] In our faith knowledge and studies are also very important, and we insist on really studying (interview 12)

Behind a veil, there can be a teacher, behind a veil there can be a nurse, behind a veil there can be a doctor, behind a veil there is always a great personality. And that's it, you know, people don't look at that. (interview 27)

Role Patterns: Practice and Views

The large majority of interviewees are housewives. Yet what transpires in some of the interviews is that in a couple in which the wife wears a face veil, there is likely to be a relatively high burden on the husband with respect to domestic errands outside the house. This may be because the wife considers that she should limit interaction with men as much as possible, or because she wants to limit her journeys out of the home on account of the negative reactions of people or the risk of being stopped by the police. In addition, some women link a husband's sharing in household chores to Islamic piety.

N: If they are sincere, they are supposed to follow the message sent by the prophet Muhammed

S: and the assorted behavior

N: and he was at the service of his family; he took care of his own clothes, he did household chores, he swept the room...

Z: He helped his wives

(Brussels focus group discussion)

Talking about their own household as well as relating their views on relations within the couple, some women express emancipated views.

I don't have to ask for every step I take to my husband, is it allowed, is it not allowed. I think if you have a normal relationship with your husband [...] there is trust and if you say as a woman, 'I go there', that is logical and the same when the man says, 'I go somewhere'. It's not that you have to stay constantly together, but just that it is logical, you have your life together and you also still have your own friends, you also have your family and those things

(interview 14)

Like a man who after work would impose on his wife because she works outside the house, [...] to come back and work another shift at the house. So he comes back from work [...]for example he would put his feet on the table and take his newspaper, watch his soccer game while his wife starts again on a work day coming home, preparing supper, taking care of the household, taking care of the children, I think that there also at a certain moment, there is an imposition and there is also an injustice that is committed (interview 1)

*At my house, we are two to vacuum, two to prepare meals, two to bathe the children, two to change the diapers, two to do the shopping, two to babysit
(Brussels focus group discussion)*

*I don't believe in the traditional thing that the woman should take care of the household and man not. I'm against that. In traditional families that are not Islamic, at my home for example, it is like that. If my brother expects me to cook for him, to iron for him... no!
(current face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)*

For some interviewees, the life of a house wife is not their first choice, but rather something they have accepted as a result of their wish to wear the face veil. These women dream however of a society in which they would not have to choose between their professional ambitions and their veil.

I would have liked to (work, EB) but I was blocked you know, with the niqab, even with a headscarf it is hard to work in Belgium. It's even harder, let's say even impossible with a niqab you know [...] I would have liked to be something in relation to office management and all that. I would have liked to do that. (interview 20)

I think it is more them who are busy to close doors for us, for our future, you know, so it's not us who have chosen that [...] It's clear that I will not exercise the same profession that I wanted two years ago [...]I wanted to start a company in fact [...] It will not be as I wanted it. If it was not that, I would have liked to be an accountant. But, now [...] well, it will be religious studies. [...] Well, I don't see what else I could do, you know. [...] Studies with which I could keep my veil. (interview 21)

We would become a society like England. Where women teach, women are police officers, where women are heads of companies, or women - in niqab, no less, not in hijab, but in niqab - [...] are in society, are part of society. Here no, you have to choose. Either you wear the niqab and you stay at home, so, well, what's that? (interview 23)

In the past I also had the notion they have now here in Belgium: the woman who is veiled, is just a stupid house wife. [...] I went to Egypt for a year and then I met women with a burqa: she's a lawyer, she's a doctor... So I think by myself: actually what she wears does not determine anything.[...] And then I started to think, I also want to be like that I want to be who I am. But I also want to achieve something more.[...] As a woman I can do all that: I can

study, I can work, I can do the same things as any other woman or man. Exactly the same. (current face veil wearer during Antwerp focus group discussion)

Yet some other women – or occasionally even the same women at a different point in the conversation - express a commitment to traditional gendered role patterns in their discourse.

I never needed to work, elhamdulillah (interview 23)

My husband says 'you can work but please so that it can be combined with your family.'[...] but there are women who say 'I don't need to go out', I want a little husband who goes out working.' If they find satisfaction in that, what's their problem. If they don't want to work. (interview 16)

A woman stays a woman for me. A woman stays a woman, she makes the children, she bears them, it is she who is the mom, she is not dad, so I don't agree with the fact of saying 'a man should be equal to a woman' or that a woman should be equal to a man. I personally do not agree, I do not want to be equal to a man, I want to remain a woman, I don't want to do the work of a woman and a mother and do the work of a man on top of that, no I am not interested in that personally, no. I want to remain a complete woman. (interview 5)

Women's Rights and Feminism

None of the women expressed approval of male dominance. Several women point out that 'in Belgium' or 'these days', men cannot oblige their wives to do anything against their will, and that in case a husband would seriously try this, divorce is easily accessible.

You should not say 'o the poor woman, look at her, there is a pressure on her'. There is no pressure. The wife has an understanding with her husband. If she does not want to wear it, I guarantee you, she will not wear it, she will not wear it. Women here in Belgium are free. (interview 2)

Here in Belgium the women, even submitted between quotation marks to their husbands, they know that if they really do not agree, they will find a social service on the street corner. (interview 10)

We are in 2011. And I don't think that a woman would stay with her husband while she does not want to wear something while her husband makes her wear it. I really don't think so. No really not, you know. Because I know many women whose husband only starts talking a little, saying 'you should dress, you should wear a headscarf', just a headscarf and she already said 'no, attorney, I want a divorce'. (interview 11)

Several women also show an awareness of some the current struggles of the women's movement, such as the wage gap, the unequal division of domestic work and violence against women. They bring

these topics up while dismissing the idea that the ban on the face veil would serve to promote gender equality, stating that the Belgian government should have other priorities for gender equality.

Let's work for the women who really experience discrimination because they are women. So all those who suffer because they are beaten, and there are many, there are women who die because they are beaten by a partner[...] women are aggressed on the street simply because they are women, because it is the weak sex. (interview 1)

If they want to start talking about the equality of men and women, I think that (I'm talking about Europe, because I already read articles on that), they should start already by creating equality between women and men in salaries. Because a woman when she works on the same job as a man, she gets less than a man. (interview 5)

Moreover, some women bring up such issues as they place their own struggle in the context of the struggle for women's rights.

But discrimination against women has always existed. I mean to say, today we talk about Muslim women, but it has always existed. I think the first woman to become an attorney in Belgium, it was in 1922, that is not so long ago. (Brussels focus group discussion)

However, this does not necessarily imply that they align themselves with 'Western' views on women's rights. Several women take up the defense of Islamic views on gender equality. Some argue that Islamic views, when correctly understood, are not so far from 'western views',

I think, if it is 100 % Islam, then the woman is already free. It is just that, unfortunately, there is still a big mix between culture and Islam. And it is that culture that actually keeps the woman imprisoned. For example, as you mention forced marriage, or for example, the father decides that the daughter cannot continue her studies, those things. I mean only, that has nothing to do with Islam. [...] In the end, , in Islam, women have freedom, but it is because of cultural influence that it is now like this. (interview 14)

There are also women who are beaten, but Islam also forbids that women are beaten. (interview 27)

Others defend Islamic views that are rather different from contemporary 'western' views, such as the woman as a gem or a queen, and 'different but equal rights'.

I think why should a woman and a man be equal? A man is created of something completely different and a woman is completely something different. A woman has her rights and duties and a man has to have his rights and duties. (interview 12)

Actually what I hear a lot, regular modern people, I think they have a lot of problems with their husbands.[...] A lot of beating and stuff. The men are like nothing in the home, they don't help, they do nothing. But to be honest once I go the husband of a woman who wears the

niqab and the man really follows the true Islam ... [...] I know nothing will happen in that couple. I even think he treats his wife better than a queen, really better. That's what I really hear everywhere. (interview 11)

My father he took my mother to the hammam, then he went home, he cooked and then he went to pick her up. She was a treasure for him, my mother never went out to work and all that. (interview 6)

Moreover, many of these women oppose gender mixity. They express the view that - with or without the face veil, but specifically without it- the company of men is to be avoided as much as possible.

Even if we don't wear the niqab we cannot possibly come among men to talk, you understand? That is out of the question. (interview 11)

Without the veil I cannot go to a market place where many men are mixed, because for us it is not recommended for a woman to go there (interview 22)

It is to be noted that without specifically being asked, some women expressed disagreement with unequal gender practices in the Muslim community (cf. also quote supra from interview 14):

Women who marry young, who do not continue their studies, to whom they impose a lot of things they don't particularly like. [...]All that is completely cultural. I mean to say it is proper to Maghreb countries etcetera, to do that. It is a bit up to the women I would say to revolt, like in '68 the women revolted here, so I think it is a process that every country must do.(interview 25)

Yet some women also criticize 'western' gender views or practices.

They say that women in Islam have no value, but it is precisely in western society that women have no value. Why? If you see a woman exposed in all publicities, for example a car, an almost naked woman is put on it, I think why is an almost naked woman needed for a car? [...] I think in western society, in fact, women are just used to sell. Yes and then I wonder, [...]the West says that women have no value in Islam, but I think the opposite in the West. That women actually have no value because they are in fact used as sex objects and as publicity and they are literally mocked.[...] Here in Belgium women are also oppressed, they have to work, they have to raise children, it is like, it's all mandatory. (interview 14)

Many references were made to the revealing dress style of other women. Most of these were made in a tolerant, neutral way – 'they are allowed to uncover, but we are not allowed to cover'; 'we tolerate them, why can't they tolerate us.' Yet some women criticized revealing dress styles, with one woman stating that women should have more self-respect, one woman saying that there would be less adultery and 'bad disease' if women covered more, and another saying that men rape women because they dress this way.

Some women abhor a tendency in society to focus on looks and appearances, in particular when women are concerned. They say that it is an advantage of the niqab that in contacts with others, one is not judged on one's good looks.

N: I know that I will not be appreciated because I am pretty or disliked because I am not... [...]

[...]

S: I think it is a collateral benefit indeed, as you say, they will rather look to what you have to say instead

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

When asked how they related to 'feminism', the respondents distinguish between a type of feminism they like and a type they don't like.

It is as in their associations that pretend to work for women, [...] for example to force a veiled girl from her environment, for it is always in that sense. But if a veiled girl knocks at 'ni putes ni soumises' or at 'insoumise et dévoilée', or what have you, and tells them, 'I want to wear the veil, but my father won't let me... my father beats me, because he won't let me wear my veil.' Would they help that girl? Are they really feminists up to that point or does their feminism end where Islam begins? (interview 23)

S: In the name of feminism, some are against us; I think that is why there are more women than men who react against us in the street [...]

H: But excuse me, S, that is not real feminism [...]

S: Exactly, it is what I tell them: 'you fought for this, so that we could do what we want'

N: It's not real feminism

H: There are real feminist ladies

S: right, who support us [...]

H: who support us and say 'we fought so that you could have the choice to wear it or not'

B: ...know that you are supported

C: That is what being a feminist is about, it is giving women the freedom to choose, not imposing on them

(excerpt Brussels focus group discussion)

Several interviewees accuse the proponents of a face veil ban of hypocrisy when it comes to women's rights, as in their interpretation, the ban is an attack on their freedom as women.

Under the pretext of wanting to defend women, they attack them (interview 1)

But when you're going to say 'no she has to be free, we will deprive her of what she does', that's not freedom. That is, you want to get at her, you want to deprive her of her liberty. Let her free, let her do what she wants. (interview 2)

Well, I would like that they would defend women a bit more instead of fighting women. Because in essence, that's what's happening, [...] in fact it is a way of fighting Islam, they fight women, why, because they are weak (interview 18)

What I would like to say is that indeed these women fought for women's freedom but today it is the same struggle. (interview 19)

7. Confrontation with the police

The majority of women report having been stopped one or several times by the police. In the majority of cases this was for the purpose of identification after which they were let go or received a warning. Six of these women had been fined, four of these were fined several times. Most of these appear to be applications of local bans, as they took place before the entry into force of the legal ban. Several women who have not been stopped or fined, know other women who did. Several women report that the police regularly did not interfere when they saw them walk veiled on the street, despite the existence of a local ban.

Never had a problem. I already went to the police office for information, I never had problems and now that's a few years ago. (interview 1)

Where I live, there are quite a number of police who often pass that way, so I say to myself, maybe they have other things to do. (interview 4)

So the police, I see them often, sometimes they pass me, they say nothing most of the time, but three times they stopped. (interview 20)

Some women report that the police intercepted them because they had been alerted by citizens. Most women who had a confrontation with the police over their face veil, state that the police treated them correctly. Some mentioned specifically that the police were polite or that they explained why they intervened. In several cases, they relate that the police was uncomfortable with the situation or apologized to them.

*He came to me and said 'I'm sorry, I would have preferred not to do it, but my boss gave me the order'
(Brussels focus group discussion)*

Yet some women report that the police insulted or ridiculed them.

I already had police officers insulting me when they passed in a car, so that did shock me a little bit, because they are supposed to represent the law [...] so they said to me: 'is it carnival, cow ('connasse')?'.(interview 10)

When we tried to discuss with the policemen, they degraded us, it was really degrading, humiliation, [...] we were really treated like a sub-class, as if we were persons [...] who did not have any capacity of reflection and choice [...]. And once I had been identified, [...]they started to mock me. [...] I had my son with a small puppet in his hand, they said, 'ah well, if it is an obligation for you, why is that puppet of your son not wearing a face veil too?' (interview25)

At the same time, some other women report reacting in an assertive manner, engaging in discussion with the police.

And I tell him 'no, there is no ban'. 'But yes yes yes, there is a ban, in all of Europe it is prohibited'. Apparently the guy did not know his file too well. I told him 'no, listen, it is not banned in all of Europe'. And I started in fact [...] to discuss a bit with him. [...] He said 'no, but in any case, we are in Belgium, and Belgium forbids it'. I say 'OK, do you want to identify me?' he says 'no, I don't want to identify you, I want you to take off that veil'. I say 'in fact it is just for fun or what?'. He said 'you call it what you want, I ask you to take off that veil'. [...] I did it, of course. I took off my veil. I say: 'but you know that I will put it back on at the corner of the street'. He says: 'well, if I see you again at the corner of the street, I'll stop you again'. I said 'OK, fair enough' (laughs).(interview 23)

Among the interviewees, there is a general willingness to identify themselves to the police or other authorities by lowering their veil. Many state explicitly that they are willing to identify to a male official as well as a female. Only a small minority is prepared to unveil only for a female official.

Police interceptions have an impact on many interviewees. Two women say they cried. Some interviewees declared that they minded the public embarrassment most of all: the fact of being seen to be intercepted by the police. Several women report experiencing a police confrontation as traumatizing.

Yes, it was on the street, and certainly when everybody was looking, I minded that very much [...] yes it was as if I had just come out of a shop and the people would think I had stolen something or something like that (interview 17)

Really diminished. Really an injustice. I really took it as an injustice, and, diminished in my capacity of choice and... as human being, yes. (interview 25)

Several strategies appear to be adopted for avoiding such confrontations: some play hide and seek with the police, some avoid going out as much as possible, others decided to only go out by car. One woman says that a shop owner has offered refuge to veiled women from the police. And one woman said that she has replaced the face veil with a hygienic face mask after the local police told her on the phone that they do not react against such masks.

Since that happened that day, so 21 days ago, I have not been out on foot. Only by car with my husband. (interview 17)

And it is from that moment that the life of those women wearing the face veil was disturbed because they were so frightened [...] of being arrested, they were watching every movement, we did not go out to the park anymore, we did not go out shopping. When I needed to go anywhere, it was mandatorily by car. I had a dentist at 200 meters from my home, I had a friend who came from Laken to pick me up by car to drive me to the dentist who was at 200 meters ...(interview 25)

They have even been called by a shop manager who said 'if there is police who enters, when you are followed etc., come into the shop and knock at the office, you can go in there'. Because they know that these women are not dangerous, they know them and they recognize them. (interview 3)

A: So I call them back and I say 'what about a mask?' Can someone wear a mask? He says 'we have no problem with a mask'. So I thought by myself, when I need to go to the city administration or something like that, I'll wear a mask.

[...]

EB: and have you gone out yet with such a mask?

A: yes, very often [...] I went to the mutuality, and when I had to arrange papers at the (name of city administration building); and to the hospital, when I go for my pregnancy, I wear it always.

(excerpt from Antwerp focus group discussion)

Yet overall, the aggressions by ordinary people appear to be more traumatizing than police confrontations.

I prefer being arrested by the police over the people staring to spit and insult me (interview 2)

8. Reactions to the legal ban

The interviewees were better informed about local bans than about the legal ban. Most had heard about the local bans via other people, or via the media or internet. Two women took the initiative to obtain information: one on the internet, the other by addressing the local authorities. Most women did not seem to be following this issue closely in the Belgian media, having vague and sometimes erroneous notions both about how far the legal procedure was advanced, and about the substance of the ban.

The feelings shown by interviewees about the ban include indignation, frustration, humiliation, and worries about how to live their lives from now on. Talking about the reasons behind the ban, many state that they do not understand the arguments, or that these are ridiculous. Strong statements abound.

I think that voting laws like that, it is as if they reduced them to less than nothing in fact, you see what I mean, they want to set for us how to live, how to behave, how to dress, but I'm sorry, in fact, there is no more liberty (interview 26)

They are really [...] ruining our lives. (interview 8)

Their law imprisons women instead of liberating them(interview20)

It's just that they want to humiliate a person, no less, no more, that's all (interview 3)

The fact of wanting to ban the face veil is a form of crushing, of violation of human rights (interview 1)

Many interviewees express a feeling that Muslims or Islam are being targeted.

I think that it starts little by little, they don't want Islam here in Europe, and that's all. (interview 9)

I really think [...] that they are simply against Islam. [...] I really think it is more racism. I really call that racism. (interview 11)

For me it is simply islamophobia. (interview 19)

It makes no sense, I don't know, they are really against Islam, that's what I think. (interview 20)

Yet it does not seem that this has the result of alienating the women from Belgium society. Throughout their discourse, a sense of citizenship emerges, in which for instance they identify themselves as Belgian citizens, and Belgian politicians as 'our politicians'- notwithstanding several women expressing a wish for emigration toward a Muslim majority country.

Z: they talk to us a lot about respect and all that; I want to respect the law of the country in which I live, but also think we should be respected as individuals

N: as citizens

Z: yes, as a citizen

N: who is active in society, knowing you pay your taxes, you participate in society

Z: exactly

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

Many women implicitly express the idea that the criminal law should not deal with an issue like this, referring to the – in their view- harmless nature of the incriminated behaviour.

C: So when they ask you 'why were you arrested?', it is 'because I cover my face'. That is completely ridiculous. We did not aggress anyone...

N: We have become guilty persons

K: We are outlaws

N: outlaws, indeed, while.. I don't steal, I don't aggress people, I comply with my duties as a citizen [...]

H: It's frustrating [...] we are all born here, we always moved around freely, when from one day to the next, I saw myself (mimics looking around in fear) ...

N: Right, as if you are wanted by the law

H: [...] I really had the feeling that I was escaped from prison [...] watch out, watch out, a police car...

K: I had that feeling for a very long time

H: But it's not normal. In the end... we are Belgians you know. That's the most bizarre thing, that we are Belgians.

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

During both focus group discussions – which took place a few months after the end of the interviews, when the reality of the ban being in force had fully sunk in – participants expressed a real worry about ‘the next step’, fearing in particular that after the face veil, also the headscarf might be banned in public space.

C: So they attacked us on the niqab now, what will it be in a few years?

K: it will be the hijab

C And I can tell you that one day we will not be able to wear our headscarf, we will not be able to wear our jilbab, we will not be able to celebrate our festivities...

(excerpt from Brussels focus group discussion)

A prominent finding is the interviewees’ frustration that this political intervention in their lives took place without any knowledge of their lives and without consulting them or researching their situation. They specifically mention the politicians’ lack of knowledge about Islam, about the situation of the women concerned, and about types of veils.

I think they are ill- informed [...] They did not try to research or understand, I'm certain of that. In any case here, in our zone, there has been no dialogue or communication at all. So they are ill-informed and they follow the motion. [...] These are ideas that have been taken over up to arriving in parliament. There you have people who talk with others without making real studies, or how do you call that, surveys, nothing. (interview 7)

They don't know us or they don't want to know us simply.(interview 9)

Honestly, they say whatever [...]they know nothing at all (interview 27)

They have not asked our advice, [...] they have not asked our opinion, they have not asked the proposals we could make on this, they have – paf- forbidden us, there you go, it was classified like that (interview 5)

I think, instead of banning, to go find these people, these Muslim women there, and to see their lives, their activities, what they do. (interview 6)

I think it's a real pity [...] that in a democratic country they vote such a law, without taking the advice of the persons concerned. (interview 25)

Some interviewees try to get into the minds of the proponents of a ban and imagine that a compromise might have been found if only there could have been a dialogue.

If we need to be identified more than the norm, [...] if they need to give us a badge that we have been identified or a booklet with a stamp, well I don't know, something that might

maybe help the police to say, OK this person was already identified... no problem, we are ready for any dialogue, we are ready for every proposal (interview 5)

It was one of the solutions I had proposed, to change the color if black was shocking, wear more lively colors, because they say, all in black, we were being stigmatized with that color. That is to say it is not an obligation that it should be black. [...] So one of the proposals I also made is to be able to go out with someone identifiable if for example we need to be identifiable at every moment [...]. If I was beside my husband, at that time, there they know, it is the wife of that person. (interview 7)

Most interviewees also stated that the government should have other priorities than this ban, referring both to gender equality measures (cf. supra) and to the general political and economic crisis.

Most interviewees experience the ban as an attack on their freedom and autonomy (cf. supra). Many also find it discriminating.

The (anticipated) effects of the legal ban on the interviewees' behavior are similar to those of local bans: some women would go out less, or wear the veil less or differently. Two women state they are not (re)starting to wear the face veil because of the law. Three women mention emigration as an option.

Only a minority state they would legally challenge a fine. Two women are involved in judicial proceedings in that sense.

(Ghent, 1 June 2012)