

Hijab

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1. Meanings of Hijab and the Issue of Face Covering

Shah Abdul Hannan

Some of the confusions about 'Hijab' could be removed if we can properly understand the meaning of the word and its implication on the dress code of Muslim Women. The meaning of 'Hijab', as it occurs in some of the dictionaries, is as follows:

1. 'Hijab' means cover, wrap, drape, curtain.

(A dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, [ed.] J. Milton Cowan)

2. (a) 'Hajaba' means to cover, shut out.

(b) 'Hijab' means veil, curtain. (John Prentice: A Dictionary of Glossary of the Qur'an)

3. 'Hijab' in Lughat (Dictionary or language) is 'Satr' (cover). (Encyclopedia of Fiqh, Kuwait)

4. 'Hijab' means Satr or cover. (Lisanul Arab)

5. 'Hijab' means to obstruct. 'Cover' is called Hijab as it obstructs seeing. (Al Misbah Al Munir)

Many other Arabic/Qur'anic dictionaries give more or less the same meaning. However, the above meanings demonstrate that 'Hijab' essentially means cover of all kinds (whether dress, curtain, darkness or otherwise) which obstructs seeing. So the use of the term 'Hijab', meaning the dress code of Muslim women, is appropriate. If some people want to use other related terms instead, they can do so.

Terms develop over time to express different ideas. In the history of Islam, so many words (such as Sunnah, Ijma, Qiyas, and Istihsan) have gradually taken technical meanings. Hijab has now also taken a technical meaning for Muslim women's dress. Islamic scholars have agreed upon the extent of the body-covering of Muslim women (except in the matter of face, feet and forehead). A few opinions of non-experts do not carry much bearing upon the normative teachings of Islam in this regard.

The discussion that follows will make it clear that Muslim Women can keep their face open.

1. Part of the Quranic verse 31 of Sura Noor reads, "And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what is apparent thereof". The phrase "Illa ma Jahara Minha" (except what is apparent thereof) needs to be interpreted. Majority of the scholars of the past and present time (such as, Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi, Malik, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Syed Qutub, Jamal Badawi) have opined that this Qur'anic phrase includes the face as an 'apparent' part of the body like hands and feet. So a woman can keep her face open while observing hijab.

2. Covering the face cannot be obligatory. If so, the Prophet (SM) would not have commanded women to keep their face open in Hajj, which is performed publicly. The same rule applies for Salat (ritual prayers) when women have to keep their face open even if they offer prayer in masjids.

3. There is a tradition to the effect that Prophet (SM) told Asma (R.A.) that women should not keep any part of the body open except face and forehead. The full text of the tradition is as follows: Ayesha (R) reported that Asmaa the daughter of Abu Bakr (R) came to the Messenger of Allah (S) while wearing thin clothing. He approached her and said: 'O Asmaa! When a girl reaches the menstrual age,

it is not proper that anything should remain exposed except this and this. He pointed to the face and hands while saying so. (Abu Dawood)

4. There is also no clear Quranic text which asks women to cover face.

Apart from these textual arguments, women require to keep their face open to effectively perform social duties, to work for the community and for the Ummah.

2. The Question of Hijab: Suppression or Liberation

Mary C. Ali

"Why do Muslim women have to cover their heads?"— this question is asked by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

For many women, it is the truest test of being a Muslim. The answer to the question is very simple: Muslim women observe 'HIJAB' (covering the head and the body) because Allah has told them to do so, as the following verse indicates:

"O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed..." (Qur'an 33:59).

Other secondary reasons include the requirement for modesty in both men and women. Both will then be evaluated for intelligence and skills instead of looks and sexuality. An Iranian school girl is quoted as saying, "We want to stop men from treating us like sex objects, as they have always done. We want them to ignore our appearance and to be attentive to our personalities and mind. We want them to take us seriously and treat us as equals, and not just chase us around for our bodies and physical looks."

A Muslim woman who covers her head is making a statement about her identity. Anyone who sees her will know that she is a Muslim and has a good moral character. Many Muslim women who cover are filled with dignity and with self-esteem; they are pleased to be identified as Muslim women. As chaste and modest women, they do not want their sexuality to enter into interactions with men in the smallest degree. A woman who covers herself is concealing her sexuality, but allowing her femininity to be brought out.

The question of hijab for Muslim women has been a controversy for centuries and will probably continue for many more.

Some learned people do not consider the subject open to discussion and consider that covering the face is required, while a majority is of the opinion that it is not required. A middle line position is taken by some who claim that the instructions are vague and open to individual discretion depending on the situation. The wives of the Prophet (S)

were required to cover their faces so that men would not think of them in sexual terms since they were the "Mothers of the Believers," but this requirement was not extended to other women.

The word "hijab" comes from the Arabic word "hajaba" meaning to hide from view or to conceal. As an Islamic term, it points towards the modest covering of a Muslim woman. The question now is what is the extent of the covering? The Qur'an says:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands..." (Qur'an 24:30-31)

These verses from the Qur'an contain two main injunctions:

(1) A woman should not show her beauty or adornments except what appears by uncontrolled factors such as the wind blowing her clothes, and

(2) The head covers should be drawn so as to cover the hair, the neck and the bosom.

Islam has no fixed standard as to the style of dress or type of clothing that Muslims must wear. However, some requirements must be met. The first of these requirements is regarding the parts of the body which must be covered. Islam has two main sources of rulings: first, the Qur'an, the revealed word of Allah and secondly, the Hadith or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (S) who was chosen by Allah to be the role model for humankind. The following is a Tradition of the Prophet:

"Ayesha (R) reported that Asmaa the daughter of Abu Bakr (R) came to the Messenger of Allah (S) while wearing thin clothing. He approached her and said: 'O Asmaa! When a girl reaches the menstrual age, it is not proper that anything should remain exposed except this and this. He pointed to the face and hands.'" (Abu Dawood)

The second requirement is looseness. The clothing must be loose enough so as not to describe the shape of the woman's body. One desirable way to hide the shape of the body is to wear a cloak over other clothes. However, if the clothing is loose enough, an outer garment is not necessary.

Thickness is the third requirement. The clothing must be thick enough so as not to show the color of the skin it covers. The Prophet Muhammad (S) states that in later generations of his ummah there would be "women who would be dressed but naked and on top of their heads (what looks like) camel humps. Curse them for they are truly cursed." (Muslim)

Another requirement is an over-all dignified appearance. The clothing should not attract men's attention. It should not be shiny and flashy that invites people's attention to the dress and to the woman who wears it.

In addition there are other requirements:

(1) Women must not dress so as to appear as men. Ibn Abbas narrates:

"The Prophet (S) cursed the men who appear like women and the women who appear like men." (Bukhari)

(2) Women should not dress in a way similar to immodest unbelievers.

(3) The clothing should be modest, not excessively fancy and also not excessively ragged to gain others admiration or sympathy. Often forgotten is the fact that modern Western dress is a new invention.

Looking at the clothing of women as recently as seventy years ago, we see clothing similar to hijab.

These active and hard-working women of the West were not inhibited by their clothing which consisted of long, full dresses and various types of head covering. Muslim women who wear Hijab do not find it impractical or interfering with their activities in all levels and walks of life.

Hijab is not merely a covering dress but more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech and appearance in public. Dress is only one facet of the total thing.

The basic requirement of hijab also applies to Muslim men's clothing with the difference being mainly in degree. Modesty requires that the area between the navel and the knee be covered in front of all people except the wife. The clothing of men should not be like the dress of women, nor should it be tight or provocative. A Muslim should dress to show his identity as a Muslim. Men are not allowed to wear gold or silk. However, both are allowed for women. For both men and women, clothing requirements are not meant to be a restriction but rather a way in which society will function in a proper, Islamic manner.

3. HIJAB: Fabric, Fad or Faith?

“Yeah, I just got on the bus and I’m on my way home. Okay, Mum, *Wa’alaikum Assalam.*”

I slip my cell into my bag. A girl in a yellow tank top and dark blue cut-offs plops into the seat beside me.

“*Ugh*, I hate taking the bus, especially in this heat,” she says. I nod and smile.

She raises her eyebrows at my full-length dress and the cloth wrapped around my head. “Aren’t you hot in that?” she asks.

I contemplate my answer. The girl shoots another question. “Why do you wear that thing on your head anyway?”

I fiddle with the clasp on my bag. I wonder what I should say. Why do I wear Hijab?

Why the Hood?

It’s tough to explain, isn’t it? Hijab relates to the basic faith that there is only one God worthy of worship. As Muslim women we want to submit to God and obey all His commands. Since Hijab is a clear commandment of God (see Quran 24:31), we choose to do it to please Him. If we wear Hijab for any other reason, we may fulfill an obligation without gaining the reward for it.

Aisha (the wife of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him) said,

“May Allah have mercy on the immigrant women (from Makkah). When Allah revealed ‘that they should draw their veils over their *juyubihinna**,’ they tore their wrappers and covered their heads and faces with them.”
[*Bukhari*]

The female companions of the Prophet gave up the traditions and norms of their society, and covered up immediately to respond to Allah, before they knew the proper method.

Only a Head Covering?

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their *Juyubihinna** and not display their beauty except to...” [Quran 24:31]

The word **Juyubihinna*, according to most scholars, refers to the head, ears, neck and chest. To fulfil the minimum requirements of Hijab, a Muslim woman covers her entire body, except her face and hands. Once Asma, daughter of Abu Bakr, entered upon the Prophet wearing thin clothes. The Prophet turned his attention from her. He said, “*O Asma, when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this,*” and he pointed to his face and hands. [Abu Dawud].

Proper Hijab means loose and opaque clothes. Clothes should not be alluring or similar to the clothing of men. What about guys? Islam outlines a modest dress code for men and women. The requirements are different based on the obvious physiological and psychological differences between the two genders.

Hijab does not apply only to clothes. It is a state of mind, behaviour, and lifestyle. Hijab celebrates a desirable quality called *Haya* (modesty), a deep concern for preserving one’s dignity. *Haya* is a natural feeling that brings us pain at the very idea of committing a wrong. The Prophet said: “Every religion has a distinct call. For Islam it is *Haya* (modesty).” [Ibn Majah]

What’s in it for Me? Five Advantages of Hijab

- **I can’t be messed with! Hijab protects me** – Hijab identifies a Muslim woman as a person of high moral standards to reduce her chances of being harassed.

“O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons: that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested.” [Quran 33:59]

As Dr. Katherine Bullock (a Canadian convert and community activist) observes, “The point to covering is not that sexual attraction is bad, only that it should be expressed between a husband and wife inside the privacy of the home. A public space free of sexual tensions is seen as a more peaceful place for human beings, men and women, to interact, do business, and build a healthy civilization.”

- **I am liberated from slavery to ‘physical perfection’** – Society makes women desire to become ‘perfect objects’. The multitudes of alluring fashion magazines and cosmetic surgeries show women’s enslavement to beauty. The entertainment industry pressures teens to believe that for clothes, less is better. When we wear Hijab, we vow to liberate ourselves from such desires and serve only God.
- **I don’t let others judge me by my hair and curves!** – In schools and professional environments, women are often judged by their looks or bodies—characteristics they neither chose nor created. Hijab forces society to judge women for their value as human beings, with intellect, principles, and feelings. A woman in Hijab sends a message, “Deal with my brain, not my body!”
- **I feel empowered and confident** – In contrast to today’s teenage culture, where anorexia and suicide are on the rise, as women attempt to reach an unattainable ideal of beauty, Hijab frees a woman from the pressure to ‘fit in’. She does not have to worry about wearing the right kind of jeans or the right shade of eye-shadow. She can feel secure about her appearance because she cares to please only Allah.
- **I feel the bond of unity** – Hijab identifies us as Muslims and encourages other Muslim sisters to greet us with the salutation of peace, “Assalamu Alaikum”. Hijab draws others to us and immerses us in good company.

Heard These Before? Three Misconceptions About Hijab

- **Hijab is a symbol of ‘male dominance’**

If you think Hijab is an act of *submission*, you are right! It is a way to submit to God. Like any other act of worship, the rewards of Hijab come only when it is done for Allah alone.

- **Hijab is a ‘cultural thing’**

From remote villages to cosmopolitan mega cities, women all across the world, from every ethnic background, wear Hijab. Do all of these women cling to old cultural practices? Hijab, the internal and external aspects, take understanding, training and determination. Since the purpose of Hijab is to please Allah, doing it for tradition is wrong.

- **Hijab is a ‘challenge to the political system’**

While Hijab may have political implications, as evident in the banning of Hijab in certain countries, Muslim women who choose to practice Hijab are not doing it to challenge the political system. Islam encourages men and women to observe modesty in private and public life. Hijab is an individual’s act of faith and religious expression.

Are you Ready? Six Obstacles to Overcome

Thinking about wearing Hijab? Here are some tips to help you overcome obstacles that may get in your way:

- **Yourself** –Not sure if you are ready? Remember that *Iman* (faith in Allah) includes submitting to Allah’s will. Research, understand the reasons and talk to girls who have gone through it. Ask Allah to help you put your beliefs into action. Prophet Muhammad relates that Allah said, “*if [My servant] draws near to Me a hand’s span, I draw near to him an arm’s length; if he draws near to Me an arm’s length, I draw near to him a fathom’s length; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running.*” (Bukhari and Muslim)
- **Your Friends** – Worried about how your buddies will take it? Your friends should accept your decision and be proud of your courage. Give them time and be patient. Be conscious of Allah, not the girls or guys.
- **Your Parents** – It’s difficult to do things when the people closest to you oppose it. As Muslims, it’s our duty to please our parents, unless their wishes go against the command of Allah. As much as your parents do for you, their love and mercy could never compare to that of your Creator. Ease your parents into your decision and pray that it becomes easy for them to understand.
- **At School** –It takes courage to be different. You are likely to hear, “what is that thing on your head?” or “who made you do it?” Questions aren’t bad. Know your reasons and explain why you chose to wear Hijab.
- **At Work** – The United Nations states that, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18). Most countries in the world abide by this declaration and have their own laws that protect an individual’s freedom of religious practice at work.
- **At the Gym** – What about swimming or basketball for sporty sisters? Obeying Allah and wearing Hijab does not limit your physical activity. Organize sisters-only sports events. This encourages true sportswoman-ship. When you play, it’s about the love of the game, not the glory (or the guys watching!).

Courtesy: www.youngmuslims.ca

4. Women in Islam: Oppression or Liberation?

Umm Tahi

For centuries, Muslim women in all corners of the world have been aware of the liberation achieved by wearing a scarf or hijab. Current world events have once again brought the issue of women's liberation in Islam to the forefront.

Can a Woman Wearing a Scarf Be Liberated?

The picture painted by the media is biased and unsubstantiated. The impression that some Muslims give to the world is often not a true reflection of Islam. Islam takes the question of gender equality very seriously. It sees the liberation of women as essential, as it considers modesty, good character, and manners to be the way to achieve such liberation.

Too often, the image of a covered woman is used to represent her silent oppression. Her very existence is described in terms that convey ignorance and unhappiness. Words like “beaten,” “repressed,” and “oppressed” are bandied about by the Western media in a desperate attempt to convince the readers that women in Islam have no rights. Descriptive and intrinsically oppressive terms such as “shrouded” and “shackled” are used to portray an image of women who have no minds, and who are the slaves or possessions of their husbands and fathers. In the 19th century, T. E. Lawrence described women in Arabia as “death taking a walk,” and from that time onward, the true status of women in Islam has been shrouded by mystery. The truth about women and Islam is far from this melodramatic portrayal.

Over 1,400 years ago, Islam raised the status of women from a position of oppression to one of liberation and equality. In an era when women were considered possessions, Islam restored women to a position of dignity.

In order to gain a true insight into the real and lasting liberation that Islam guarantees women, we must first examine the concept of liberation as viewed by the West. In Western countries where liberation encompasses unlimited freedom, women are actually finding themselves living lives that are unsatisfying and meaningless. In their quest for liberation, they have abandoned the ideals of morality and stability, and found themselves in marriages and in families that bear little resemblance to real life.

Girls as young as 6 years old have been diagnosed with eating disorders, teenage pregnancy is rampant, and women who choose to stay at home to raise their families are viewed as old fashioned or unemployable. Yes! Women in the West are free to choose: to choose which of twenty different brands of lipstick to wear, to choose their own career path so they are independent and capable. Yes!

Women in the West are liberated: liberated to the point that they are no longer free to choose the life that is natural for them. They are free only to choose from the selection of consumer goods offered to them by their masters. The so-called liberated women of the West have become slaves. Slaves to the economic system, slaves to the fashion and beauty industries, and slaves to a society that views them as brainless machines, taught to look desirable, earn money, and shop. Even the career woman who has managed to push her way through the glass ceiling is a slave to the consumer society, which requires her to reside in a spacious house, wear only the latest designer clothes, drive a luxurious car, and educate her children at the most exclusive and expensive schools.

Is This Liberation?

A Muslim woman knows her place in society and knows her place in the family infrastructure. Her *deen* (religion) is her first priority; therefore, her role is clear-cut and defined. A Muslim woman, far from being oppressed, is a woman who is liberated in the true sense of the word. She is a slave to no man or to any economic system; rather, she is the slave of Allah. Islam clearly defines women's rights and responsibilities spiritually, socially, and economically. Islam's clear-cut guidelines are empowering; they raise women to a revered position both in their families and in the eyes of the Muslim Ummah.

Women in Islam have no need to protest and demonstrate for equal rights. They have no need to live their lives aimlessly acquiring possessions and money. With the perfection of Islam as the natural and only true religion came the undeniable fact that women and men are equal, partners and protectors of one another.

So their Lord accepted from them (their supplication and answered them), "Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be they male or female. You are (members) of one another, so those who emigrated or were driven out from their homes, and suffered harm in My cause, and fought and were killed (in my cause) verily, I will expiate from them their evil deeds and admit them into gardens under which rivers flow; a reward from Allah, and with Allah is the best rewards. (Aal `Imran 3:195)

And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of Allah, such will enter paradise and not the least injustice, even to the size of a speck on the back of a date stone, will be done to them. (An-Nisaa' 4:124)

And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey Allah and His messenger. As for these, Allah will have mercy on them. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise. (Tauba 9:71)

Women in Islam have the right to own property, to control their own money or money that they earn, to buy and sell, and to give gifts and charity. They have formal rights of inheritance. They have the right to education; seeking and acquiring knowledge is an obligation on all Muslims, male or female. Married Muslim women are completely free from the obligation of supporting and maintaining the family.

They are in no way forced into marriage, but have the right to accept or refuse a proposal as they see fit. Women in Islam have the right to divorce if it becomes necessary, but they also have the right to save their marriages.

Islam teaches that the family is the core of society. In Western cultures, the fabric of society is being torn apart by the breakdown of the family unit. It is in these crumbling communities that the call for the liberation of women arises. It seems to be a misguided and feeble attempt to find a path of security and safety. Such security is available only when the human being turns back to God and accepts the role for which he or she was created.

Liberation means freedom, but not the freedom to do as one pleases. Freedom must never be at the expense of oneself or of the wider community. When a woman fulfills the role for which she was created, not only is she liberated but she is empowered.

The modestly dressed or covered woman you see in the street is liberated. She is liberated from the shackles that have tied the feet of her Western sisters. She is liberated from the economic slavery of the West, and she is liberated from the necessity of managing a house and family without the support of her husband or the help of a wider community. She lives her life based on divine guidelines; her life is filled with peace, happiness, and strength. She is not afraid of the world, but rather embraces its tests and trials with patience and fortitude, secure in the fact that true liberation is only achieved by full and willing submission to the natural order of the universe.

Oppression is not defined by a piece of material, but rather by a sickening of the heart and a weakening of the mind. Oppression grows in a society that is crumbling because its members have lost sight of the true purpose of their existence. Liberation arises and takes root in a society that is just, cohesive, and based on natural order and divine guidelines.

Courtesy: www.islamonline.net

5. THE VOICE OF A WOMAN IN ISLAM

Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Many Muslims seem to have adopted the Judeo-Christian ethic which views women as the source of human tragedy.

And this is because of her alleged Biblical role as the temptress who seduced Adam into disobedience to his Lord.

By tempting her husband to eat the forbidden fruit, she not only defied Allah, but caused humankind's expulsion from Paradise. Thus she is blamed for supposedly instigating all temporal human sufferings.

Misogynists, who support this

Biblical myth, dredge from the archives of pseudo-Islamic literature such as false and weak hadiths.

This Old Testament myth is a widely circulated belief in the Islamic community, despite the fact that Allah in the Qur'an stresses that it was Adam who was solely responsible for his mistake. In 20:115 it is stated: "We had already, beforehand, taken the covenant of Adam, but he forgot; and we found on his part no firm resolve." Verses 20:121-122 continue:

"In result, they both ate of the tree...thus did Adam disobey His Lord, and fell into error. But his Lord chose for him (from His Grace): He turned to him, and gave him guidance."

There is nothing in Islamic doctrine or in the Qur'an which holds women responsible for Adam's expulsion from paradise or the consequent misery of humankind. However, misogyny abounds in the pronouncements of many Islamic "scholars" and "imams." The result of such misinterpretation of hadiths and of the spreading of negativity is that, entire societies have mistreated their female members ignoring the fact that Islam has honored and empowered the woman in all spheres of life.

The woman in Islamic law is equal to her male counterpart. She is as liable for her actions as a male is. Her testimony is solicited and valid in court. Her opinions are sought and acted upon. Contrary to the pseudo hadith: "Consult women and

do the opposite," the Prophet (SAW) consulted his wife, Um Salama on one of the most important issues to the Muslim community. Such references to the Prophet's positive attitudes toward women disprove the one hadith falsely attributed to Ali bin Abi Talib: "The woman is all evil, and the greatest evil about her is that man cannot do without her."

The promotion of such negativity against women has led many "scholars" and "imams" to make the unsubstantiated ruling about female speech. They claim that women should lower their voice to whispers or even to silence, except when she speaks to her husband, to her guardian or to other females. The female act of communication has been interpreted by some as a source of temptation and allurement to the male.

The Qur'an, however, specifically mentions that those seeking information from the Prophet's wives were to address them from behind a screen (33:53). Since questions require an answer, the Mothers of the Believers offered fatwas (juristic opinions) to those who asked and narrated hadiths to whomever wished to transmit them. Furthermore, women were accustomed to question the Prophet (SAW) while men were present. Neither were they embarrassed to have their voices heard nor did the Prophet prevent their inquiries. Even in the case of Omar when he was challenged by a woman during his khutba (Friday sermon) on the minbar, he did not deny her. Rather, he admitted that she was right and he was wrong and said: "Everybody is more knowledgeable than Omar."

Another Qur'anic example of a woman speaking publicly is that the daughter of the Shaykh (old man) mentioned in the Qur'an in 28:23. Furthermore, the Qur'an narrates the conversation between the Prophet Sulayman and the Queen of Sheba as well as between her and her subjects. All of these examples support the

fatwa that women are allowed to voice their opinion publicly for whatever has been prescribed to those before us is prescribed to us, unless it was unanimously rejected by Islamic doctrine.

Thus, the only prohibition is the female talking softly and flirting in a manner meant to excite and tempt the male. This is expressed in the Qur'an as complacent speech which Allah mentions in 33:32: "O consorts of the Prophet! Ye are not like any of the other women: If ye do fear Allah, be not too complaisant of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speech that is just."

What is prohibited, then, is alluring speech which entices those whose diseased hearts may be moved with desire, and that is not to say that all conversation with women is prohibited for Allah concludes the verse with:

"...but speak ye a speech that is just." (33:32)

Finding excuses to silence women is just one of the injustices certain scholars and imams attempt to inflict upon women.

They point to such hadiths as narrated by Bukhari about the Prophet which says: "I have not left a greater harm to menthan women." They assume that the harm implies that women are an evil curse to be endured just as one must endure poverty, famine, disease, death and fear. These "scholars" ignore the fact that man is tried more by his blessings than by his tragedies. And Allah says:

"And We test you by evil and by good way of trial." (21:35).

To support this argument Allah says in the Qur'an that two of the most appreciated blessings of life, wealth and children, are trials. Allah says: "And know ye that your possessions and your progeny are but a trial" (Anfal 28). A woman, despitethe blessings she bestows on her relations, can also be a trial for she may distract a man from his duty toward Allah. Thus, Allah creates awareness how blessings can be misguided so that they become curses. Men can use their spouses as an excuse for not performing jihad or for eschewing sacrifice for the compiling of wealth. Allah in the Qur'an warns:

"Truly among your wives and children are enemies for you." (64:14)

The warning is the same as for the blessings of abundant wealth and offspring (63:9). In addition, the sahih hadith says:

"By Allah I don't fear for you poverty, but I fear that the world would be abundant for you as it has been for those before you so you compete for it as they have competed for it, so it destroys you as it has destroyed them".

(Bukhari & Muslim) This hadith does not mean that the Prophet (SAW) encouraged poverty. Poverty is a curse from which the Prophet sought refuge from Allah. He did not mean for his Ummah to be bereft of wealth and abundance for he said: "The best of the good wealth is for the pious person." (narrated by ahmed and Al-Hakam) Women are also a gift for the pious person for the Qur'an mentions the Muslim men and women (the Muslimat), the believing men (Mumins) and women Muminat as aids and comforts for each other here and in the hereafter. The Prophet did not condemn the blessings Allah provided for his Ummah.

Rather the Prophet wished to guide the Muslims and his Ummah away from the slippery slope whose bottomless pit is a mire of callousness and desire.

6. Hijab Ban in French Schools: A Blow to Religious Freedom

Dr M A Bari

France's Legacy of Religious Intolerance

The French President Jacques Chirac who led the anti-war campaign in the UN against the US-led invasion of Iraq has plunged his country into a cloud of controversy and international criticism by his hysterical banning of 'religious symbols' in French schools from 2 September 2004. The worst sufferers in this ill-conceived ban are obviously France's already disenchanted huge Muslim population. This ban has now the potential of unleashing a wave of Islamophobia and creating a new controversy between faith and state in defining the social life of people. The fact that some European countries are trying to follow suit is ominous. The deep antipathy that the French establishment has for religious symbolism, particularly the Islamic dress code for women, has surprised the rest of the world. The debate has already come to the surface of French politics; and although most French people are supporting the ban, it is nevertheless dividing the whole nation. Chirac took personal initiative in urging the French parliament to pass the law, and it has now been implemented formally. In a televised speech in December 2003 he declared that the 'Islamic veil, whatever name we give it, the skullcap and a cross that is of plainly excessive dimensions have no place in the precincts of state schools.' He made reference to the underlying principles of the French constitution arguing that secularism was being undermined by the encroachment of religion. Do all the constitutional experts agree on Chirac's subjective argument?

The law was passed with unprecedented authoritarian skill. The French Parliament and then the Senate passed this law on 10th February and 3rd March 2004 respectively with an incredible majority (thanks to the determined effort by the government to get the ban through, to the media hype for the ban and to the hypocrisy of the French liberals). The whole process now has the risk of undoing what France has achieved over generations and what it promotes internationally – the freedom of life. Ironically, this ban echoes the bigoted practice in some Muslim countries, notably Tunisia and Turkey, on hijab. As the ban came into effect in French schools, five million or so Muslims who live and work in France, many of whom are French citizens, have found themselves in a serious predicament. The simple act of wearing a piece of cloth on some school children's head has become a point of conflict and contention in schools, council buildings, courts and so on. Muslims are once again pushed toward a situation where their adherence and loyalty to religion is being ruthlessly tested. One Muslim girl has shaved off her hair in protest and others who can afford are going abroad for study.

The law includes the Sikh turban, Jewish skull-cap and Christian cross. Skull-cap and cross are not obligatory for the followers to wear, but hijab and turban are. Sikhs are a small minority in France. And India, where they originally come from, is a big country. It was foreseen that France would waive the law for the Sikhs under Indian pressure. This has now happened, and the hypocrisy of the French establishment has now been exposed. How Christians and Jews respond to the ban on their religious symbols is also going to be a matter of interest, as most Jews educate their children in private schools and Christians can wear smaller crosses. That means, only ordinary Muslims who do not have support from outside power like India and who cannot afford to send their children to private schools are in the receiving end of this law. France is clearly following the colonial 'divide and rule' policy with its own citizens. At a time when the international community is in dire need of tolerance among religious communities and societies need faith for individual happiness and community harmony, France is alienating a major section of its people for its misconceived view of secularism. This may be politically and socially costly for France in future.

Given France's history of religious intolerance, it is not surprising it has taken this divisive line with its Muslim population. France has a legacy of religious bigotry, at least in the Middle Ages. In 1542 when Pope

Paul III set up the Universal Inquisition against Protestants, Muslims and Jews, Europe plunged into an era of intolerance and cruelty. France's atrocity towards its Protestant people, the Huguenots, from 1562 till the French Revolution (1789-99) was particularly repulsive. The French Revolution brought an end to this bigotry and raised hope of tolerance not only to the people of France but also to Europe and the rest of the world. Since then European countries seemed to have learnt from their mistakes of their past and started adopting more tolerant and humane attitude to establish freedom, human rights and the rule of law for their own people. However, at the same time, the European powers failed to do the same to the people they colonised in other parts of the world. After the Second World War, when the European powers lost their colonies, they came to terms with the reality of accommodating people from their ex-colonies. Since then, most European countries were making good progress in enhancing multi-racial and multi-faith societies. France now is unfortunately going back to the past and, in an enthusiasm to protect secularism, they have targeted certain religious groups, with a view to mainly curbing the growing influence of Islam. After more than two hundred years of the French proclamation of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', it seems that France has become impatient to return to the era of intolerance of its Middle Ages. French secularism appears too vulnerable to face the 'onslaught' of a piece of cloth worn by some school girls. French socialism now needs protection by discriminatory law! It is incredible.

The extent of ignorance about religion in France is amazing. When Bernard Stassi, an ex-French Minister who chaired the Stassi Commission set up to oversee the process of this ban, met a number of prominent faith leaders in Britain last year, he was visibly surprised to see the diversity in the multi-faith delegation. Among others he met a prominent Sikh personality with his turban. He could not hide his surprise and asked the Sikh whether he attends public functions with this turban. When he learnt that the Sikh leader not only attends public meetings but also acts as a judge with his turban on, he was just taken aback. The ignorance is astonishing.

French Hijab Ban is an Affront to Religious Rights

The hijab ban issue has created genuine concern not only among Muslims but also among others in the international community. Muslim scholars across the world publicly registered their protests. Demonstrators took to streets in many countries across the globe for expressing solidarity with the religious rights of France's minority communities. Even the non-practicing Muslim women who do not wear hijab considered the hijab ban as an attack on the religious freedom. Apart from the discredited fatwa of the Egyptian government sponsored Sheikh al-Azhar and the carefully publicised support from some French Muslims, this hijab ban has been criticised by Muslims scholars and mass alike all over the world. The Muslim objection was based on Islam's guidance on the dress code as well as on human rights. Muslims do not consider hijab as a symbolic display of faith, but a religious right and obligation.

A statement published on its website on February 27, 2004 by the US based Human Rights Watch says, 'By disproportionately affecting Muslim girls, (the) proposed law is discriminatory'. It also puts, 'The impact of a ban on visible religious symbols, even though phrased in neutral terms, will fall disproportionately on Muslim girls, and thus violate anti-discrimination provisions of international human rights law as well as the right to equal educational opportunity'.

The group maintain that the law would leave some Muslim families with no choice but to remove girls from the

state education system. This will isolate a large section of French citizens from the French society. This is going to defeat the very purpose the French government is advocating. As long as integration means total assimilation into 'French' values, Muslims and other minority communities will be forced to remain in the periphery; and France will pay the cost of social division. This ban will also prevent the promotion of understanding and tolerance in schools. What is the meaning of tolerance if there is no acceptance of diversity? If girls are supposed to remove a part of who they are at the school gates, how can they learn belongingness and how can others educate themselves in diversity and tolerance? It is now universally accepted that if children of different faiths are educated together, some wearing a turban, others a skullcap, and others still a headscarf, this helps to promote understanding and break down barriers and prejudices. When children exposed to religious and cultural diversities enter the wider world, they are more informed and have a greater chance of showing respect and understanding towards fellow citizens.

The Human Rights Watch also argues, 'International human rights law obliges state authorities to avoid coercion in matters of religious freedom, and this obligation must be taken into account when devising school dress codes'. 'Under international law', the report says, 'states can only limit religious practices when there is a compelling public safety reason, when the manifestation of religious beliefs would impinge on the rights of others, or when it serves a legitimate educational function. But hijab, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses - which are among the visible religious signs that would be prohibited - do not pose a threat to public health or order. They have no effect on the fundamental rights and freedoms of other students; and they do not undermine a school's educational function.'

Many international figures have expressed their dismay at the discriminatory hijab ban. London Mayor Ken Livingstone terms Paris's move as an 'anti-Muslim measure' and accuses Chirac of playing a 'terribly, terribly dangerous game'. In Britain, the government has stressed that it will not follow the French example. Government ministers and other prominent figures, like CRE Chair Trevor Philips, have come out against this folly (and the attendant fallacy) of French government. In America, the International Religious Freedom report, released by the U.S. State Department last year, voices concerns over French plans to ban the religious insignia.

Why Hijab Ban should not go Unchallenged?

Hijab is an Arabic term used to describe the outfit worn by Muslim women. The literal meaning of hijab is 'covering'; but, being a loaded term, it also carries a more general connotation of 'modesty'. Hijab as a social practice thus embraces not only clothing but also values and behaviour. In the past, most societies in the world practised some form of hijab; and Catholic nuns even today wear it as a symbol of modesty.

Muslims believe in a benevolent Creator Who has provided humanity with guidance on how best to live as good human beings. The basic rule is that men and women should wear dignified and modest dress. Women should cover their body with loose fitting clothes. This is a generic requirement, but the actual style of clothing is adaptable to suit personal preferences, cultural norms and practical requirements. These regulations of modesty are equally applicable to men, albeit in a different manner.

Islam does not hinder the natural inclination of a woman to dress well and take care of her feminine beauty. However, it should not be for public display or in a provocative manner. With modest dress women get more

respect because of what they are, not how they look. Here are a few assertions from some highly educated western Muslim women.

'I accept the whole faith of Islam. To me, the dress requirements are part and parcel of my accepting Islam as my faith and way of life, regardless of changing times and opinions....'

'The scarf is just a part of the overall dress. Women not so far back in this country were content in dressing modestly....'

'When I converted to Islam I soon became aware of its [hijab's] benefits - most noticeable of all was that men increasingly treated me as an intelligent human being and not simply a piece of flesh...'

A central principle of the Holy Qur'an is that 'there is no compulsion in religion'. As such, although hijab is certainly an integral part of the overall Islamic dress code, it is not for anyone to force it upon another person. Parents have a responsibility to nurture and to educate their children. Children grown in the culture of their parents and of the community normally choose to follow similar values. This cultural mooring gives young people the required confidence and empowerment to relate with others in dignity. Muslim women, who make a personal and independent choice to wear hijab and who understand what this means to them, consider hijab as emancipating. They find that hijab liberates them from the visual clutches of men, as it frees them from the demands of dressing to conform to others' demand. They learn how to value their bodies and themselves according to their own belief. Such women see hijab as a right, not a burden; a practise that often brings richness to the world as they are evaluated on the merit of their talent and personality. They are happy not to fit into stereotypical images of so called 'emancipated' modern women.

Overcoming the Challenge

Muslim predicament in France and elsewhere in Europe, would not be solved by just leaving the country or insulating themselves in ghettos. They have to realise that there are many others in the society who feel the same against this discriminatory hijab ban. They are their allies for a common cause. What is required for Muslims in these difficult days is full trust on their religion, firmness and determined action in constitutional and other legal means. Muslims need to improve in dialogue and employ civil resistance in collaboration with others. They need to have a permanent strategy of social and political presence in the societies they live.

With the rise of far right movements in many European countries, Islamophobia is now on the rise. Although most Europeans denounce these groups, some governments are trying to curtail ostentatious religious and cultural practices of minority communities to appease these groups, or to win votes from the majority community. This tactics is being adopted also by some political parties in Europe who want to come to power in future. This is dangerous for future social harmony in those countries. Conversely, the victim mentality among some Muslims has led them to ignore their wider social responsibility. With this ghettoised attitude these people fail to see their own shortcomings. Muslims have to address whatever challenges they face with their own responsibility first. They should realise that there is so much ignorance surrounding Islam and Muslims, and the reason for this is because the noble principles of Islam is not explained properly.

Unfortunately, the common Europeans do not see in Muslims the manifestations of the principles of Islam. Islam is great, but Muslims prove themselves not to be so in most cases. Muslims have to be seen as serious about building bridges with the people around them. Islam's natural assertion of producing outgoing and sociable people in the society is unfortunately missing in most places. Many Muslims prefer insular life and some sincere young Muslim activists, even in their third generation, do often possess the 'immigrant' mentality in them. Their main concern then becomes just the protection of their religion from 'external threats'.

Muslims in Europe need to understand that the problem they are facing is both psychological as well as religious. They should also remember that they are not prevented from practicing their religion in Europe, and the ban on hijab in France is only for the secondary school girls. I am not saying this is less serious, but Muslims should see things in broader perspectives. There will be a review on the ban in one year time. Can Muslims articulate their case and let people around them understand that as French citizens they want their equal rights, not a favour from the government? In this campaign they need to use the 'right language'.

7. Hijab and Contemporary Muslim Women

Katherine Bullock

Those who support the French State's decision to ban hijab from its schools argue that the law is a necessary step to protect young Muslim girls, as French citizens, from fundamentalist pressure to wear hijab. Such a law, thus, penalizes innocent girls who wish to cover in order to protect those who do not wish to cover. The French see hijab as more than just a piece of cloth. The girls who wear it are not innocent; they are, in fact, seen as signs of a cancer in the French body politic - "Islamic fundamentalism". That the French see the hijab in this way is due to an old and resilient Orientalist stereotype of the hijab as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression. This idea was introduced into Western discourse in the early eighteenth century and was given "teeth" during the colonial era. During the British and French occupations of the Middle East, the colonialists went to great lengths to unveil Muslim women.

The Europeans' campaigns against the veil were eventually successful, as a new generation of Muslims internalized the Western colonial view of the veil as a symbol of backwardness. A society that wished to modernize had to follow the secular, Western path or else be condemned to the backwater of history. In 1936, the Shah of Iran initiated a policy of forced unveiling of women, decreeing that they wear Western women's dress. Taxi drivers could be fined if they accepted veiled passengers; policemen would pull scarves off women's heads in the streets and were actually instructed to shred a woman's veil with scissors if she was caught wearing it in public. (This is the secular equivalent of the "religious police" in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Taliban Afghanistan, who enforce the wearing of hijab. The French State's decision to ban hijab in its schools, while not being enforced with police violence, is nevertheless part of the same phenomenon of state coercion in the name of modernity.) By the 1960s, the colonial and Muslim modernizing elites' attacks on the veil had been largely successful. Only rural, peasant or lower-class urban women continued to cover. The urban, modern woman who wanted to "get ahead" did not cover and scorned those who did as illiterate, backward peasants. Thus, the movement for re-veiling, which has swept the Muslim world since the early 1970s, has surprised many observers. Social science research into the phenomena has revealed that the "re-veiling movement", as it is called (though it is not really re-veiling, since most of the women are adopting hijab for the first time), is a women-driven movement. That is, contrary to media reports and the opinions of intellectuals who aim to foster

fear of and hatred towards Muslims, the re-veiling movement is not the result of fundamentalist violence or coercion, but the result of women choosing to cover.

Academic research has, also, highlighted the fact that the motivations and meanings behind covering are extremely diverse; though the women may look similar in their dress, they are not thinking similarly, nor experiencing hijab similarly. This is an important point to make because those who would claim that the hijab is a sign of oppression ignore the multiple sociological meanings that hijab carries. According to some analysts, the first impetus of the re-veiling movement was the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. This event made many Muslims reconsider the paths of Westernization and modernization that their countries were pursuing. Many felt that their heritage and religion had been sidelined in the process, and they turned to Islam for solace during those difficult times. Many women adopted hijab as a part of this new mental state. (Many men grew beards and began wearing the traditional jalabiyya.) It is important to note that the style of hijab adopted by these women was new and quite different from traditional forms of covering worn by their ancestors. Instead of a large piece of material wrapped around the body and, often, a face veil, these women adopted long coats and head-scarves pinned under the chin. For these women, the hijab was a combination of piety and political protest. One Egyptian woman told Williams, during his 1978 study into why Egyptian women embraced the veil, "Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then, the war showed that we had been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more, and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then, I put on shar'i dress..." Hessini found similar sentiments of political protest in her 1989 study of urban and professional Moroccan women who had adopted hijab. One woman, Hadija, stated, "the hijab is a way for me to retreat from a world that has disappointed me. It's my own little sanctuary."

Some women felt that, in adopting this dress, they were proactively working to improve their societies and promoting social justice. Nadia told Hessini, "My religion saved me. In a world where there is no justice, I now believe in something that is just. I now have something I can count on." Many women, however, have prioritized religious belief as the main motivation behind their decision to cover. Their adopting the new style of hijab is meant to express their adherence to "true Islam." Sou'al told Hessini, "My mother has always worn the veil, but she knows nothing about Islam. She wore the veil out of tradition, whereas I wear it out of conviction." My own research amongst Toronto Muslim women in 1994, also, found similar motivations. Yasmeen, an immigrant to Canada from the Middle East, who is in her early thirties, told me, "I feel in peace [wearing hijab], and ah...I feel I respect myself more. I am not concentrated about my beauty and ah... the fashion and this stuff ah...I think it's a peace of mind...I feel comfortable because this is what God want from the human being, ah...I am obeying."

But the hijab carries a multitude of meanings. Researchers in Egypt, for instance, have found that not all those who adopt hijab do so out of religious sentiments. Many of these women do not pray regularly, nor do they discuss hijab as a religious form of dress. Rather, they have found in hijab an empowering dress that facilitates their access to education and work. Often coming from urban lower class families and being the first woman in the family to achieve formal education, hijab has, for them, served the purpose of declaring their modesty to a conservative milieu, in spite of the fact that they are outside the family home for extended periods a day. They also find economic advantages of hijab; by wearing hijab, they do not have to spend huge amounts of money on work clothing. Sommayya told Hoodfar (1991) that she was having trouble with her fiancé and his family who did not want her to work after marriage; she solved the problem by wearing hijab; "if I have only two sets of clothes, I can look smart at all times because nobody expects muhaggabat (the veiled ones) to wear new clothes every day. This will save me a lot of money. It will, also, prevent people from talking about me or questioning my honor or my husband's. In this way, I have solved all the problems, and my husband's family is very happy that he is marrying a muhaggabat."

Muslim women in the West find other compelling reasons to wear hijab, one of which is to assert their Muslim identity publicly and with pride, something which is especially important to them as citizens of Western,

multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious polities. Nadia, a second generation British Asian woman, who began to cover when she was sixteen, told Watson (1994), "My cultural background and my family's roots are in another part of the world. These things are very important to me and make me feel special. It is important to me not to lose these parts of my life. My decision to wear the veil also ties into my feeling of coming from this different kind of background. We are a British family but because of Islam and our links with Pakistan we have different values and traditions from the families of my non- Muslim friends...[So] wearing the veil makes me feel special, it's a kind of badge of identity and a sign that my religion is important to me."

Even in Saudi Arabia, where there is no obvious choice about veiling, some women feel they are wearing hijab as a symbol of identity and pride. As a 35 year old teacher, married with two children and holding a BA in education from the United States, told AlMunajjed (1997), "'Yes, I wear the veil out of conviction'. 'On what do you base your conviction?' [AlMunajjed] asked. 'I am attached to my traditions. Wearing a veil is part of one's identity of being a Saudi woman. It is a definite proof of one's identification with the norms and values of the Saudi culture.'"

Thus, sociologically, the hijab carries many meanings, and it is wrong for the West to argue that the hijab is a symbol of male domination over women or a sign of fundamentalist threat or coercion. I say "wrong" purposefully, even though empirically it may sometimes be true. There are Muslim women who are forced to cover against their will, either due to state policy, Islamist violence or family coercion. I condemn coercion and violence perpetrated against Muslim women by those who seek to impose hijab. However, just because there are some women who experience hijab in this unfortunately negative way, it does not turn the hijab into a symbol of coercion. To be a symbol, the thing being represented must have a constant meaning. Quite simply, hijab signifies a variety of things, depending on the historical and social context. We have seen a wide range of meanings that arise out of the contemporary Muslim women's re-veiling movement.

There are other meanings too. Prior to the European intervention into the Middle East, the face veil was a symbol of wealth and status. In the 1950s during the Algerian war of Independence, secularized, urban women donned headscarves to show their support of the war; the hijab was a symbol of resistance to French colonial rule. In the 1979 Iranian Revolution a similar process took place, with secular women joining religious women to wear chador as a sign that they supported the movement against the Shah. These women grew up not covering, but the chador became a symbol of the anti-Shah revolution.

Thus, hijab expresses many meanings, and commentators should be wary of attempting to impose one single meaning on it. In addition, the West should take notice that many Muslim women wear hijab with pride, conviction and happiness. I do not mean to downplay the tragedy of a Muslim woman who is forced to wear hijab out of coercion, but the prevalent image of the veil in the West, as a symbol of oppression, ignores the real expression women find in hijab. Furthermore, this is not simply an academic matter because public policy is being founded on the misconception of hijab as a symbol of oppression; state policies are being made to 'save' the Muslim women. The French decision to ban the veil is based on this kind of logic. It is a dangerous precedent because it will encourage and inflame both Islamophobia in the West and extremism in the Muslim world. The only reasonable way forward is for people to understand the multiple and positive meanings of hijab; allow people to freely practice their religious convictions; and to work together to eradicate coercion and violence in ways that do not denigrate religious convictions.

Hijab and My Story

In 1991 I saw a news report on the television that showed Turkish women who were returning to the veil. I felt shocked and saddened for them. "Poor things," I thought, "they are being brainwashed by their culture." Like many Westerners, I believed that Islam oppressed women and that the veil was a symbol of their oppression. Imagine my surprise then, four years later, at seeing my own reflection in a store window, dressed exactly like those oppressed women. I had embarked on a spiritual journey during my Master's degree that culminated four years later in my conversion to Islam. The journey included moving from hatred of Islam, to respect, to interest,

to acceptance. Naturally, being a woman, the issue of the veil was central. Despite my attraction to the theological foundations of Islam, I was deeply troubled by what I believed to be practices oppressive to women. I felt that the veil was a cultural tradition that Muslim women could surely work to eliminate. I was shown the verses in the Qur'an that, many Muslims believe, enjoin covering on men and women, and it seemed quite clear to me then that, indeed, the verses did impose covering. I wandered home, feeling quite depressed and sorry for Muslim women. If the verses were clear, they had no recourse: covering would be required for a believing Muslim woman. I had to put these issues aside in order to decide whether or not to accept Islam. What counted, in the final analysis, was the fundamental theological message of the religion- - that there is a single God, and that Muhammad (SAAS) was His Last Servant and Messenger. After several years of study, I had no doubt about thatif only it were not for the issue of women and Islam. When I finally made my decision to convert, now one and a half years into my doctorate (July 1994), I decided that whether I liked it or not, I should cover. It was a commandment, and I would obey. I warned some people in my department that I had become a Muslim, and that the next time they saw me I would be covered.

Needless to say, people were quite shocked, and as word spread (and as people saw me in my new dress), I found myself subject to some hostile treatment. How could I have embraced an oppressive practice, especially when I was known as a strong and committed feminist? How could I embrace Islam? Had I not heard what Hamas had just done? Had I not heard what some Muslim men had just done to a woman? I was not quite prepared for this hostility, nor was I prepared for the different way I was being treated by secretaries, bureaucrats, medical personnel, or general strangers on the subway. I felt the same, but I was often being treated with contempt. I was not treated as I had been as a white, middle-class woman. It was my first personal experience of discrimination and racism, and made me see my previous privileged position in a way that I had never before properly understood.

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8. LAICITÉ, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND THE HEADSCARF ISSUE IN FRANCE

Raja El Habti

The recent French law banning visible religious signs that display a student's religious affiliation in public schools has unleashed heated debates on wearing the Islamic headscarf/veil/*hijab*. Although this law does not apparently target the French Muslim community in particular and will affect other religious minorities such as the Jewish and Sikh communities, it is obvious that it will affect essentially Muslim girls wearing *hijab*.

The law supposedly aims to protect the French principle of *laïcité*, which loosely refers to the idea that religion should be excluded from civil affairs and from public education. French officials and proponents of the law vehemently reject accusations that the measure discriminates against Muslim girls who wear headscarves. Some others, mainly French feminist groups, including some Muslim women's organizations, point out that the veil/*hijab* symbolizes women's oppression by patriarchal Muslim societies and groups, and denotes the

interiorization of such oppressive values by Muslim women themselves, and therefore should be banned. Finally some more honest voices evoke the widespread fear of growing Islamic fundamentalism in France, where the Muslim population is estimated to be the largest in Western Europe with more than 5 million Muslim. They urge French authorities to counter attack and respond to supposed this threat.

For a critical mind, it does not take much to figure that the proposed law has nothing to do with defending laïcité or limiting the role of religion in French life, or even with defending the rights of women and children. The ban is an attempt to avoid real problems that the Muslim community as well as other immigrant communities have in France. In fact the French official discourse is inconsistent, as it suffers from:

1. Deliberate vagueness and misuse of the concept of laïcité;
2. A stereotypical and condescending view of the Other; and

Does the Islamic headscarf threaten the French Principle of laïcité?

We are using the term "laïcité", which means religious neutrality, instead of "secularism" that refers to rejection of religion. The prohibition of "ostentatious religious symbols" is justified by the majority of French officials and intellectuals in the name of universalism, the basis of French laïcité. Another argument, which comes back quite often in the official French discourse, is protecting Muslim girls who do not wear the veil from the pressure they are subject to in schools from girls who do wear it. It is legitimate to ask some questions here:

- a. Does the Islamic headscarf threaten the French principle of laïcité?
- b. Is in France the non-negotiable principle of laïcité, as described by President Chirac, observed so firmly when other religions are involved? And
- c. Do Muslim girls who wear the headscarf have enough power to exert pressure on their peers who do not wear it?

First, through the French history, laïcité has been a principle of emancipation and freedom, never a principle of exclusion. It is rather paradoxical for French officials and feminists to consider those young girls who wear headscarves as "poor victims of patriarchal systems of thinking" and yet exclude them from the educational system and leave them behind facing "their oppressors". It is certain that the French principle of laïcité refers, among others, to the necessity of upholding the separation of church and state in education. It requires the neutrality of the state, the public sector, public schools and the educational system in general. However, it does not require students and users of public services to be neutral themselves, and to renounce their identity in order to be able to access those services. Students should be able to practice their religions and their beliefs peacefully without state interference as long as they are doing so without provoking and intimidating others. The 1905 law of separation between the church and the state, as well as the French Constitution and the general regulations of the French national educational system, does not mention anything relating to "neutrality of students". All what is required from students, in addition to assiduity, is respect to others whether they were other students, teachers, or staff. Article 1 of the 1905 law states: "The Republic assures the right of conscience and guarantees the freedom of cult."

French historian René Rémond, who was a member of the Stasi commission², points out the misuse of the concept of laïcité. He says, "I read the law of separation [of state and church], I accept it as a whole, without being a fundamentalist of laïcité. I see that article 1 says, and God knows that the first article is always

important: "the French Republic guarantees the free practice of cults". This article captures the religious act in its collective and social dimension. It is not true that this law ignores the religious act (...) Not only it does not ignore it but also it commits to guarantee it... I am little surprised by the lecture you [referring to Joachim Salamero (la Libre Pensée)] make of it [the 1905 law], a lecture that is restricted, fundamentalist and extremist".

Moreover, the European Convention on Human Rights ratified by France in 1974 and that has become opposable to public authorities before the European Court of Human Rights in 1981, clearly states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

The argument that France must protect the public school, which is a space of integration and where the citizens of tomorrow are being taught, by banning signs of difference and promoting instead what is universal and common, is for the least questionable. It reveals a certain fear of difference that should rather be, if well handled, a source of strength. De Saint Exupéry once said: "your difference, my brother, far from scaring me, enriches me." It would be rather difficult for French officials to teach their children to live together in diversity if they think that expressing differences is dangerous for school and public space. And if they manage to cover religious differences, it would be impossible for them to erase more inherent differences such as the color of skin and gender differences.

Second, it seems that the principle of laïcité is not set in stone and actually accommodates exceptions. In fact, defenders of the French banning law prefer to set aside the fact that a type of cultural particularism tends to dominate in the French society, where only those holidays of a Christian origin are implicitly recognized. Clergy in the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine still receive government salaries. And despite the French government claim to be laic, it provides 80 percent of the budget for Catholic schools where two million study. In the past years, Jewish schools have also grown by 120 percent, whereas only one Muslim school exists in all France, which took eight years of negotiations with the government before it opened. This also means that Muslim private schools are not an option for Muslim girls who refuse to take off their headscarves. Their last resort would be to enroll in Catholic schools or to drop out, which many Muslim girls have already opted for.

Third, let us state the fact that of the two million female students in French schools, only 1500 wear headscarves to school. According to the government report, that was used to justify this law. This represents less than one percent of the 500,000 students from Muslim families. It is hard to believe that this small number of Muslim girls wearing headscarves threatens the French laïcité. Moreover, being such a minority, these girls are unable to exert any kind of religious or moral pressure, such as the one described in the French official reports, over other Muslim girls who do not wear hijab. The opposite would be more likely to happen.

Muslim girls will be excluded from public schools, condemned to live in ghettos, and will become an easy target for radical groups. If the French government is sincere in its attempt to counter the rise of fundamental Islam, this is a curious way of doing so.

Behind the ban: Fear of difference and Speaking for the "Other":

In an article about the headscarf issue in France, Patrick Weil, one of the 20 members of a presidential commission that proposed the law in December said: "Whereas for a majority of women the headscarf is an expression of the domination of women by men ... it can also be the articulation of a free belief; a means of protection against the pressure of males; an expression of identity and freedom against secular parents; a

statement of opposition to Western and secular society. The state has no right to "adjudicate" between these meanings, or to interpret religious symbols *tout court*."

This is a wise statement from a person who rejects the accusations that the ban discriminates against Muslim girls. However, the same Patrick Weil flatly states in another setting with American journalists this time: "I am surprised that in America, where the fight for sexual equality has been fought so early on, no one says anything. This is frankly surprising. The veil carries a symbol of inequality and domination, right?"

Mr. Weil chooses the right tone for the right audience. Even worse, some proponents of the law go as far as to formulate their fear for a supposedly "threatened laïcité" in words that are for the least racist: "We won't let those people alter our traditions", "it is necessary to restrict the freedom of conscience", we should have "the lucidity of recognizing that those Muslims ("Allah's crazy") reproduce like rats", "our Muslim guests must comply with the laws of the Republic".

The terms of the debate have subtly changed. We are no more talking about banning a piece of clothing from schools but a whole religion and a whole community from France. It is now about "we" and "our traditions" as opposed to "they" and "their practices". French Muslims are in the best-case scenario guests that must comply with their host's rules.

In another statement, from a feminist point of view this time, "Elle" magazine printed an open letter to President Chirac signed by leading French feminists who called for an outright ban.

"The Islamic veil sends us all — Muslims and non-Muslims — back to a discrimination against women which is intolerable," said the letter.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/11/international/europe/11CNDFRAN>).

It is clear that minds were set to strip the Muslim community in France not only from their women's headscarves but also from their identity and their right to speak for themselves. In fact, no body seems to remember that those women subject of the debate can express themselves and should be able to decide for themselves. Nobody cared to ask them what they think, because nobody really wants to know. These women are "oppressed", "victims of patriarchy", and women who say that they have chosen to wear a headscarf are "brainwashed". French feminists and officials know what is better for these "self-oppressed" women. This attitude brings back to memories the days of colonial France in Algeria, when the French generals had Algerian women unveiled by French women in a public event that took place on May 16, 1958 to show to the world that Algerian women are on their way to becoming modern. This event was one of many French attempts to appropriate Algerian women's voices and to silence those among them who had begun to take revolutionaries women as role models by not abandoning the veil. This is, with small shift in appearances, the tone and stance of today's French feminists and officials.

However, what French feminists and officials seem to ignore is what Franz Fanon rightly underlined when he narrated the May 16, 1958 event: the immediate response of many Algerian women "who had long since dropped the veil once again donned the *hayek* (veil), thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle." Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian sociologist, states that this incident "did lasting harm to Algerian women. It brought into limelight the politicization of women's bodies and their symbolic appropriation by colonial authorities."

This is something to think about for those who condemn Islamist groups and governments for using women's bodies to ideological ends. Moreover, the proponent of the ban, feminists and others, seem to forget what the veil means for women themselves. The Islamic veil is part of a complex system aimed at both sexes in order to manage the community's sexual needs and social relations. It bears no demeaning implications for women; on the contrary, many Muslim women see veiling as an empowering practice that allows them to move freely through their professional and social life. So the veil symbolizes for many Muslim women not only a religious obligation but also a different way of being a woman.

But this is exactly what French feminists do not like: the physical image of difference. It is indeed clear that those feminists are not willing to listen to the plural voices of women and to learn from them. They have their own version of freedom and modernism, and anything that parts from it is a manifestation of oppression, patriarchy, and obscurantism. Secular liberal feminists' unexpressed desire is that all people will be happy and well integrated once "they" abandon "their" practices of differences. In this process the principal party concerned, Muslim women, is forced to be voiceless and passive. Once again, they are denied the right to choose for themselves, and this time in the name of women's rights.

It is time that French feminists and officials hold up their own practices to the same critical scrutiny they use to examine and to judge foreign cultures. For no matter what one thinks about the veil, forcing women to take it off is no better than forcing them to wear it, both ways are discriminatory and undemocratic.

The crisis of the French policy of integration:

"The headscarf today symbolizes a defeat for the French government, which has failed to integrate these minorities," says Françoise Gaspard, a sociologist at the Advanced Group of Social Studies in Paris, who opposes the veil ban.

The French banning law is in fact the tree that hides the forest. For years the situation in French ghettos has been explosive. Periodically there are violent youth rebellions. The denial of rights for immigrant workers and their exploitation has been until recently a prominent feature of French society. Immigrant workers, who are mainly North African, have played a key role in the French labor market ever since the Second World War. It took France 40 years to realize that those workers have families they left behind and to allow them to bring their families to France.

But even then France expected them to assimilate to its culture, while they were still subject to racist attitudes in hidden and open forms. The debate about laïcité has pushed aside the real alarming social and economic problems, the increasing gap made of inequalities, poverty, discrimination, and racism all exacerbated by international political tensions.

However, in the minds of many French officials and intellectuals, racism and discrimination against French Muslim from immigrant origins is just "a dream." This state of mind is very well expressed in a book that has been of great influence to the Stasi Commission and to the public opinion in France, "Territoires Perdus de La République". Emmanuel Brenner, the editor of the book, flatly states: "If one was to assess the feeling of rejection, the North African population living in France suffers certainly the most among all other populations of foreign origins from this feeling. However, it is not rejection itself that matters, but most importantly acting upon this rejection. If some of our contemporaries nurture dreams of eradication [of North Africans], they usually do not go further. A police of dreams was never an objective of democracy." After quoting this passage, Alain Gresh, Chief Editor of *Le monde Diplomatique* wonders whether all forms of discrimination against North African immigrants from failing to find a decent job, decent housing, accessing school, to the police

racist acts and use of unnecessary violence, are just dreams (should we say "nightmares"?) not daily realities. It is rather not surprising that radical Islam in its most violent forms flourishes in ghettos and feeds on feelings of frustration and anger generated by racism, discrimination, and marginalization.

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KARAMAH: MUSLIM WOMEN LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS is a charitable, educational organization which focuses upon the domestic and global issues of human rights for Muslims.

Courtesy: www.karamah.org

9. Hijab: Religious Symbol or Obligation?

The received notion that hijab is a religious symbol is a misperception. Hijab has an indispensable function in the life of a Muslim woman. That function is protection of the Muslim woman and preservation of her honor and chastity.

This means that a woman who wears hijab does not do so to declare her religion or to distinguish herself. Rather, she wears it out of obedience to her Lord.

Conversely, preventing hijab on the basis of preserving the secularity of the state is a fallacy. Secularism in a liberal community means that the state authority should be neutral in matters of religion. The government should neither accept nor reject, neither be for or against any religion. The state is to provide freedom of religion for all people.

One might further ask: If a non-Muslim woman chooses to dress modestly by covering her body and even her hair, would she be prevented from doing so by such state ban on hijab? And if the answer is 'no' (that is, she is given the freedom to cover herself because she is not a Muslim), why then is a Muslim woman not given the same freedom?

In this concern, the eminent Muslim scholar, **Dr. `Ali Jum`ah**, Mufti of Egypt, states:

"A Muslim woman is obliged to wear hijab as soon as she reaches puberty, as indicated in the Qur'an, in the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and in the consensus of Muslim scholars from early ages of Islam uptill now. Hijab is known to be essential and necessary in religion; it is not merely a symbol that distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims. It is an obligation that forms part and parcel of the Islamic religion. Allah Almighty says: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful." (Al-Ahzab: 59)

He also says: "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms." (An-Noor: 31)

Also, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said to Asma', daughter of Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with them):

"O Asma! Once a girl reaches puberty, nothing of her body may be seen (by non-*mahrams*) except this and these, (he pointed to his face and hands while saying so)."

Sheikh Muhammad Husain Fadl Allah, a well-known Shiite jurist of Lebanon, also comments:

"Wearing hijab derives from religious commitment; it is in the same status of religious obligations in the way that non-compliance with it constitutes a sin. Has secularism become so frail that the secular authorities fear a scarf, a turban, or a cross hanging from the neck can threaten its stability?"

Moreover, the eminent Muslim scholar, **Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi**, states:

"I completely reject and condemn the French resolution that prevents the Muslim female students from wearing hijab at schools. By doing so, they force Muslim women to ignore the teachings of their religion and to disobey Allah's commands, which say: "...and to draw their veils over their bosoms", and: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad)."

Actually, all Muslims with their various affiliations and inclinations agree upon the obligation of hijab. Hence, we have been struck by the hijab ban, which is a discrimination against the Islamic teachings and values. It is strange that such a ban is promulgated by France, a country that claims to be a land of liberalism and openness. This is also incongruous with the motto of the French Revolution, that is liberty, equality and fraternity. Moreover, France has the largest Muslim community in Europe. Such resolution contradicts both individual freedom and religious freedom, two basic human rights, which are asserted by all constitutions and charters of human rights all over the world.

Claiming that hijab is a sign of religion is by no means acceptable. A religious sign or symbol, such as the cross for a Christian and the kippa for a Jew, has no function but to declare the religious belief of the one who wears it. Hijab, on the other hand, has a religious function. A hijab-clad woman does not wear it for declaring her religious belief. Rather, she does so in obedience to Allah's commands.

Therefore, the hijab ban contradicts the principles of freedom and equality that have been asserted by the French Revolution and stipulated in all heavenly revealed religions and international charters of human rights.

In fact, the hijab ban is a form of persecution against the committed Muslim women; it infringes upon their freedom, as it denies them their right to learn and to work.

It hurts to hear the claims that one who wears hijab bears hostility towards others. What hostility can a woman, who tries to protect her honor and is committed to the teachings of her religion, bear towards others? Hostility and enmity is never expected from a truly pious person, man or woman, who is conscious of Allah and fears Him.

Courtesy: www.islamonline.net

9. The veil in my handbag

Aisha Khan

I see a girl in Manchester Piccadilly station. She has a full mouth, high cheekbones and velvety brown eyes. But what captivates me is the white cotton scarf covering her head. People know she is a Muslim because of her veil, and I wish my appearance had the same effect.

I envy her because I am too weak to wear the veil, too scared that doors will close and that opinions will be formed long before friendships are. Islam does not oppress me; fear does. I live a half-life, a double-life: not quite a Muslim and not quite a westerner. My parents raised me as a Muslim. They gave me everything I wanted, but I coveted the freedom enjoyed by non-Muslim friends and, because I derived no satisfaction from religion, I sought solace in hedonism.

I was 18 when I left home for university, and my limited knowledge of Islam meant I only saw negatives. Religion was bad because it stopped me from wearing what I wanted, tasting what I wanted and doing what I wanted. And what I wanted was to be like everyone in mainstream society. So I set out to have fun.

I was the toast of my friends. But I was the scourge of the Muslim community, who viewed me with pity and distaste. I remember going into a shop to buy some things I should not have been buying. The man behind the counter greeted me: "Assalaam alaikum." I looked at him blankly. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you," I lied. "No, I'm sorry," he said, "I thought you were a Muslim." "I used to be," I whispered, as I left the shop, crying.

Too ashamed to talk to my parents about my guilt and too impatient to unravel my dilemma to my friends, I never said anything. And the silence was devastating. I was bereft of purpose and support. My sense of isolation intensified when I saw other Muslims being part of society without compromising their faith. When people spoke about Islam, their eyes would light up and their voices resonated with pride and love. I once shared their enthusiasm, but my lifestyle was leading me so far away from religion that I could barely remember anything about it.

So I went to the university prayer room. I performed the intricate washing ritual, an act of purification and preparation. I took my place on the prayer mat to recite verses from the Koran, but my lips froze. I couldn't remember any verses - the same verses I had repeated every day as a child. I panicked. I prayed to Allah, pleading with him to let me remember. The words didn't come flooding back, but I muddled through the prayer.

I decided that I didn't want to muddle through any more and shut myself away for days, poring over books and piecing together the fragments of my knowledge. As my awareness increased, so my appetites diminished. I would go out, but I wouldn't stay out. My clothes were less revealing, but fell short of complete coverage.

Had it not been for these cosmetic changes, I would have gone through university life with my religious identity concealed. But I told people I was a Muslim and, post- September 11, this revelation prompted a tidal wave of questions. People quizzed me about jihad - the holy war. I was reluctant to talk about it because my views were at odds with those held by most people living in the western hemisphere.

I once broached the subject of the Middle East conflict during a conversation. I explained that there was an international community of Muslims, a nation state: the ummah. Every Muslim is a member of this community

so when one is murdered, it is an assault on Muslims throughout the world. I was shouted down. My peers accused me of sympathising with terrorists. I have not spoken about September 11 or jihad since.

I have left university and now feel better equipped to cope with the irreconcilable differences of being a British and a Muslim. You can be born and raised in this country, benefit from its education and live freely and comfortably; thanks to the solid British economy. But you can also be oppressed. Stay silent when your religion is being lambasted in the press. Look on helplessly when Muslims are being persecuted in their homelands and then watch them being punished by the British asylum system. Stuff your veil into your handbag because you'll never get that job if you cover your head. Sacrifice prayer times and fasting to keep up with the crowd and stay in with the boss.

I am in my mid-20s now and loosening the ties with my past, although I still have the same friends I started university with. They know my values are changing and they respect my decision to learn more about Islam. So I have overcome one set of hurdles - the conflict between the desires of youth and the duties of religion. But I want to work as a headhunter and this line of work sits uncomfortably with the demands of my faith. Long hours, business travel and face-to-face meetings mean my values will be tested again and the disharmony will continue.

For now, I will try to pray at the appointed time instead of cramming in three or four prayers together when I get home. Nor will I break my fast. When people ask me why I am not having lunch, I will not tell them I am on a diet – I will tell them I am a Muslim.

Courtesy: www.guardian.co.uk

10. Hijab: What a Beautiful Thing!

Aziza A.D. U.

What does it mean to be a woman? This is a question that is hotly debated in today's world and the answer will differ according to whom you might be speaking to at the time. Whenever human beings are left to decide upon issues according to their own limited perception, we will find discrepancy and injustice. This is where the mercy and wisdom of Allah the Almighty become manifest. The laws in Islam are for all human beings regardless of race, color, or social position. And when Allah orders people to do something, it is for their own good. When we look at today's world and how women are treated as commodities, we see the wisdom behind covering (wearing hijab) that compels men to appreciate us for our intelligence and personality—not just for our looks.

Throughout the ages humans have tried to make laws for themselves and in doing so have tried to define woman and her role in life. The result of this is that throughout the ages, except for a few moments in history, women have been oppressed, misused, and humiliated. In modern time, being a woman is a confusing thing. Natural urges push us toward motherhood and to the spiritual role of nurturing, while societal pressures push us to abandon the home and center our lives on work, being ambitious in a career, and always to be “beautiful.” Herein lay many of the problems of the modern woman.

In order to be considered successful in modern terms, women must keep up with fashion, be thin, sporty, and career oriented. Obviously, not all women can fit this bill! So what happens to those who get left behind in all this? They usually feel a great sense of failure and low self-esteem. They might even resort to taking pills in order to lose weight and more pills to combat depression. Women are caught up in the dilemma of not being accepted for who they are, but for what they look like. How can a woman develop self-esteem and feelings of well-being when society doesn't really care what she thinks as long as she "looks right" and thinks like them?

It takes a lot of courage to wear hijab and adopt the good behavior that goes along with it. When you wear hijab, you're making a statement. You're saying that pleasing Allah the Almighty is more important than anything else in this world. You're also saying that you are a person who wants to lead a virtuous life. After getting past the initial stages of wearing it and learning how to deal with criticism and "looks" from people, then the positive side of it all will become clearer.

If you wear hijab, people will have to accept you for what you are and not for what you look like. Most people will respect you for having the courage to stand up for your convictions, and they will be pleasantly surprised when they find you to be a kind, funny, friendly person who is intelligent and knowledgeable about her religion and about the world at large. You will no longer be prey for irresponsible, immoral men.

As you wrap yourself in your garments and take part in the activities of this life, you are like a precious jewel whose core is always striving to please the Most Merciful Creator, whose intentions are directed to always say and do what is right, whose words are kind and wise, whose behavior is pious and worthy of respect, whose face shows the calmness and tranquility of one who knows what this life is all about and where she is heading.

Courtesy: www.islamonline.net

11. The Science Behind the Veil

Karima Burns

The moral duty of wearing the veil in Islam is an often-discussed topic among Muslim women. However, little has been written about scientific reasons that the veil is beneficial for society. There are, in fact, a number of health benefits that wearing the veil can provide, as well as many behavioral science studies that suggest that the veil is the best attire for women. Protecting the head is very important from a health perspective. Results of medical tests show that 40-60% of body heat is lost through the head, so persons wearing head coverings during cold months are protected about fifty-percent more than those who do not.

Chinese and Muslim medical texts take this concept even further. In the *Hua Di Nei Jing* (The Yellow Emperor's Classic on Internal Medicine), wind is said to cause sudden changes within the body, and shaking, swaying, and other movements that potentially upset the body's equilibrium, thus, creating bad health. These texts attribute the common cold to wind elements entering the body and causing the typical symptoms of sneezing and a runny nose.

In the traditional Islamic medical texts of *Al-Jawziyya*, we can find numerous references to the "four elements" of fire, water, air, and earth, and how these affect the body in adverse ways. In particular, we are advised to stay

away from drafts and to protect our heads in wind, breezes, drafts, and cold weather. All outdoor workers should wear some sort of head covering for this reason.

Protecting the head is even more important in warm weather. V.G. Rocine, a prominent brain research specialist, has found that brain phosphorus melts at 108 degrees; a temperature that can be easily reached if one stays under the hot sun for any length of time without a head covering. When this happens, irreversible brain damage, memory loss and loss of some brain functions can result. Although this example is extreme, brain damage can still be measured in small degrees from frequent exposure to and overheating of the head. Bernard Jensen, a naturopath and chiropractor, states that this is because the brain runs on the mineral phosphorus, which is very effected by heat. Last, but not least, a veil or head covering should be worn by all public workers serving society to ensure cleanliness and purity. Workers in a number of professions wear "veils"—nurses, fast food workers, deli counter workers, restaurant workers and servers, doctors, health care providers, and many more. In fact, when we compare the number of workers who cover their heads to the number who do not, we find that more people probably cover their heads than do not. Aside from personal and public health benefits of the veil, it has numerous other benefits to society. In *Analyzing Visual Data*, Ball and Smith discuss the acknowledgement of sociologists that visual representations are influential in shaping people's views of the world and their interpretations of life. Men use visual data to interpret their relationships with the women around them. Many studies have found that when a person tries to rewire their instinctual perceptions, they are usually only rewired on the surface; their original perceptions still exist on some level. Brain studies show that we exist in a world of constantly varying light variables that force the brain to perform what is called "lateral inhibition;" consequently, it provides us with a "steady" image as opposed to a "true" image of what we see. Furthermore, lateral inhibition networks operate as part of the "unconscious" brain, largely, without providing any information to the "conscious" part of the brain about what they are doing. Therefore, the brain can provide varying perceptions of the world without our even being fully conscious of what it is processing. Further studies cited in *Encyclopedia Britannica* show how a female presents herself to society falls under the category of ritualized behavior through which animals provide specific information to other animals, usually to members of its own species.

Virtually all higher animals, including humans, use displays to some extent to do this, and the best-known displays are visual ones. Some biologists actually restrict the term display to refer to visual signals or gestures. These visual signals, which in animals can be simply a bright color or plume, encourage attraction. In humans, they are usually exhibited in ornamental hair, make up, or clothing. In our society, most of the time attractive hairstyles and clothing are worn for the purpose of making the adorer more attractive (advertising and television have institutionalized this reality). The ever-changing variations in fashion tend to affect the brain because it typically has trouble with constantly adjusting to changing shadows and forms in the world. Reasonably then, through "lateral inhibition," the brain automatically simplifies these images into the unconscious message that attractive hair and clothing are MEANT to attract. Joining these two concepts together, we can see how the human male could receive the signal of "attraction" from the brain before he has enough time to "block" it by "lowering his gaze."

Having to re-form an image already processed by the lateral inhibition network is a cause of stress for most people. Doing this day after day, after seeing many "displays," potentially causes a great cumulative stress on society. In early times, stress caused the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in an outpouring of the hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, and glucocorticoids that were essential to the life-preserving fight or flight reactions of primitive man.

However, the nature of stress for individuals living today is different. It is only occasional that one is confronted with unexpected, overwhelming, life-threatening stresses. Present day stresses arise from many things; among

these are the vast amounts of visual and physical input we are bombarded with in this "information age" of personal freedom. The problem we face in this is that the body still continues to respond in the same fashion as during primitive times, releasing large amounts of these hormones, which can be very harmful. They can cause an increase in blood pressure, damage muscle tissue, lead to infertility, inhibit growth, damage the hippocampus, and suppress the immune system. The two most effective solutions to this problem are, first, to convince the advertising industry, and society as a whole, to alter the presentation of women to our males. The second and more viable way is to simply influence women to dress modestly, which will help ensure that they do not send inappropriate visual signals to men. Covering the hair can also have a beneficial effect on the female psyche as well. Studies of women being interviewed for jobs show that there is a high correlation between what they wear and their perceptions of how successful they will be in their interviews. There are many more examples of how what we wear can influence how we act. Wearing a veil can serve to remind women of their religious duties and behavioral expectations. It can also serve as a reminder to women that we are not only individuals, but also representatives and diplomats of our "Ummah."

12. Hijab for children

Kaniz Fatima

We need to remember that our children are a big amanah (trust) from Allah (SWT). Every child is a potential member of this ummah. So how we build them up is very important. Very likely they will reflect tomorrow what we put into them today; one day we will reap what we have sown. If we ameliorate their nurturing, they will ameliorate their reciprocation. So the first growth stages of our children are the most important years. There is an Arabic saying: Learning in the first stages of life is like carving on stones, while learning in the later years is like drawing on water.

Regarding hijab for children, first of all we have to have very clear knowledge about a child's dress code. Scholars say that Hijab is not fard or obligatory for girls at their early ages; it becomes fard when they reach puberty. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said to Asma', daughter of Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with them): "O Asma! Once a girl reaches puberty, nothing of her body may be seen (by non-*mahrams*) except this and these, (he pointed to his face and hands while saying so)." Islamic scholars also say that it is haraam (prohibited) to dress a child in clothes that adults are forbidden to wear. Clothes with images are forbidden for adults, so it is also haraam to dress children in them.

Though hijab is not a must for younger girls, we have to take the advantage of early years to make them familiar with the hijab culture. It is not as easy as it sounds. The following tips can help us in this regard:

- Introduce children with hijab culture at early age: Parents must take advantage of the early stages of their children's lives. If we lose these days of their childhood innocence, we will lose our best chance to achieve certain goals with our children. Do not think she will do it when she reaches the age. Tell her that we are Muslim and we have a unique identity, we must follow Allah and Prophet (SAWS) in all aspects of life, our dress style included. As Muslim we can't dress like others, we have to follow our own dress code. The recommended age for trying hijab could be 7/8. You may try it bit later if you find that convenient for your child.
- Give them book with hijab pictures: Children like to listen to stories from books and enjoy colorful illustrations thereof. They try to copy the characters of pictures. So books with pictures of hijab donned girls will make them familiar with hijab culture and engender an aspiration to have hijab in her mind.
- Do not impose, don't be rigid: Youngsters should be encouraged to have hijab, but it is not yet incumbent upon them to do so. So we should not be very rigid, and should not impose it on them. We need to remember they do not like to do things that are forced upon them. If they don't want to wear hijab, try to make them understand and offer them something they like. When they do follow, give them some form of positive reinforcement like a hug, a kiss on the forehead, etc.

- Take time to make them understand: Do not expect that children will follow your every word all the time. They have their own choices and personalities, although they are in their early ages. So be patient and take time. Persuade them when they are in a mood to listen to you.
- Treat them according to their nature: All children are not of similar type. Even the nature of siblings differs. So when you approach them with hijab, do it according to their nature. Some may listen to you immediately, some may not. Try to read their mind why they are opposing and then take measures to remove the obstacles.
- Do not hurt them: Some children may show very negative attitude which may irritate and outrage you. Show your dissatisfaction, but not anger. Hurting their feelings may make them more stubborn. Do not accuse them, do not scold them or yell at them, as that will only drive them away.
- Make the hijab comfortable and desirable for them: Consider the colour of the hijab you present before them; if the child likes this or not; whether the material of the cloth is comfortable and suits the weather. In summer use light scarf and in winter it should be bit heavy.
- Try to make them smart and nice looking: Children at this age are very fashion sensitive. So choose nice hijab, and help them to put it on in such a way so that they look smart.
- In choosing hijab consider the surrounding culture: Hijab does not mean a particular dress, rather it is a dress code. So try to cope up with indigenous culture. Don't choose a dress which is odd in your surrounding. It may create a negative notion in your child's mind and in those of her friends about Islam.
- Let your children mix with other girls with hijab: Friendship is very important in this regard. Help your child to build relationship with other hijab donned girls. Visit their house and also invite them on several occasions. Discourage them to mix up with girls from very open families at this very early age because they pickup things very quickly and without giving a good thought.

Finally we have to make du'aa' or supplication for our children: 'O our Sustainer! Grant that our spouses and our offspring be a joy to our eyes, and cause us to be foremost among those who are conscious of You!' (Surah Al-Furqan, verse 74)

13. Hijabed Like Me **A Non Muslim Woman Experiments with Hijab**

Kathy Chin

I walked down the street in my long white dress and inch-long, black hair one afternoon. Truck drivers whistled and shouted obscenities at me. I felt defeated. I had just stepped out of a hair salon. I had cut my hair short, telling the hairdresser to trim it as she would a guy's.

I sat numbly as my hairdresser skillfully sheared into my shoulder-length hair with her scissors, asking me with every inch she cut off if I was freaking out yet. I wasn't freaking out, but I felt self-mutilated.

I Was Obliterating My Feminist

It wasn't just another haircut. It meant so much more. I was trying to appear androgynous by cutting my hair. I wanted to obliterate by femininity.

Yet that did not prevent some men from treating me as a sex object. I was mistaken.

It was not my femininity that was problematic, but my sexuality, or rather the sexuality that some men had ascribed to me based on my biological sex.

They reacted to me as they saw me and not as I truly am.

Why should it even matter how they see me, as long as I know who I am? But it does.

I believe that men who see women as only sexual beings often commit violence against them, such as rape and battery. Sexual abuse and assault are not only my fears, but my reality. I was molested and raped. My experiences with men who violated me have made me angry and frustrated.

How do I stop the violence? How do I prevent men from seeing me as an object rather than a female? How do I stop them from equating the two? How do I proceed with life after experiencing what others only dread? The experiences have left me with questions about my identity.

Am I just another Chinese-American female? I used to think that I have to arrive at a conclusion about who I am, but now I realize that my identity is constantly evolving.

My Experience of Being 'Hijabed'

One experience that was particularly educational was when I "dressed up" as a Muslim woman for a drive along Crenshaw Boulevard with three Muslim men as part of a newsmagazine project. I wore a white, long-sleeved cotton shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, and a flowery silk scarf that covered my head, which I borrowed from a Muslim woman. Not only did I look the part, I believed I felt the part. Of course, I would not really know what it feels like to be Hijabed— I coined this word for the lack of a better term— everyday, because I was not raised with Islamic teachings.

However, people perceived me as a Muslim woman and did not treat me as a sexual being by making cruel remarks. I noticed that men's eyes did not glide over my body as happened when I was not Hijabed. I was fully clothed, exposing only my face.

I remembered walking into an Islamic center and an African-American gentleman inside addressed me as "sister" and asked where I came from. I told him I was originally from China. That did not seem to matter. There was a sense of closeness between us because he assumed I was a Muslim. I did not know how to break the news to him because I was not sure if I was or not.

I walked into the store that sold African jewelry and furniture. Another gentleman asked me as I was walking out as if I was a Muslim. I looked at him and smiled, not knowing how to respond. I chose not to answer.

Being Hijabed Changed Others' Perception of Me

Outside the store, I asked one of the Muslim men I was with, "Am I Muslim?" He explained that everything that breathes and submits is.

I have concluded that I may be and just do not know it. I have not labeled myself as such yet. I do not know enough about Islam to assert that I am a Muslim. Though I do not pray five times a day, go to a mosque, fast, nor cover my head with a scarf daily, this does not mean that I am not a Muslim. These seem to be the natural manifestations of what is within.

How I am inside does not directly change whether I am Hijabed or not. It is others' perception of me that was changed. Repeated experiences with others in turn create a self-image.

Hijab as Oppression: A Superficial and Misguided View

I consciously chose to be Hijabed because I was searching for respect from men. Initially, as both a Women's Studies major and a thinking female, I bought into the Western view that the wearing of a scarf is oppressive. After this experience and much reflection, I have arrived at the conclusion that such a view is superficial and misguided: It is not if the act is motivated by conviction and understanding.

The Most Liberating Experience of My Life

I covered up that day out of choice, and it was the most liberating experience of my life. I now see alternatives to being a woman. I discovered that the way I dress dictated others' reaction towards me. It saddens me that this is a reality.

It is a reality that I have accepted, and have chosen to conquer rather than be conquered by it. It was my sexuality that I covered, not my femininity. The covering of the former allowed the liberation of the latter.

This article was originally published in Al-Talib, the newsmagazine of the Muslim Students' Association of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) in October 1994.

14. HIJAB IN THE WORKPLACE

Q&A

Q: What is hijab?

A: Rules regarding Muslim women's (and men's) attire are derived from the Qur'an, Islam's revealed text, and from the traditions (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In the Qur'an, God states: Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty...And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and adornments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers...[a list of exceptions] Chapter 24, verses 30-31.

In one tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying: ...If a woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen but this— and he pointed to his face and hands.

From these and other references, the vast majority of Muslim scholars and jurists, past and present, have determined the minimum requirements for hijab: 1) Clothing must cover the entire body, with the exception of the face and the hands. 2) The attire should not be form-fitting, sheer or so eye-catching as to attract undue attention or reveal the shape of the body. 3) The clothing cannot be similar to male clothing or to the distinctive clothing worn by people of other faiths. 4) Clothing must not suggest fame or status.

There are similar, yet less obvious requirements for a Muslim male's attire. He must always be covered from the navel to the knees. A Muslim man should similarly not wear tight, sheer, revealing, or eye-catching clothing. The prohibitions against wearing clothing of the opposite sex or distinctive clothing of other faiths are also the same. In addition, a Muslim man is prohibited from wearing silk clothing (except for medical reasons) or gold jewelry. A Muslim woman may wear silk or gold.

(References: The Muslim Woman's Dress, Dr. Jamal Badawi, Ta-Ha Publishers; Hijab in Islam, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Al-Risala Books; The Islamic Ruling Regarding Women's Dress, Abu Bilal Mustafa Al-Kanadi, Abul-Qasim Publishing)

Q. Is Islamic dress appropriate for modern times?

A: Islamic dress is modern and practical. Muslim women wearing Islamic dress work and study without any problems or constraints.

Q. How can a woman have a role in this century if she is never given the real freedom to express herself?

A: I am very sorry to hear this kind of complaint because it highlights the heart of the problem when we speak of women in Islam today. It goes to the heart of the disjuncture between Islam, as it should be in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and Islam as how it is practiced today in certain cultures. Needless to say, the challenge for Muslim ummah in the 21st century is to try and close this unfortunate gap which exists in various fields. Women's issues and the so-called "woman question" are at the frontiers of this challenge. It is for people like you to educate themselves in genuine Islam from its sources and to contribute to raising awareness in the community beginning with your own children and families. As a Muslimah, you are duty-bound to Allah (SWT) and to no one else, to persevere and persist, to clear ignorance, myths and stereotypes that exist about Islam and about the role of Muslim women.

Q. Does Islamic dress imply that women are submissive or inferior to men?

A: Islamic dress is one of many rights granted to Islamic women. Modest

clothing is worn in obedience to God and has nothing to do with submissiveness to men. Muslim men and women have similar rights and obligations and both submit to God.

Q: But aren't there Muslim women who do not wear hijab?

A: Yes, some Muslim women choose not to wear hijab. Some may want to wear it but believe they cannot get a job wearing a head scarf. Others may not be aware of the requirement or are under the mistaken impression that wearing hijab is an indication of inferior status.

Q: Why is hijab becoming an issue for personnel managers and supervisors?

A: More Muslim women are entering the work force. In many cases, these women wish both to work and to maintain their religious convictions. It should be possible to fulfill both goals.

Q: What issues do Muslim women face in the workplace?

A: Muslim women report that the issue of attire comes up most often in the initial interview for a job. Some interviewers will ask if the prospective employee plans to wear the scarf while at work. Others may inappropriately inquire about religious practices or beliefs. Sometimes the prospective employee, feeling under pressure to earn a living, may take off the scarf for the interview and then put it on when hired for the job.

Q: What can an employer reasonably require of a woman wearing hijab?

A: An employer can ask that an employee's attire not pose a danger to that employee or to others. For example, a Muslim woman who wears her hijab with loose ends should not be operating a drill press or similar machinery. That employee could be asked to arrange her hijab so that the loose ends are tucked in. An employer can ask that the hijab be neat and clean and in a color that does not clash with a company uniform.

Q. What to do when your work necessitates interaction with males— and your boss and staff are male?

A: As long as you are modestly dressed, you should be able to work anywhere. A Muslimah is supposed to be actively contributing to society in whatever field it may be, and this is one big reason why a woman should wear modest dress.

Courtesy: www.islam101.com

www.media.isnet.org

15. HIJAB IN THE WORKPLACE

Q&A

Interview

with All-Stars College Student Lubna Ahmad

By Ayesha Ali

Lubna Ahmed was among the top 20 USA TODAY 2004 College Academic All-Stars students. She is majoring in Biomedical engineering at Arizona State University. Her GPA is 4.0 A high school valedictorian at 16, Lubna invented and has applied for a patent on a non-invasive breath sensor for medical applications such as diabetes management. She has received Goldwater Scholarship, the nations' highest undergraduate award in science, mathematics and engineering. She is also a vice president of the Biomedical Engineering Society, a mosque volunteer and an Arthritis Foundation volunteer. Lubna resides in Chandler, Arizona with her parents (Jalil Ahmed and Seema Munir, M.D.) and three siblings. She is a Muhajabah (one who wears hijab

The hijab was almost like the next step in me reaching the next degree of Iman (Faith). It was a gradual process and I always had the desire to wear the hijab. No one pressured me or forced me into it.

Q What were your feelings upon receiving this recognition from USA Today?

When USA Today notified me of the recognition that I was selected to receive, I was amazed and thrilled. I had imagined they contacted me only to request more information or clarification to my application, but it was actually to notify me of the award that I was receiving. I was truly honored to have the privilege of receiving such recognition. I am very thankful and I owe my gratitude to my family for all their support in my life, my professors and colleagues who helped me to reach my academic success, and most importantly to Allah (SWT) who has been the cause of my success and happiness.

Q What role does religion play in your life and how has it helped you on your path and goals?

I strongly feel that religion is an important aspect of life. If I had to identify the two driving forces in my life, it is, without doubt, my family and my faith. I believe that Allah is the Overseer of all things and events, and to Him belongs all the praise of our success in life. There are many qualities of Islam that have helped me to develop a positive and close relationship with Allah. Prayer has been one key aspect through which I am able to connect with Him, and it has been the inspiration for me as I face new challenges and frontiers in my life.

Q What projects and activities are you involved in?

I am a third year student at Arizona State University majoring in Biomedical Engineering. I am the Vice President of the Biomedical Engineering Society at ASU where I also am involved in research. Here, I designed and created a medical device, a non-invasive breath sensor, for the treatment and management of patients with diabetes. It is currently in testing right now and I hope to perfect it as a tool of technology designed to help people with medical ailments. Using academics as my foundation, I designed a curriculum for underprivileged high school girls to help foster an understanding and appreciation for math and science through the use of robotic engineering. I also play the piano and take occasional opportunities to teach others.

Q What factors helped you to decide this choice of projects and activities?

The reasons for choosing to pursue these activities are such to help build a bridge between the knowledge of science and serving the community. I undertook the responsibility of organizing the MSA conference to get an opportunity to interact with other Muslims and to directly serve the Muslim society. Being a teacher for several years at a weekend Islamic school gave me the background to get involved in this project. Secondly, I wished to use my knowledge of science to help others, hence developing the medical device and serving as a volunteer in for high school students helped me to build that connection. Also, involving in these secular activities as a Muslim helped me to expose and educate others to Islam.

Q When did you start practicing hijab and what were your feelings at the time?

I began observing the hijab when I was about 17 years old. My parents are practicing Muslims and have been all their lives. Thus, my siblings and I were raised in a religious environment where we always observed modesty in behavior and dress. So, the hijab was almost like the next step in me reaching the next degree of Iman. It was a gradual process and I always had the desire to wear the hijab. No one pressured me or forced me into it. Probably the most difficult part was finding the right time to actually start. Alhamdulillah, it was not hard for me as I always had the support of my family and I had developed a strong level of faith in myself.

Q As a Muhajabah, what are some of the challenges you faced, including on your way to achieving your goals?

Alhamdulillah, I am grateful to say that I did not face many hardships when I began to wear the hijab. No one turned away from me nor did they treat me rudely. Some people did ask why I chose to wear it and I explained to them. To everyone, I was still the same person because I was still the same personality I

always had been. I also mentioned to some of my immediate peers and colleagues that I was planning to start wearing the hijab and why it was important to me. They were understanding and respectful.

Q What kind of advice would you provide to young Muslim sisters as they pursue their academics and activities?

If I had to convey a message to young Muslim sisters, I would advise them to learn, understand, and know who you are. Be educated in your faith. Learn critical thinking skills and be focused on your goals. Always remember to be thankful to who guided and supported you through your process and helped you reach your success. And, also importantly, do not forget to enjoy and appreciate life as you pursue your goals. This has to start with Muslims. We must understand why we wear hijab (not out of modesty, nor to keep from tempting men and certainly not because we are like a precious gem to be locked away). We wear hijab so people will know that we are Muslim.

Modesty is a part of our dress and conduct, but it is also part of a man's dress and conduct.

Dress does not tempt men to wrong action; mental sickness causes them to do wrong things.

Only when Muslims set aside the cultural teachings about women and hijab, we can begin to help non-Muslims understand our commitment, our pride in being recognized as Muslims. There must be more education on the role and rights of women according to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Having said this, I would also mention that both men and women must stop using the hijab as a way to judge a woman's iman. There is much work yet to do.

Courtesy: www.messageonline.org

16. **Personality**

HUDA SHAARAWI (1879-1947):

An upper-class woman, Huda was born and educated in the harem system, a system designed, in principle, to confer respect upon women and to separate women and children from the men. In practice, the harem system and veiling served to oppress women. According to Badran,

Huda Shaarawi was a pioneering Muslim feminist from Egypt and was the founder of Egyptian Feminists Union. As she was an early twentieth century Egyptian nationalist and feminist, Shaarawi's life and works had a profound influence on Egyptian women, indeed, on women throughout the Arab world.

Veiling and high seclusion were the marks of prestige and sought-after symbols of status. Only the few very wealthy families could afford the most elaborate measures for secluding women — the grand architectural arrangements and eunuchs (castrated men who were usually slaves from Sudan) to guard their women and act as go-between with the outer world. In the houses of the poor, women and men were crammed together in the same, limited space. However, when poor women went out— as they did far more often than their richer sisters— they too veiled. Life was different in the countryside, where any visitor could plainly see peasant women moving freely with faces unencumbered by the veil. Veiling and

the harem system were social conventions connected with economic standing. They had nothing whatsoever to do with Islam.

Her wealthy father died when she was still a small child. She was married at age 13 to her cousin. She remained separated from him for 7 years, years in which she matured into a woman. Over the next few years, she gave birth, first to a daughter, Bathna, and then to a son, Muhammad.

Speaking French and Turkish, as well as Arabic, and, using her husband's influence, Huda had high contracts throughout Egyptian society and in the foreign community. One evening while at the opera, Marguerite Clement, traveling on a tour sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment, asked Huda if Egyptian women were in the habit of giving and attending lectures. Huda admitted that they were not, but suggested that Clement give a lecture for the women. Chancing to run into Princess Ain al-Hayat, the Princess decided to personally sponsor the lecture. Huda's husband arranged for the lecture to be given in a lecture hall at the university. The lecture was a success. Clement was invited to give a series of lectures, and the lecture hall was reserved for the women on Fridays. Soon, Egyptian women began to speak. And that is how the first public lecture for and by Egyptian women was given. Eventually, the lecture series grew into the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women. Huda's next excursion into social reform occurred a short time later when the same Princess asked Huda to establish a dispensary for the poor, which, at Huda's suggestion, was eventually expanded to teach classes in infant care, family hygiene, home management, and the like.

Social progress was halted by the advent of World War I. But shortly after the war, Egyptian men demanded independence from English occupation. Huda's husband was treasurer of Wafd, the political party which was leading the effort for Egypt's independence. Leading the first demonstration of women against the British occupation, Huda early established her own reputation as a fighter for her country's freedom. To coordinate women's efforts in the independence movement, Huda formed the Wafdist Women's Central Committee.

Huda's husband died in 1923 and she was left without a strong male-authority figure to control her movements (her father, her brother, and her husband were all dead). With an impeccable reputation and a huge fortune, and being trained in the techniques of organization building, she turned her attention away from the independence movement toward the movement for woman's equality.

An event in her life in 1923, as represented in her autobiography, remains a milestone in the history of Arab Muslim women, standing up for their rights and dignity, challenging the orthodox religious establishment and the prevailing male-dominant culture. She grew up in a well-known family where, parallel to commitment to women's education, strict adherence to dress code prevailed. As Muslim women, they were required not just to wear a long outer-garment, but also face-covering (niqab). As she grew up and availed the opportunity to educate herself about Islam with an open and independent mind, she discovered, as many Muslim men and women did, that face-covering was not mandated by Islam. Knowing the fact was easy, but unveiling herself was not. It would be a revolutionary step, with potentially serious social consequences in a traditional society. In 1923, Shaarawi went to attend an international feminist conference in Rome and her picture shows her with friends without any niqab (face covering) [Harem Years, p. 128]. While she was quite free in Rome in this regard, due to an entrenched orthodoxy and the domestic cultural milieu, it was still quite different in Egypt. A milestone was set upon her return from the conference. When at the Cairo rail station, she and one of her friends deliberately and publicly took off their niqab (facecovering) [p. 8]. (Here it should be made clear that Shaarawi did not discard her hijab, what she did was taking off her face-covering.) The momentous event shook the entire country and its reverberations reached far beyond. Another "episode in the summer of 1923 is telling: she was sailing to Egypt on the same boat that carried Saad Zaghlul, accompanied by his wife. . . . Huda's veil now simply covered her head; her face was free. Observing this, Saad asked Huda to help his wife arrange her veil the same way." [pp.129-130]

Her autobiography includes several pictures of herself, wearing scarf, without any face-covering (niqab). The photograph of Shaarawi (at age 44), as shown above, "is one of the first photographs of an unveiled Egyptian woman to appear in local newspapers" [p. 121]. Once she removed the niqab, her friends also joined in. The picture of Wafd women's committee meeting in 1925 is quite illustrative. Shaarawi's step to

take off niqab already made its mark on Egyptian women. In that Wafd meeting, as the caption mentions, only four women wore face-covering, "the rest are Hijabed" (i.e., dressed with a scarf or headgear).

Huda founded Egyptian Feminist Union and served as President from 1923 until 1947. She was a member of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and served as its vice-president in 1935; she was founding President of the Arab Feminist Union (1945-1947) and supported the founding of *al-Mara al-Arabiyya*, the newsletter of the Arab Feminist Union (1946); founded the magazines *l'Egyptienne* (1925) and *al-Misriyya* (1937). Huda was also a speaker throughout the Arab world and throughout Europe.

17. **Fatwa**

Q Dear scholars, As-Salamu `alaykum. For the past three-and-a-half years, I've been suffering from a condition called scalp folliculitis. This is an inflammation of the hair follicles caused by excessive heat and sweat, and at times this problem of mine becomes an infection because of the heat and bacteria triggered by the sweat. When I first discovered the problem, I began to wear cotton scarves and cut my hair very short, and thinned my hair, as well, to accommodate my hijab. This worked and gave me some relief at the time. I took the medications prescribed by my dermatologist and, *al-hamdu lillah*, my condition disappeared. However, the doctor did tell me that this condition is known to be chronic and that this would not be the last time I'd see it.

Being optimistic, I didn't believe him, and put my trust in Allah and believed I would not have this problem again. To my dismay, I continually had this problem and it reappeared time and time again over the past three years. Since then, I have ingested so many antibiotics that I've developed a resistance to the medication and now they don't give me any relief. I sought the advice of two other dermatologists; each gave me the same diagnosis. Because I work full-time, I find it very difficult to wear my scarf now, as it irritates my skin and worsens my problem. I don't know what to do. I know I have to wear my hijab, but it is very itchy and intolerable. My dermatologist told me that if I take it off for a couple of months, I would notice a difference in my scalp. I would like to take off my hijab to heal my scalp, and then return to it as soon as I am healed, but I don't know if this is the best decision. Please advise.

In Islam there are exceptions allowed for people in times of necessity. If your medical condition requires that you should take off your hijab, you may do so until your condition improves, without incurring sin. However, it is best advised to try other alternatives such as taking a vacation in order to avoid displaying your hair in front of non-*mahrams*. You can also cover your hair only in the presence of male non-*mahrams*. If this is not possible, then you may uncover your hair until your condition improves.

Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, a senior lecturer and Islamic scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, states:

If your condition is unbearable for you and the dermatologist has advised you that you can only get relief by temporarily taking off your hijab, then I think you fall in the category of those who are excused. In Islam there are exceptions allowed for people in similar cases. This can be proven by pointing to the concession the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) allowed to some of his Companions to wear silk because of their medical condition, even though wearing silk in general is *haram* (unlawful).

But I must caution you against resorting to this action purely on your own personal likes or dislikes; it can only be done if there is a genuine medical reason. For exceptions in Shari`ah are simply exceptions and

not general rules. They are bound by specific conditions and circumstances in such a way that the allowance is lifted as soon as the condition or circumstance changes.

Sheikh `Abdul-Majeed Subh, a prominent Azhar scholar, adds:

First of all, try to take a vacation at this period and to stay home in order to avoid displaying your hair in front of non-*mahrams*. If this is not possible and you are in need to work, then you can try to cover your hair only while working and when you come back home, uncover your hair. Also, if, depending on your work, there are times at work when male non-*mahrams* are not present, you can uncover your hair.

But if we suppose that this is not enough, then this is an excuse for you to uncover your hair until your condition improves.

Having stated the above, we advise you, dear sister, to try to use henna after consulting the doctor, and we ask Allah Almighty to cure you.

Q Respected scholars, As-Salamu `alaykum. Please enlighten us — according to Islam — on how we, Muslim women, should conduct ourselves especially when getting out. Can we go out to fulfill our needs? If so, how should our behavior and dress be? Jazakum Allah khayran.

Islam does not prohibit women from going out to fulfill their needs, but it lays down a proper code of behavior, which is primarily intended to safeguard the modesty, dignity and honor of both men and women. Allah, the Creator of humans, knows our nature better than ourselves, and thus He has prescribed appropriate rules of behavior and appearance to be observed when men and women interact with one another in a social milieu. These rules of interaction also include a prescription for modesty in dress, talk and walk, etc.

In his well-known book, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, **Sheik Yusuf Al-Qaradawi**, states:

“The correct Islamic behavior required of Muslim women which keeps them from wantonly displaying their attractions is characterized by the following:

1- Lowering the gaze: Indeed, the most precious ornament of a woman is modesty, and the best expression of modesty is in the lowering of the gaze, as Almighty Allah says, “...And tell the believing women that they should lower their gazes...” (An-Nur: 31)

2- Not intermingling with men in such a way that their bodies come in contact or that men touch women, as happens so often today in the movies, theaters, university classrooms, auditoriums, buses, streetcars, and the like. Ma`qal ibn Yasar narrated that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said, “It is better for one of you to be pricked in the head with an iron pick than to touch a woman whom it is unlawful to touch.” (Reported by at-Tabarani and al-Bayhaqi)

3- Her clothing must conform to the standards laid down by the Islamic Shari`ah, which are as follows:

a) Her dress must cover her entire body with the exception of “**that which is apparent**”, which, according to the most preferable interpretation, refers to the face and hands.

b) It must not be transparent, revealing what is underneath it. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) has informed us that, "Among the dwellers of hell are such women as are clothed yet naked, seducing and being seduced. These shall not enter the Garden, nor shall (even) its fragrance reach them." Here, the meaning of "clothed yet naked" is that their light, thin, transparent garments do not conceal what is underneath. Once some women of Bani Tamim, who were clad in transparent clothes, came to see `A'ishah, and she remarked, "If you are Believers, these are not the clothes which befit believing women." On another occasion, when a bride wearing a sheer and transparent head-covering was brought into her presence, she commented, "A woman who dresses like this does not believe in *surat* an-Nur." (This is *surah* 24, which together with *surah* 33 (al-Ahzab) contains many injunctions concerning purity and propriety, man-woman relations, and dress.)

c) Her dress must not be too tight so as to define the parts of her body, especially its curves, even though it may not be transparent. This describes many of the styles of clothing current in the sensuous, materialistic civilization of the Western world, whose fashion designers compete with one another in devising clothing for women which tantalizingly emphasizes the bustline, waist, and hips, etc., in order to elicit the lustful admiration of men. Women who wear such clothes likewise fall under the definition of **"clothed yet naked"**, since such a dress is often more provocative than one which is transparent.

d) She must not wear clothes which are specifically for men, such as trousers in our time. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) cursed women who try to resemble men and men who resemble women, and prohibited women from wearing men's clothing and vice-versa.

e) In her choice of clothing, she should not imitate non-Muslims, whether they are Jews, Christians, or pagans, for Islam disapproves of conformity to non-Islamic modes and desires its followers to develop their own distinctive characteristics in appearance, as well as in beliefs and attitudes. This is why Muslims have been asked to be different from non-Muslims in many aspects, and why the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) has said, "Whoever imitates a people is one of them."

4- The Muslim woman walks and talks in a dignified and business-like manner, avoiding flirtatiousness in her facial expressions and movements. Flirting and seductive behavior are characteristics of wrong-minded women, not of Muslims. Allah Almighty says:

"Then do not be too pleasant of speech, lest one in whose heart there is a disease should feel desire (for you)..." (Al-Ahzab: 32)

5- She does not draw men's attention to her concealed adornment by the use of perfume or by jingling or toying with her ornaments or other such things. Allah says:

"They should not strike their feet in order to make known what they hide of their adornment..." (An-Nur: 31)

The women of the time of *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic period) used to stamp their feet when they passed by men so that the jingling of their ankle-bracelets might be heard. The Qur'an forbade this, both because it might tempt a lecherous man to pursue her and also because it demonstrates the evil intention of the woman in attempting to draw the attention of men to herself. Similar is the Islamic ruling concerning the use of fragrant perfumes, since here again the intention is to attract men by exciting their desire. A hadith states, "The woman who perfumes herself and passes through a gathering is an adulteress." (Reported by Abu Dawud and at-Tirmidhi) This hadith has also been reported by an-Nasa'i, Ibn Khuzaymah, and Ibn Hibban in the following words: "Any woman who perfumes herself and passes by a group of people so that her scent reaches them is an adulteress." Al-Hakim also reported this hadith and said that it has sound transmitters.

From all this we know that Islam does not require, as some people claim, that a woman should remain confined to her house until death takes her out to her grave. On the contrary, she may go out for prayer, for her studies, and for her other lawful needs, both religious and secular, as was customary among the women of the families of the Companions and the women of later generations. Moreover, this early period of Islam is considered by all Muslims to be the best and most exemplary period in the history of Islam. Among the women of this time were those who took part in battles in the company of the Prophet himself (peace and blessings be upon him), and after that under the caliphs and their commanders. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) told his wife Sawdah, "Allah has permitted you to go out for your needs." (Reported by al-Bukhari) He also said, "If someone's wife asks his permission to go to the mosque, he should not deny it to her." (Reported by al-Bukhari) On another occasion he said, "Do not prevent the bond-maids of Allah from (going to) Allah's mosques." (Reported by Muslim.)

Some very strict scholars are of the opinion that a woman is not allowed to see any part of a man who is not her *mahram* (unmarriageable relative). They base their ruling on a hadith reported by at-Tirmidhi on the authority of Nabhan, the slave of Umm Salmah, that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) told Umm Salmah and Maymunah, his wives, to veil themselves when Ibn Umm Maktum entered. "But he is blind," they said. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) replied, "Are you blind, too? Do you not see him?"

However, researchers say that the manner in which this hadith has been transmitted renders it unsound. While the narrator here is Umm Salmah, the transmitter is her slave Nabhan, who had no concern with the incident nor any need to report it. Even if the hadith is sound, it simply shows that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was very strict in respect to his wives because their exceptional status required greater modesty on their part; Abu Dawud and other great scholars have commented on this exceptional position of the wives of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). In any case, the significance of the following well-established and sound hadith remains uncontested: The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) instructed Fatimah bint Qays to spend the required period of confinement (*'iddah* or waiting period) following the death of her husband at the house of Umm Sharik. But he later changed his mind, saying, "My Companions gather in her house. Go and stay with Ibn Umm Maktum, since he is a blind man. If you uncover yourself he will not see you." (*Tafsir al-Qurtabi*, vol. 11, p. 228.)"

Q Dear dignified scholars, I would like to know what does Islam say about mixing between men and women as many say that it is *haram* (unlawful) while others give a loose rein to themselves in this regard.

The eminent Islamic scholar **Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi** says:

In principle, contacts between men and women are not totally rejected; rather, recommendable so long as a noble objective is intended and the subject itself is lawful such as acquiring beneficial knowledge, good work, charitable project, obligatory Jihad or many other deeds that require the efforts and the co-operation the both sexes.

However, this by no means calls for transgressing the limits and forgetting about the nature of both sexes. In all their dealings, both men and women are to abide by the teachings of Islam that call for co-operation on the basis of goodness and piety while observing the rules of morality and politeness.

The following are the conditions that must be met when there is a contact between both sexes:

1- Both parties should adhere to lowering the gaze. No lustful look should exist. Almighty Allah says:

“Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed.” (An-Nur: 30-31)

2- A Muslim woman should observe the Muslim dress code. The Muslim dress for women, as well-known, covers the whole body except for the face and the hands. It is neither tight nor light in a way that describes the features of the body.

3- General morality should be adhered to. In other words, a woman should be serious in speech and decent in way of walking, nipping any trial of Satan to spread immorality in the bud. Also, no perfumes are to be worn while being away from home, for the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) says: “Any woman who wears perfumes and then passes by a group of men and they smell it, she is an adulteress.”

4-No man and woman are allowed to be together in a place where no other people exist, for the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) says: “(Doing so) their third mate will be Satan i.e. leading them to sin.” This applies also to the relatives of the husband as the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) says: “Beware of sitting with women alone!” They (the Companions) said: “What about the relative of the husband, O Messenger of Allah?” He said: “A relative of the husband is death i.e. the cause of death.” This is because a relative of a husband may stay for a long time and thus the danger of sin becomes greater.

5- Finally, we would like to note that all these contacts are not to be given loose rein. They are to be carried out according to need and reasonable interaction. Contacting men, no Muslim woman is allowed to forget about her nature or her role as a woman and an instructor of all Muslim generations.

Courtesy: www.islamonline.net

18. **Current world**

Australian Policewoman Allowed to Wear Hijab

MELBOURN, November 28, 2004 (IslamOnline & News Agencies) - A 30-year-old former graphic designer who hails from Lebanon made history this week when she became the first Victoria Police officer to wear hijab as part of her uniform.

Maha Sukkar graduated from the police academy on Friday, November 26, with 49 recruits in a ceremony attended by Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon and Police Minister Andre Haermeyer, the *Herald Sun* reported on Saturday, November 27, 2004.

"Police designed a headdress -- known as a hijab -- to meet health and safety requirements," the paper said.

Constable Sukkar, who hails from Lebanon, was involved in the design, including testing several types before settling on one with a Velcro to enable its release should she get caught in a physical scuffle.

The specially designed headwear had to be designed to meet both religious and occupational health and safety standards, the Australian Associated Press reported.

A Dream

Constable Sukkar said she was very proud to be a police officer and her family had flown all the way from Lebanon for the big day, the *Herald* added. "It has been a dream since I came to this country four years ago," she said. "And now it's here." Sukkar said she was not worried about anybody picking on her because of her hijab. "People can't understand things they don't know about," she noted. "But once they know about me and my religion, they accept it totally and there is no problem at all." Sukkar said she does not expect the headpiece would attract any unwanted attention, but if it did she would handle it "just like any other police officer."

Commenting on the move, *The Australian* newspaper said "Sukkar stood tall despite being the shortest recruit on parade at her police graduation ceremony."

Support

The former graphic designer was supported by her parents and friends from the Muslim community, *The Age*, Melbourne's oldest newspaper, said. "At first we were worried by how people would respond but we really admired her courage and she has been an inspiration to us," said her best friend, Aiesha Hussain, at the ceremony.

Chief Commissioner Nixon said Victoria Police wanted to attract more women and more recruits from culturally diverse backgrounds that reflected the community, *The Age* said.

"I think this is Victoria Police showing that we are very welcoming of people from a whole range of backgrounds and nationalities who want to join us." Australian Muslims have grown to represent a significant section of the Victorian population. Some Muslim organisations estimate as high as 350,000 the number of Muslims in Australia.

The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) is the umbrella organization of Islamic societies in Victoria and their sole representative body to Australian government and Australian community at large. It is a member of

the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), the umbrella organization of all Islamic Councils in Australia.

US University Allows Revert Muslim athlete to Wear Hijab

CAIRO , September 15, 2004 (IslamOnline.net) – The University of South Florida has ruled that one of her Muslim athletes is entitled to wear hijab during basketball competitions.

After a meeting between university officials and representatives from the Florida office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-FL), the university allowed Andrea Armstrong to wear the Muslim headscarf during the basketball activities and to reinstate her athletic scholarship.

The University also agreed to work with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to allow 22-year-old Armstrong to wear hijab during her team's matches in the new basketball season, CAIR said Wednesday, September 15. Armstrong, who recently reverted to Islam, complained that she was forced to quit her basketball team and deprived of athletic scholarship after she insisted on wearing hijab during the basketball games.

"An athlete should not be asked to choose between engaging in healthy sporting activities and her deeply-held religious beliefs," said Bedier. He further said Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to urge to teach children activities such as swimming, archery and horseback riding.

'Just to Play'

Andrea, a co-captain of her basketball team, said her coach Jose Fernandez forced her to leave the team after she told him she would wear long pants, long-sleeve shirts and a hijab during the basketball activities. "I just want to play," the Muslim player told the *St. Petersburg Times* Saturday, September 11. "I've been doing this since third grade. This is my life," she added. Armstrong said Fernandez told her the clothing would make teammates uncomfortable and also said Islam oppressed women. She also said he telephoned her parents in Oregon and told them she had joined a "cult". Armstrong said she was raised Catholic, but began exploring other Christian churches in college. None moved her, she said. At USF, she began asking questions of Muslim students and visited a nearby mosque. In June, she recited the Shahadah (Testimony of Faith) to officially declare herself a Muslim.

"It's pure to me ... it's just beautiful," Armstrong told the paper. "Each day, I look forward to learning more and growing." Islam sees hijab as an obligatory code of dress, not a religious symbol displaying one's affiliations – unlike the symbolic Christian crucifixes or Jewish Kappas. Hijab has taken central stage recently in several European countries, which banned it in state-run schools and public institutions. France has triggered the controversy by adopting a bill banning hijab and religious insignia in public schools.

19. German State Bans Hijab For Teachers

Khaled Schmitt

BONN, April 2, 2005– A southern German state has become the first to ban Muslim public school teachers wearing hijab, a move expected to draw ire of the more than three million Muslims in the country.

The legislature of Baden-Wuerttemberg, led by a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the liberal Free Democrats, of state voted unanimously Thursday, April 1, for the new law.

It will go into effect on April 8, with the exception of Christian and Jewish symbols, much to the consternation of the Muslim community.

Because the Muslim dress code is "open to interpretation" including a possible espousal of the "Islamist political views," it had no place in the classroom, State culture minister Annette Schavan said, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP).

The State justice minister voiced reservations, saying the law could be easily invalidated by the constitutional court for its religious discrimination.

The court, Germany's highest tribunal, ruled in September that Baden-Wuerttemberg was wrong to forbid a Muslim female teacher, Fereshta Ludin, from wearing a hijab in the classroom. But it said Germany's 16 regional states could legislate to ban religious dress code if it was deemed to unduly influence children.

Six states have now put forward draft laws banning hijab or other religious symbols in public institutions. The latest came this week when the left-wing government in Berlin agreed on a sweeping ban on religious insignia that would cover not only Muslim hijab but also large Christian crosses and Jewish skullcaps. It will apply to police officers, judges and bailiffs as well as public school teachers.

Analysts said the Thursday ban came to reflect a wide perception of hijab as a political symbol. In Islam, hijab is a religious obligation which has nothing to do with portraying any political affiliation.

Criticism

Muslim groups have fiercely slammed hijab bans as compromising their freedom of religious expression. The ban could upset relations between the community members and the state. German President Johannes Rau said in an interview published December 28, that there is nothing wrong for Muslim women to put a piece of cloth atop of their heads in obedience to their religion.

Rau said also if hijab was banned, all crosses and other religious signs should be taken off as well. The President asserted that hijab should not be a cause for concern inside the German society, as these concerns are groundless.

In Hesse state, the dominant party, the conservative Christian Democrats, proposed in February a ban on Muslim civil servants wearing hijab. Claiming the covering is a political rather than religious statement, the party leader, Franz-Josef Jung, hoped the ban would come into effect by the summer.

Courtesy: www.islamonline.net

20. Belgian King Renews Support for Hijab-clad Worker

Nasreddine Djebbi

BRUSSELS, April 20, 2005– Belgian King Albert II and Queen Paola have made a rare visit to a factory where a hijab-clad woman was forced to quit her job over death threats, to express their support for the Muslim employee and her factory colleagues against extremist threats.

Naimi Amzil, of a Moroccan origin, was forced to quit her job in the Remmery seafood factory on March 3, after receiving death threats from an extremist group for no reasons other than being a veiled Muslim.

Expressing outrage at the extremist threats, the Belgian monarch decided to visit the factory to back the Muslim employee and other factory workers against the extremist death threats.

During a reception party held on the sidelines of the King's visit Tuesday, April 19, Rick Remmery, the factory owner, said the visit represents a powerful sign of support for the Muslim employee and the factory workers.

He expressed hope that King Albert II's visit to the factory will bring an end to the extremist death threats against the factory staff.

"Arresting the culprits is not a priority for me. All I do care about is to see an end to the series of death threats," said Remmery.

The latest in a series of death threats against the Muslim woman was a letter containing two bullets signed by an extremist group calling itself "New Free Flanders".

The fundamentalist group said that an execution was being prepared, threatening to poison the produce made at the delicatessen factory in west Flanders where she worked.

Amzil and her employer Rick Remmery hit the newsstands after they were received by King Albert II, following their refusal to bow to death threats against them.

The tragic chain of events became known last November when the "New Free Flanders", demanded that Remmery sack 31-year-old Amzil if she insists on wearing hijab, accusing him of being "a bad Belgian who collaborates with Muslims."

The group threatened Remmery and his family in case of noncompliance. Amzil offered to take off her hijab during working hours or resign, but a brave Remmery shrugged off both options.

Sympathy

During the reception party, one of Amzil's sons presented the Belgian King a painting portraying the tragic situation in which the Muslim family lives since the series of the tragic events began.

The Belgian Monarch and Queen also met with hundreds of students of the primary school in which Amzil's sons are studying to show their sympathy.

Afterwards, King Albert and Queen Paola toured the factory, ending with the packing department, where Amzil was working, and listened to an explanation from her colleagues on the role the Muslim employee used to play.

The number of Belgian Muslims amounts to 400,000 of the country's 10 millions, represented before the state bodies by the Islamic Executive Council, which is officially recognized by the king and government.

There are hundreds of mosques as well as cultural and social societies in major Belgian cities.

Several political activists, of Muslim origin, have managed to sit in the Federal Parliament and provincial parliaments as well as municipalities.

The recent government has included the first Muslim minister, Anisa Timsmani, of Moroccan origin, who had to resign under the pressures of Belgian press and media.

The issue of hijab has recently taken a central stage in several European countries.

France triggered a controversy by adopting a bill banning hijab and religious insignia in public schools, a decision dismissed by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) as "discriminatory."

Last year, Belgian ministers locked horns over whether they should follow the French example by passing a law banning hijab in state schools.

Islam sees hijab as an obligatory code of dress, not a religious symbol displaying one's affiliations – unlike the symbolic Christian crucifixes or Jewish Kappas.

21.

I am a Muslim woman

Jenn Zaghoul

I am a Muslim woman
Feel free to ask me why
When I walk,
I walk with dignity
When I speak
I do not lie
I am a Muslim woman
Not all of me you'll see
But what you should appreciate
Is that the choice I make is free

I'm not plagued with depression
I'm neither cheated nor abused
I don't envy other women
And I'm certainly not confused

Note, I speak perfect English
Et un petit peu de Francais aussi
I'm majoring in Linguistics
So you need not speak slowly

I run my own small business
Every cent I earn is mine
I drive my Chevy to school & work
And no, that's not a crime!

You often stare as I walk by
You don't understand my veil
But peace and power I have found
As I am equal to any male!

I am a Muslim woman
So please don't pity me
For God has guided me to truth
And now I'm finally free!