

Why Muslim Women Wear the Veil

لماذا ترتدى المرأة المسلمة الحجاب

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In recent years, a small piece of cloth has managed to cause quite a stir. The scarf or *hijab* that Muslim women wear on their heads is making headlines around the world. Hijab is banned in French public schools and other European countries have adopted, or are drafting similar legislation. In Australia, a radio presenter triggered both debate and outrage when he called for the face veil (*niqab*) to be banned from banks and post offices. Even predominantly Muslim countries such as Turkey and Tunisia ban the hijab in certain government buildings. When a small piece of fabric causes such controversy and conflict, wouldn't it be easier to remove it? Why then, under such circumstances, do Muslim women wear scarves?

There are a myriad of reasons why, but the easy, one sentence answer is, because they believe God has made it an obligation for believing women. In the Quran God tells the believing men and women to lower their gaze and to dress modestly. He (God) specifically addresses women when He asks them not to show off their adornment, except that which is apparent, and draw their veils over their bodies. **(Quran 24:30-31)**

These verses of Quran are known as the verses of *hijab* and it is the consensus of Islamic scholars that they make the wearing of hijab mandatory. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar do enforce a dress code. Women there are expected to cover their hair and wear some sort of loose fitting, full-length garment over their clothes. However, for the majority of Muslim women around the world, to cover, or not to cover, is a freely made choice. God requires Muslim women to dress modestly and to wear the *hijab* in public and in the presence of men who are not close relatives.

Although the English word scarf and the Arabic term *hijab* have become interchangeable, it is worth noting that hijab is more than just a scarf. It is a term that covers a variety of clothing including scarves, but also a variety of different dress styles from around the world. Many have cultural connotations such as the Pakistani *shalwar khamis* or the Afghani *burqa*, but whenever a Muslim woman covers “her adornment”, she is said to be wearing hijab.

The literal meaning of hijab is to veil, to cover, or to screen. Islam is known as a religion concerned with community cohesion and moral boundaries, and therefore hijab is a way of ensuring that the moral boundaries between unrelated men and women are respected. In this sense, the term hijab encompasses more than a scarf and more than a dress code. It is a term that denotes modest dressing and modest behaviour. For instance, if a Muslim woman was wearing a scarf but at the same time using bad language, she would not be fulfilling the requirements of hijab.

The majority of Muslim women wear hijab, to obey God, and to be known as respectable women. **(Quran 33:59)** However, in the last 30 years hijab has emerged as a sign of Islamic consciousness. Many women see wearing the hijab as indicative of their desire to be part of an Islamic revival, especially in countries where the practice of Islam is discouraged or even forbidden.

While those who seek to ban hijab refer to it as a symbol of gender based repression, the women who choose to don a scarf, or to wear hijab, in the broadest sense of the word, do so by making personal decisions and independent choices. They view it as a right and not a burden. Nor do these women regard hijab as a sign of oppression. Women who wear hijab often describe themselves as being “set free” from society’s unrealistic fashion culture.

Hijab frees women from being thought of as sexual objects of desire or from being valued for their looks, or body shape rather than their minds and intellect. No longer slaves to consumerism, hijab liberates women from the need to conform to unrealistic stereotypes and images dictated by the media. Women wearing hijab have expressed that dressing modestly and covering their hair, minimises sexual harassment in the workplace. The aura of privacy created by hijab is indicative of the great value Islam places upon women.

It is true that in some families and in some cultures women are forced to wear hijab but this is not the norm. The Quran clearly states that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256). Women who choose to wear hijab do not make the decision lightly. In fact many women testify that they faced great animosity from their Muslim or non-Muslim families when they decided to cover. Across the globe there are numerous instances of women having to defend their right to wear the hijab.

Hijab can be a symbol of piety and it can be a sign of great inner strength and fortitude. A woman wearing hijab becomes a very visible sign of Islam. While Muslim men can blend easily into any society, Muslim women are often put on the line, and forced to defend not only their decision to cover, but also their religion. Nevertheless, women who wear hijab insist that the advantages far outweigh any disadvantage conjured up by media bias or general ignorance.