

You Don't Have to Wear That in Canada

The *Hijab* Experience of Canadian Muslim Women

by [Katherine Bullock](#)

The furor over the expulsion in 1995 of Quebec high school students who refused to remove their head scarves, with some people declaring the *Hijab* might not be considered proper “Canadian” dress, demonstrates that the West has not yet transcended the negative stereotype of the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman which has generated during the period of Western colonization of the Middle East. Indeed Muslim women in the West are still discriminated against based upon these myths. The aim of this paper is to bring the perspective of some Muslim women who cover willingly into the debate over *Hijab*.

They Say, 'You Don't Have To Wear That In Canada'

Muslim women in *Hijab* are regularly told by Canadians “This is Canada. You're free here. You don't have to wear that thing on you head.” Nur, a university student, discovered one day that this view of *Hijab* can lead people to be quite hostile. At university one day, a woman angrily approached her, asking why Nur was dressed like that, bringing herself so much attention, and bringing “backwardness” to Canada, when feminists had worked so hard for the cause of women for the last twenty years.

The *Hijab* Is A Commandment From God

When asked to explain why they covered, the women I interviewed said they believed that in the Quran God commanded women to cover their hair, and that Prophetic statements backed that up. For them, *Hijab* symbolizes, not oppression or terrorism, as it does in mainstream Western discourse, but “purity,” “modesty,” a “woman's Islamic identity,” and “obedience, or submission to God and a testament that you're Muslim.” Halima, a convert to Islam, adds that *Hijab* symbolizes “the woman's power to take back her own dignity and her own sexuality.”

***Hijab* : Not a Result Of An 'Anti-Woman' Interpretation**

The women I interviewed are aware of feminist arguments that they are being duped by an anti-woman interpretation of the Quran. However, they reject this suggestion, and in so doing demonstrate they do not follow Quranic verses blindly. They have considered various interpretations of the Quran, and chosen that which made most sense to them. They are not, as conventional wisdom in the West suggests, duped women following the dictates of men. They all believed that the Quranic verse asking women to cover their hair is straightforward. Nadia captures the women's position well: “I have to say that when I read the Ayah (verse) that says take your headdress and put it over your bosom (Quran 4:30-31), it's pretty clear to me that there is an assumption that you're wearing a head dress, and that's part of the Islamic dress. I mean why didn't He [God] just say ‘wear a high neck collar?’ {laughs} You know, if it was your bosom that was the important thing then why wasn't there more stress on, um, you know put a button in the top of your shirt, or something, I dunno. Or make sure your bosom is covered, or um, that kind of thing.” Raneem, a convert to Islam, added even if *Hijab* was just a cultural thing, “it's a good thing to do.”

Why Do Muslim Women Wear *Hijab* and Not Men?

Westerners are often puzzled to see Muslim women covering their bodies more than Muslim men do, and see that as a proof of the woman's inferior status. Islam lays out a dress code for both male and female believers, but the requirements for covering are different: a man is to cover from navel to knee, and wear

opaque, loose clothing (tight jeans are out of the question); women cover more, everything but face and hands. All of the women I interviewed believe that these differences are due to inherent differences between men and women. They say that men are more easily turned on sexually than are women. 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 harmonious and peaceful place for human beings, men and women, to interact, do business, and build a healthy civilization.

Even Many Non-Muslim Men Seem To Respect *Hijab*

These women see *Hijab* as a benefit to society, as a protection for women, and as a source of inner peace. Several women, especially converts who started covering in their twenties, felt men, even non-Muslim men, approached them more respectfully, did not try to flirt with them or make “leering” comments, and treated them as ‘persons’ not ‘sex-objects.’ Halima also pointed out that male-female interactions were based on more than just the clothes: *Hijab* is a mode of decorous behaviour as well, “when you're covered, you're not going to be a flirtatious person.”

Women Should Care How Their Dress Affects Men

My interviewees reject the feminist argument that women should not care how their dress affects men. They reply that Muslim women and men are brothers and sisters in faith, and find nothing wrong in helping men practice their faith better. As Zainab, a convert to Islam, said: “women have been exploited so much, and men make such silly fools of themselves over women, that I really think it's a good thing for the men, that women wear *Hijab*. Why encourage jealousy or envy or anything like that? Why encourage the negative emotions?”

Male-Female Differences Not a Sign of Inequality

Many feminists argue that to believe in male-female differences is to accede to women's oppression, because it is these differences which have been used to stop women from realizing their potentials. The Muslim women in the survey do not agree that believing in male-female differences is to believe women and men are unequal. They all believed that men and women are different, and that women and men are equal in Islam. For these women, the principal definition of equality is how human beings are in relation to God. The Quran unequivocally states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. Men and women were created from a single soul, and are both the trustees of God on earth (Quran 2:30), individually responsible and accountable for their actions. However, these women do not believe that male-female differences include traditional western notions of men being more rational or intelligent than women. In addition, the women were not of the opinion that a woman's childbearing nature meant she could not be in the work force, and nor did they believe that a man's duty to support his family financially meant that he should not do household chores. The women referred back to the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), who used to mend his clothes, sweep his house, and perform other chores. The view that men and women have inherent differences is a source of the conflicting understanding of women's position in Islam between the West and my interviewees.

Equality Between Men And Women is Not Sameness

They argue that equality does not have to mean sameness, and criticize western presumptions that if men and women are not doing something in an identical manner they must be unequal. Nor do the women believe that *Hijab* hinders their freedom, rather *Hijab* is seen as a device to facilitate Muslim women's movements outside the home. Nadia expresses the sentiment well: “I kinda see [the *Hijab*] the opposite way [from being a sign of constraint]. I kinda think that if you've covered yourself Islamically, then there wouldn't be a reason for you to stay home, I mean that was the whole point, that you've removed the attention to yourself, so now you're out there to do your business, based on who you are, I mean what you have to say and what you're going to contribute and not what you look like, and that kind of thing.” The women argue that the idea that *Hijab* means women should not go outside is contradicted by the Sunnah of

the Prophet: during his lifetime women were very actively involved in the community, in business, in fighting wars, in scholarship and so on.

Hijab Gives Women Self-Esteem

An aspect of *Hijab* that came through strongly in the interviews was how wearing *Hijab* gives these women sources of inner strength and a high level of confidence and self-esteem. For example, men and women learn from an early age that women (all of them) are beautiful, and this is the reason they cover. That message is good for women's self-esteem, as well as for the way men think about women. The message compares favorably to that of the West where we see anorexia and bulimia on the increase as young women attempt to reach an unattainable ideal of female beauty.

Hijab Gives Women Inner Peace

Many women stressed how comfortable they felt wearing *Hijab*, how it made them feel good about themselves, and brought them a feeling of inner "peace". Ellen, a convert to Islam, stresses that in *Hijab* she feels "like I am doing something to please God, you know....it makes you feel good about yourself. You feel different in a good way, because you're not exposing yourself and you know, you're not exposed to many things like you would be if you're not covering."

Discrimination Against Women Who Wear Hijab

Muslim women in the West who cover suffer daily indignities from the people around them because of the way they dress. The Western image that they are oppressed, or represent a terrorist religion makes it difficult for them to be accepted easily by the Canadian community. Because Islam is not well understood in the West, some converts also have problems with their families, friends and colleagues about becoming Muslim and about wearing *Hijab*. Other women face opposition from their own (Muslim) families as well, in their decision to cover. This is because in many Muslim countries, the West has been seen as the model to imitate in order to 'progress,' and they tried to shed Islam and all that was associated with it. *Hijab* is associated with something 'backward,' 'low-class' people do, or as something only old women do. Many see *Hijab* as ugly and as reducing the chances for a young woman to get married. Muslims who grow up in Canada often object to *Hijab*, taking on the Western perception of the meaning of *Hijab*. Several of the women (born Muslim) in this study had battled families in order to cover.

Some Positive Reactions To Hijab

And yet, many of the women I interviewed stressed that overall they do not get too many hostile reactions and some of them also experience positive reactions from non-Muslims. They think that Toronto (Canada) is so multicultural that people are used to seeing all different kinds of dress.

Bringing Up The Hijab Question When It's Not Relevant

Sometimes Muslim women have problems with people in situations where their identity is really irrelevant to the situation at hand. Zainab has been a patient in a hospital and had her doctor tell her she should not have embraced Islam because she became a "second class citizen." He asked her "don't you know how badly the women are treated in Islam?" Rania, who is a doctor, finds sometimes patients will interrupt their visit to her to ask her "Where is she from?" Or why is she "dressed like that?" Rania said that she finds that "there's the time to explain and then there's the time to just give a brief answer and go on to other things...I mean you may look like a Muslim, but you have a job to do, and let's talk about why you're here, and I'm the doctor and you're the patient okay?"

The Pressure To 'Look Canadian'

Given these kinds of negative reactions to *Hijab*, it is not surprising that many Muslims try to hide their Islamic identity. The pressure for Muslims to assimilate to the ways of the West is great. Safiyah is under such pressure from her husband to “look Canadian”. He did not seem to mind that she wore *Hijab* in Algeria, but in their first six months in Canada, so many people stared at them, that he felt uncomfortable with her in *Hijab*. Although the staring didn't bother Safiyah, her husband has successfully pressured her to stop covering. The women I interviewed referred to Canada as a multicultural and multi faith society in a positive way, and appreciate the liberty and protection Canadian law gave them to practice their religion as any other group can. They thought as does Halima: “if Canada boasts you can practice your religious freedom of thought and beliefs, if a woman believes she should wear her *Hijab* why shouldn't she? She's not hurting anybody, I mean if people can go down Yonge street [the main street in downtown Toronto] almost naked, why should her putting a scarf on her head bother people, why should that upset somebody?”

***Hijab* Is A Respectable Thing**

Muslim women want non-Muslims to think that *Hijab* is a respectable thing, not degrading or “oppressive.” They like to be seen just as an ordinary person who deserves to be respected. Raneem said, “Just take me as I am you know, like they should accept me for who I am, not for the way I look and that goes for everybody.” Halima was clear in her views. She said, “I would like them to respect our choice and not exclude women who wear *Hijab* from certain things [like] in Quebec [...] I mean this is truly oppression, they say the woman is oppressed because she's wearing the *Hijab*, but the true oppression is preventing somebody from going to school because they have a scarf on their head, the larger issue is we'd like everybody to know about Islam so more people would accept it.” Sadia said her *Hijab* should tell others, “That I'm a Muslim, so I want them to know that, I'm doing this because I'm obeying God, and it's a free country and I can do what I want. And that I don't care if I'm accepted by them or not, I'm going to do it anyway.”

Katherine Bullock, a convert to Islam since 1994, was a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto when this article was originally published in the March/April 1998 issue of *Islamic Horizons* magazine.