Beat: Politics

A PRIVATE VISIT LINKED TO BAPS SPARKED A STAFF STRIKE AFTER FEMALE EMPLOYEES BAN

REPORTEDLY REMOVED FROM EIFFEL TOWER.

Paris, Washington DC, 08.09.2026, 01:27 Time

USPA NEWS - WHEN WOMEN WERE TOLD TO DISAPPEAR: THE EIFFEL TOWER AND THE PRICE OF A PRIVATE VISIT

Paris is often sold to the world as the city of light, love, freedom and dreams. Couples come to stand beneath the Eiffel Tower, newlyweds arrive for honeymoons, families travel thousands of kilometres for a photograph beneath one of the most recognised monuments on Earth. Yet, on Saturday 5 September, according to employees and their representatives, some women working at the tower were asked to step away, remain out of sight or were replaced by male colleagues during a private visit by a delegation linked to BAPS, a Hindu spiritual organisation. This is not a minor protocol mishap. If confirmed in its full detail by the inquiry announced by Paris authorities, it is an alarming breach of the equality owed to female employees in their own workplace. A private booking cannot create a private republic. No visitor, sponsor, cultural event or religious request should make a woman disappear from the place where she works.

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The result was a strike on Monday 7 September that closed the Eiffel Tower to visitors. The Société d'Exploitation de la Tour Eiffel, or SETE, acknowledged that the delegation requested arrangements limiting "interactions with women" and said that "these conditions should not have been accepted." Workers said female employees and female staff from contractor companies were sidelined, replaced or told not to cross certain areas during the visit.

WHAT BAPS IS AND WHY ITS DELEGATION WAS IN PARIS

BAPS stands for Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha. It is a Hindu spiritual and cultural organisation with an international presence. Its delegation was in the Paris region for events surrounding the consecration of a major BAPS temple in Bussy-Saint-Georges, east of Paris, described by the organisation as an emblem of Indian culture and Hinduism in France.

The private Eiffel Tower visit took place in that wider context, alongside cultural events including a Seine procession. Thousands of people attended the temple's consecration on Sunday 6 September. A BAPS representative told AFP that men and women were separated during certain ceremonies but were together inside the temple itself.

This distinction is essential. The issue is neither Hinduism nor Hindus in general. France protects freedom of belief, worship and cultural expression. The issue is a specific request attributed to a specific delegation, and the reported decision by an operator of a public Paris landmark to accommodate that request by restricting women at work because they were women.

Religious freedom does not include the freedom to impose sex-based exclusion on employees who do not share the visitor's beliefs. Nor should the cultural importance of a visit be used to convert a workplace into a zone where ordinary equality is temporarily suspended.

A WORKPLACE IS NOT A STAGE SET

According to the statement reported by workers, the instructions went far beyond an effort to facilitate a discreet private visit. Some women were asked to leave their posts and remain in staff rooms. In some positions, women were replaced by men. Female employees were also reportedly told not to move through specific zones while the delegation passed.

The vocabulary used by staff is striking: women were “sidelined”, “replaced” and “made invisible”. These are not neutral words. They describe the removal of a person from public and professional space because of her sex.

The Eiffel Tower is not a decorative stage set that can be reconfigured according to a client’s prejudice. Its employees are not props to be rearranged so that visitors do not have to encounter women doing their jobs. The monument belongs to Paris, to its workers and to the millions of people who see in it a symbol of France not a commercial backdrop in which equality can be rented out for an afternoon.

SETE has acknowledged that the conditions should not have been accepted and said they were inconsistent with its values and with equality between women and men. That admission matters. It should now be followed by a transparent explanation of who received the request, who authorised it, how it was communicated, whether any employees objected, and what safeguards will prevent it from happening again.

THE LAW DOES NOT TAKE A DAY OFF

French law is clear on the principle. Article L.1132-1 of the Labour Code prohibits discrimination against an employee or job applicant on numerous grounds, including sex, pregnancy, family situation, origin, disability, state of health, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, political opinions and religious beliefs. A worker must not be removed, penalised, denied promotion or treated differently because of any of these protected characteristics.

The principle of professional equality between women and men is also embedded in the Labour Code, including Article L.1142-1, which prohibits taking account of sex in recruitment, training, pay, assignment, promotion, working conditions and dismissal, subject only to narrow and legally defined exceptions. France’s constitutional and republican principles similarly affirm equality before the law without distinction of origin, race or religion, and public authorities have a duty to protect individuals from discrimination.

The Defenseur des droits, France’s independent equality body, may receive complaints and assist victims of discrimination. Labour inspectors, courts, unions and employee representatives can also play roles depending on the facts established. This article does not determine legal liability: that is the purpose of a proper inquiry and, where appropriate, judicial or administrative procedures. But the legal standard is not mysterious. An employer cannot put sex-based exclusion on the menu as if it were an optional extra for a private client.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY ACTOR

The BAPS delegation’s reported request must be fully clarified. If it asked for female workers to be removed or made invisible, that request should be publicly rejected as incompatible with equality in France. A visitor has the right to practice a faith; no visitor has the right to dictate the sex of employees encountered in a French workplace.

SETE, as the Eiffel Tower’s operating company, bears a central responsibility because it has the practical authority to accept or refuse conditions attached to a private visit. Its own public acknowledgement that those conditions should not have been accepted is therefore not the end of the matter. It is the beginning of accountability.

The City of Paris, which owns the monument, must establish how this could happen in a landmark that represents the capital internationally. Mayor Emmanuel Gregoire said the staff’s anger was legitimate and announced an inquiry. Ariel Weil, president of SETE, said that no cultural motive could justify a gender-based distinction or any other discriminatory consideration in welcoming the public. Those are the right words. The inquiry must now produce the right actions.

Public institutions responsible for tourism and public image also have a duty to understand the difference between hospitality and

surrender. France can welcome the world without asking women to disappear. Paris can honour cultural diversity without selling its core equality principles to the highest bidder.

WHAT COMES NEXT IF THIS IS NORMALISED?

This is where the affair becomes larger than one delegation and one private visit. If a group can obtain the invisibility of women at the Eiffel Tower because it pays for a private event or presents a religious preference, what is the next demand?

Would a future client ask for no disabled staff to be visible? No wheelchair users? No people of colour? No gay or transgender employees? No one wearing a religious symbol? No one whose body, identity or existence does not match a visitor's private ideology?

That is precisely why equality cannot be treated as negotiable. Discrimination works by testing boundaries. It begins with an exception, a discreet arrangement, a "special request", a commercial compromise. It grows when institutions decide that avoiding discomfort matters more than defending the dignity of the people they employ.

For women with disabilities, the issue is even sharper. They can face the combined exclusion of sexism and ableism: being judged as less employable, less visible, less welcome or too complicated for an institution to accommodate. A society that allows workers to be hidden because they are women sends a dangerous signal to every person whose difference is already treated as an inconvenience.

The Eiffel Tower should represent the opposite. It should be a place where a woman, disabled or non-disabled, French or foreign-born, can work, visit and move freely without being transformed into an administrative inconvenience for someone else's comfort.

PARIS MUST NOT RENT OUT ITS VALUES

The anger surrounding this incident is justified because it touches something deeper than a failed event-management decision. The Eiffel Tower is not just an iron monument. It is a global emblem of Paris, of France and of a country that has fought often imperfectly, sometimes slowly for women's civil and political rights.

French women fought to vote, to study, to work, to control their own bodies, to enter professions once reserved for men and to make equality a legal principle rather than a polite promise. Those victories were never gifts. They were won through political struggle, union action, legal reforms and the everyday courage of women who refused to remain in the background.

The question now is not whether Paris welcomes Indian visitors, Hindu worshippers or international tourists. Of course it should. The question is whether the City of Light will permit female employees to be pushed into the shadows to satisfy a discriminatory request.

The answer must be no, not because France is hostile to belief, but because democracy cannot require women to disappear in order to prove it is tolerant.

Disclaimer

This independent editorial analysis was written by Rahma Rachdi, a political correspondent with more than 25 years of journalistic experience, based on reporting from reliable public sources, statements from employees and their representatives, the Eiffel Tower operator SETE, Paris authorities, and applicable French equality law. The article concerns reported actions connected to a specific BAPS delegation and does not make claims about Hinduism or Hindu people as a whole. French law protects freedom of religion and cultural expression, while also prohibiting employment discrimination based on sex, disability, origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, state of health and other protected characteristics. As a wheelchair-using journalist working for over 2 decades, the author affirms that equality and accessibility are indivisible: no woman, disabled person or minority should be hidden, excluded or treated as less legitimate in a workplace or public space to meet a private commercial, cultural or religious demand.

The facts and responsibilities in this matter should be fully established through the inquiry announced by Paris authorities.

Article online:

https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-27129/a-private-visit-linked-to-baps-sparked-a-staff-strike-after-female-employees-ban.html

Editorial office and responsibility:
V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Rahma Sophia RACHDI, Jedi Foster

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619