

## **NSS policy statement on the burka/niqab**

The National Secular Society has serious concerns about the wearing of the burka (full veil with face covering) or niqab (face covering), relative to their symbolic role and the subjugation of women; their making an issue of female gender and sexuality; their potential to cover-up evidence of abuse; and their potential to hinder a woman's communicative abilities and integration within civil society.

These concerns notwithstanding, the NSS opposes any attempt to legally ban the burka or niqab. We do so on two grounds of principle: a woman's right to choose what she wears, i.e. her right to free expression; and her right to religious freedom.

An individual's right to express herself and to freely practise her religion constitute two of the fundamental principles upon which the NSS's ideal of secularism is based. We reject any legal interference with these principles, provided their realisation does not unjustifiably undermine the rights of others.

The NSS sees as unjust and paradoxical, any attempt to promote freedom for women by limiting their freedom to dress and practice their religion in the way that they choose. Forcing a woman not to wear a burka or niqab contravenes a woman's right to choose in the same way that forcing her to wear one

does; both cases represent an attempt to control the woman and dictate how she should express herself.

A law which prohibits the burka and niqab also punishes the very women society is seeking to liberate. The NSS takes the position that if a woman is being forced to wear the burka or niqab, the person forcing her to do so should be punished – not the victim of that enforcement.

The NSS is also concerned that a prohibition on the wearing of the burka and niqab would serve to further alienate women already on the margins of mainstream society. Furthermore, imposing a burka/niqab ban could exacerbate tensions between various communities in the UK and merely encourage some women who had not previously worn the burka or niqab to do so in protest or on principle.

The NSS condemns any view that rejects women as equal to men and abhors violence and harassment against women.

Nevertheless, we believe banning the burka and niqab on the grounds of its symbolic value is irreconcilable with the fundamental right to freedom of religion and the right to free expression – a right which includes the right to offend the sensibilities of others.

Instead, we urge the government to put greater focus on the creation of mechanisms designed to help women escape subjugation and domestic abuse, leave oppressive family structures without the fear of violent reprisals, as well as equip them with tools to better integrate within society and ensure their autonomy.

Whilst the NSS does not support a general ban on the wearing of the burka and niqab, religious freedom is not absolute and should be limited proportionally in response to legitimate security concerns. The state has every right to ensure that a woman removes her burka or niqab for security purposes where necessary. Thus, we would support any requirement to remove a full veil in places such as airports or for the purposes of identification.