

# Boris sparks row over burkas in Britain

Should the burka be banned? Boris Johnson has refused to apologise over incendiary remarks he made about burkas. Meanwhile, Denmark has become the latest nation to outlaw the face covering.



Take cover: "If you tell me that the burka is oppressive, then I am with you," Johnson wrote.

The backlash against Boris Johnson rumbles on following disparaging remarks he made about Muslim women wearing **burkas**.

It all started on Monday when, in a column for *The Daily Telegraph*, he wrote that women wearing veils "look like letter boxes", and compared them to "bank robbers".

Condemnation was swift, with Prime Minister Theresa May urging him to apologise, saying the remarks "clearly caused offence".

**Baroness Warsi** went further, accusing Johnson of "**dog-whistle**" Islamophobia, and claimed that his comments help "to create an environment in which hate crime is more likely."

Some came to his defence, however, with supporters arguing that Johnson's column actually defended a woman's right to wear the burka.

In the **piece**, Johnson argues against the ban on face coverings recently imposed in **Denmark** on the grounds that it could inflame cultural tensions and "risk a general crackdown on any public symbols of religious affiliation".

Whatever the outcome of this latest political row, burkas and veils will remain a highly controversial symbol in Western culture and politics.

Denmark is just the latest of 13 countries to impose full or partial bans on the burka, including Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands. France was the first European nation to outlaw it in 2010.

Bans on face coverings often make headlines, but the number of people they target is small. Before the France ban was imposed, authorities calculated that around **1,900** Muslim women wore face coverings in 2011 – that is 0.04% of the country's Muslim population, and less than 0.003% of the general population.

Comparative figures are unavailable for the UK. Nonetheless, public opinion often favours imposing similar legislation in Britain. A 2016 YouGov poll found that 57% of respondents supported banning the burka, with just 27% opposed.

Should the burka be banned?

## Cover-up

Without doubt, some argue. The garment itself is a symbol of **patriarchal** oppression that has no place in liberal society. Furthermore, veils prevent their wearers from integrating into society; can provoke unease and suspicion among others; and can even be used to cover up domestic abuse. What is more, for most Muslims the burka is not a religious obligation, but a fringe practice arising from **fundamentalist** beliefs that should not be tolerated.

A ban would be totally hypocritical, others respond. In a liberal society women should be allowed to choose what they wear, burka or not. And nobody should be forced to deny part of their religious culture and expression. Furthermore, rather than helping integration, a ban would only stoke cultural tensions, encouraging suspicion of Muslims and Islamophobia.



## Q: What do we know?

A: The Koran instructs both men and women to dress "modestly". However, there is some debate among the Islamic community over what is an acceptable interpretation of this

instruction. There are several different head coverings that Muslim women wear, with a minority in Britain choosing to wear the burka or niqab.

## Q: What do we not know?

A: How many women in the UK wear full facial coverings. However, we do know that in the

2001 census, there were 748,000 women who gave their religion as Muslim, and that this had risen to 1.3 million by 2011 – an increase of 74%. While this means that a greater number of women could be wearing veils, we do not know if the proportion of Muslims wearing burkas has changed.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Should the burka be banned?
2. Should Boris Johnson be sacked for his remarks?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you have been asked to interview a woman who wears a burka or niqab. What three questions would you ask them and why?
2. Watch the second video in the Become An Expert section – it features a debate about whether Britain should ban the burka. Summarise each of the speaker's key arguments into bullet points. In your opinion, which speaker makes the most convincing points? How do they use language in an effective way?

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*"Niqabs make us appear more alien, more dangerous and suspicious."*  
Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## WORD WATCH

**Burkas** – A full body cover which obscures the entire face, with a mesh panel in front of the eyes. The niqab is similar in that it leaves a slit for the eyes, but does not cover the whole body. To find out more about Islamic dress see the [BBC](#) link in Become An Expert.

**Baroness Warsi** – Ex-chair of the Conservative party, and the first Muslim woman to attend Cabinet.

**Dog-whistle** – A subtle political message which is intended for a particular demographic group – in this case some argue Johnson's comments are designed to appeal to Britain's far-right.

**Piece** – Read it for yourself by following the link in Become An Expert.

**Denmark** – One woman has already been fined under the new law, after a passer-by attempted to pull off her veil.

**1,900** –

Some argue that even this low figure is inflated. When French authorities first attempted to collect the data, they only found 367 women.

**Patriarchal** – Relating to a system or society which is dominated by men.

**Fundamentalist** – For more on this point, see [The Spectator](#) link in Become An Expert.

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