Thanks to the mayors of French Riviera beach towns, the burkini has received international attention, and sales are skyrocketing. They banned Muslim women from wearing this three-part (four-part?) swimming costume at their beaches but, after photographs of three, large French policemen were shown making a Muslim woman take off her outer tunic (to the accompaniment of her crying children) went viral, women around the world are seeing the burkini as a possible fashion choice for beachwear. After all, if it is too hot for the French Riviera, it must be cool.

The name “burkini” comes from a combination of the words “burka” and “bikini,” and it is actually a brand name that becomes synonymous with a new type of clothing. A burkini looks like a snorkeler’s wet suit with a tunic and hoodie, often brightly colored. It is the fashion creation of an Australian Muslim woman named Aheda Zanetti. Her company has been slowly garnering international market penetration for several years, but sales have spiked since the French controversy started several weeks ago.

Zanetti designed the burkini to enable Muslim women to enjoy beach and ocean activities like other Australians while keeping their modesty. It was quickly taken up in Australia, not without controversy, but that country’s Surf Rescue society adopted the burkini as one of its official uniforms, with the international shipping company DHL sponsoring it. And, if you think that burkini style can’t be fashionable, just google “burkini surfer.”

The point of the burkini is to provide women with another option for action wear. Zanetti says that about 40 percent of her customers are non-Muslims; some are women with health issues such as cancer, pale skin that burns when exposed to the sun or other body issues. Burkinis also are purchased by members of other religions, from Mormon women to Buddhist nuns.

For women with a strong sense of modesty, the burkini enables them to participate in water sports. Most just swim, play beach games and have a good time. But, others pursue activities requiring more dedication, such as surfing or snorkel diving. The number of Southern Californian Muslim surfer girls is on the rise; after all, that’s what Southern Californians do, right?

So, what’s going on? Unfortunately, this is another instance of men telling women what to wear and to shame them into conformity with the use of morals. In the 1950s, the two-piece bikini was banned in Italy. Male officials told women they were showing too much of their bodies. They sent out policemen to fine women and eject them from the beaches. Young women needed to be more modest, the authorities said.

Now, the mayor of Cannes, David Lisnard, says that women in burkinis cannot enter beaches, because they are “wearing improper clothes that are not respectful of good morals and secularism.” In his view, apparently showing lots of feminine skin is “good morals” and that proper secular women wear bikinis. Talk about a turnaround!

To be fair, the mayors are responding to fights erupting on beaches over women wearing burkinis. There have been several incidents where burkini-wearing women on a beach have been harassed by young men for being “anti-France.” One claimed purpose of the ban is to prevent such “incitements” against public order. In other words, authorities address male behavior by telling women what to wear.

The French mayors’ ban and its aftermath have blown this matter out of proportion. French beaches are not about to be overrun by women in burkinis. There are rarely more than one or two women on a beach in a burkini, and often not even that. They stand out because they are so rare. It is more common to see nuns in full costume dipping in the sea...