

France: Correspondence with the International Olympic Committee concerning the hijab bans in French sports

On 24 May 2024, in advance of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, several human rights organisations wrote to the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ask the IOC to publicly call on sporting authorities in France to overturn all bans on athletes wearing the hijab in French sport. The IOC responded on 18 June 2024. This document contains the exchange of correspondence.

Nyon, Switzerland
May 24, 2024

Dr. Thomas Bach

President
International Olympic
Committee

Château de Vidy
1007 Lausanne
Switzerland

Re: Overturn all bans on athletes wearing the hijab in France before the 2024 Paris Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games

Dear President Bach,

In advance of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, the undersigned organisations are writing to ask the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to publicly call on sporting authorities in France to overturn all bans on athletes wearing the hijab¹ in French sport, both at Paris 2024 and at all times and all levels of sport. The country's discrimination against women and girls wearing the hijab is particularly concerning given the IOC's celebration of Paris 2024 as [the first "Gender Equal Olympics"](#).

Women and girls in France who wear the hijab have been and are being prevented from playing multiple sports, including [football](#), [basketball](#), [judo](#), [boxing](#)², [volleyball](#) and [badminton](#) – even at youth and amateur levels. The hijab bans in sports have resulted in many Muslim athletes being discriminated against, invisibilised, excluded and humiliated, causing trauma and social isolation – some have left or are considering leaving the country to seek playing opportunities elsewhere.

The bans imposed by the French sports authorities are discriminatory and prevent Muslim athletes who decide to wear the hijab from exercising their [human right to play sport](#) without discrimination of any kind. The effect of these bans is that Muslim women and girls wearing the hijab will never be able to qualify for the Games, given that these bans preclude them from the necessary training and competition opportunities to even reach the Olympic level. Additionally, they heighten the context of systemic discrimination, Islamophobia and discrimination on the basis of religion that Muslim women and girl athletes are already subjected to before, during and after the Olympics and Paralympics.

France's hijab ban against Muslim women and girl athletes places the Olympic host country in clear breach of multiple obligations under

¹ In this letter, hijab refers to approved sports hijab, a completely safe outfit adapted to the sport, known in French as "couvre-chef sportif homologué".

² The regulations do not specifically refer to a ban, but the organisations are aware of prohibitions in practice because only clothing that is specified in the rules is allowed.



international human rights treaties to which it is party. The bans also fly in the face of the human rights requirements for host countries and the [IOC Strategic Framework on Human Rights](#), as well as being antithetical to the [Fundamental Principles of Olympism](#).

In September 2023, the [IOC stated publicly](#) that [restrictions placed on the Muslim French athletes](#) at the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games announced by the French Sports Minister in September 2023 will not apply to athletes from other nations in the Olympic Village. This position fails to challenge France's discriminatory ban and address an ongoing harmful practice impacting athletes wearing hijab.

We are also concerned that Basket Pour Toutes and other Muslim women and supporters are being denied opportunities to be heard about the impact of the bans by the French Federation of Basketball (FFBB) and other sports bodies. Global and national sporting authorities must engage with impacted people to ensure their policies do not exclude groups of women and girls from sport, are free from racism and gender discrimination and their freedom of religion or belief and their right to take part in cultural life are respected.

Therefore, we call on the IOC, as Leader of the Olympic Movement, use your considerable leverage in advance of Paris 2024 to publicly call on French sporting authorities to overturn all bans on athletes wearing the hijab in France – at all levels of sport. This important step would ensure the Olympics and Paralympics leave a true legacy towards gender equality in France by ensuring all women and girls can have their right to non-discrimination respected and protected, and their right to participate in sports guaranteed.

We also take this opportunity to make you aware that we intend to communicate publicly about the content of this letter at a later date. We remain available to provide any further information required. We can be contacted by email at andrea@sportandrightsalliance.org.

We appreciate your urgent attention to this important request and look forward to hearing from you on the actions that you will be taking with regard to the deeply concerning discriminatory ban on women and girl athletes from wearing the hijab in France.

Yours sincerely,

Basket Pour Toutes

Athlete Ally

The Sport & Rights Alliance

Amnesty International

The Army of Survivors

The Committee to Protect Journalists

Football Supporters Europe

Human Rights Watch

ILGA World (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association)

Transparency International Germany

World Players Association

Background

The IOC Charter's Fundamental Principle 4 of Olympism states that "[T]he practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have access to the practice of sport, without discrimination of any kind in respect of internationally recognised human rights within the remit of the Olympic Movement." Principle 6 of Olympism expressly provides that "the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Olympic Host Contracts have a [dedicated requirement](#) for hosts to "protect and respect human rights and ensure any violation of human rights is remedied in a manner consistent with international agreements, laws and regulations applicable in the Host Country and in a manner consistent with all internationally recognised human rights standards and principles, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), applicable in the Host Country". In addition, '[equality and non discrimination](#)' are one of the five focus areas of the IOC strategic framework on Human Rights. These requirements apply to the Olympic and Paralympic Games from 2024 onwards.

Prohibitions on the wearing of hijab in public spaces violate Muslim women's rights under [international human rights laws and standards](#), including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which France has ratified. France is also bound by international human rights law, specifically the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to counter gender-based stereotypes, which obliges France to take steps to end negative gender stereotypes relating to women and men, or to specific groups of women and promote the values of gender equality and nondiscrimination.

Further, as a State Party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, regarding Islamophobia, France is obliged to, "engage in no act or practice of racial discrimination against persons, groups of persons or institutions and to ensure that all public authorities and public institutions, national and local, shall act in conformity with this obligation", "not to sponsor, defend or support racial discrimination by any persons or organizations" and "take effective measures to review governmental, national and local policies, and to amend, rescind or nullify any laws and regulations which have the effect of creating or perpetuating racial discrimination wherever it exists."

Under international law, state neutrality and secularism are not legitimate reasons for imposing restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and religion or belief, including through general bans on religious and cultural symbols. Any restrictions must be justified by demonstrable facts, not presumptions, speculation or prejudice. In October 2023, six [UN human rights experts](#) wrote to the French government expressing their concern that the ban violates the right of Muslim women and girls in France to "participate in sporting life" and may "fuel intolerance and discrimination against them."; in a broader context of systemic discrimination and Islamophobia in France largely documented by scholars and NGOs.

In an [open letter](#) published on March 8, 2024, over 80 athletes – including former member of the youth French national team Diaba Konaté, Olympic medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad, and WNBA stars

Layshia Clarendon and Breanna Stewart – urged the FFBB and the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) to immediately overturn the FFBB's hijab ban, in line with FIBA current regulations. The Sport & Rights Alliance partners supported athlete's calls [publicly](#). Neither the FFBB nor FIBA has responded to this letter.

cc: Andrew George William Parsons, President, International Paralympic Committee
Ms. Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, French Minister of Sports, Olympic and Paralympic Games
Mr. Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Pr. Nicolas Levrat, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues
Alexandra Xanthaki, UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights
Ms. Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
Ms Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women
Ms. Farida Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education
Ms. Tania Maria Abdo Rocholl, Chair of the UN Human Rights Committee

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International
Olympic
Committee

Corporate and Sustainable Development
Department

Public

Andrea Florence
Director
Sport & Rights Alliance

Lausanne, 18th June 2024

Response to your letter addressing the hijab bans in French sports

Dear Ms Andrea Florence,

We thank you for your letter dated 24th May, addressed to IOC President Thomas Bach.

At the Olympic Games, the IOC rules and the technical rules of the International Federations (IFs) apply. Athletes are free to wear a hijab, veil and headscarf in the Olympic Village and in Olympic venues. During competitions, the technical rules set by the relevant IFs apply. In some sports, restrictions on attire, including but not limited to the hijab, veil and headscarf, are in place for safety and technical reasons.

With regard to the applicable IOC rules, the Olympic Charter states very clearly: “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

While this principle applies within the remit of the Olympic Movement, outside this remit, athletes are also acting in accordance with their national context. Freedom of religion is interpreted in many different ways by sovereign states. This is reflected in national approaches to sport, too. In practice, the wearing of the hijab, veil or headscarf is highly debated in many countries. This covers countries where the wearing of the hijab, veil or headscarf is mandatory, countries where it is optional and countries where it is prohibited.

In France, elite athletes competing for French national teams are considered civil servants. This means that they must respect the principles of secularism and neutrality, which, according to French law, means prohibition from wearing outwardly religious

symbols, including the hijab, veil and headscarf when they are acting in their official capacity and on official occasions as members of the French national team. The same secular approach also applies, for instance, to civil servants and teachers.

When the IOC learned, some time ago, about this situation, it contacted the National Olympic Committee of France in order to understand if any athletes would be impacted with regard to the Olympic Games Paris 2024. It was informed that the approach in French elite sport is based on French legal and normative constraints and the particular view in France on secularism. After further consultation, it appears that the only case concerning an athlete qualified for the Olympic Games Paris 2024 has been resolved to the satisfaction of everyone.

The IOC also learned about the situation in some French federations with regard to grassroots sport. In this context, the IOC refers to the relevant French laws and jurisprudence and the recent decision of the Council of State. Last year, it rejected an appeal by a group of athletes, and ruled that the hijab ban by the French Football Federation (FFF), which also applies in grassroots sport, was “appropriate and proportionate”. It reiterated that sports federations are responsible for determining “the rules for participation in their sporting events and competitions, including those relating to dress and equipment, in order to ensure safety of the players and compliance with the rules of the game” and added that the FFF was entitled to issue the ban “in order to ensure the smooth running of football matches and avoid any conflicts”.

The IOC refers you to the French Ministry of Sport for further questions.

With warm wishes,

Magali Martowicz

Head of Human Rights