

Module 7: Body Politics

7a Hijab 101

7b Multiple Meanings & Images of the Hijab

7c Belonging & Banishment – Quebec's Bill 94

7d Educator's Guide to 7c (pdf)

| Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century

introduction

There is widespread miseducation around the issue of the hijab, and discrimination occurs as a result. This presentation outlines basic “101” information about the hijab and other forms of veiling from a religious, cultural and social perspective, including the diversity of opinions about the practice of veiling from within Islam. It also addresses broader questions about body image and pressures on young women from all walks of life to conform to various standards of dress and beauty.

what is a hijab?

- *Hijab* comes from the Arabic word *hajaba* which means to cover or to hide. From this perspective, *hijab* refers to an article of clothing commonly used by women to cover their hair.
- *Hijab* means “curtain,” implying a code of conduct that guides the behaviour of Muslim men and women. The concept of *haya* or modesty is important to understanding the broader meaning of hijab.
- It is important to note that Muslim women's exercise/practice of their modesty depends on the individual woman. There are as many expressions of modesty as there are Muslim women. This means generalizations and stereotypes are problematic among Muslims and others.
- While some Muslim women wear a hijab, others do not for various reasons. This is true around the world, except where the dress code is imposed by the government; e.g., Saudi Arabia and Iran.

modesty in Islam

- *Hijab* means modesty in clothing, appearance, and speech – exemplifying simplicity, decency, and respect for one’s body.
- For some people, *observing hijab* also means not wearing any revealing or provocative clothing, excessive make-up or jewellery, strong perfume, or anything that unnecessarily attracts attention to oneself. It also means not acting in any way that may be flirtatious or sexually suggestive.
- Being modest also means to observe a “curtain” in your eyes that respects the body of the other as well. This is illustrated in the Qur’an, which asks Muslims to “lower their gaze” when they interact with members of the opposite gender.
- Both women and men are required to conform to ideals of modesty and act in a way that exhibits respect, humility, regard for self and others, and commitment to God.
- Some Muslim women find that they can achieve modesty through their values, manner and behaviour without the use of the hijab. They see the hijab as emphasizing the female body rather than moving attention away from it.
- Hijab is a journey for many women who may choose to wear it for part of their lives and then decide to remove it. Conversely some women do not start off wearing the hijab but later decide that they want to adopt it.

variations of the veil

- The hijab is commonly referred to a headscarf. There are various styles of wearing the hijab based on different cultures and regions that Muslim women are part of. The wearing of the hijab predates Islam, and not all Muslim women choose to wear it. Other Muslim women wear the hijab because of their understanding of what it means to be modest according to Islam.

1: <http://peacethought.com/images/hijab2.jpg>

2-3: <http://www.sheclick.com/dresses/latest-hijab-designs-and-styles-collection-2010/attachment/latest-hijab/>

4: <http://hijabislam.blogspot.com/2010/07/orange-color-indonesian-nurzahra-hijab.html>



5: <http://www.pathsofdevotion.com/islam/modesty.html> © iStockphoto.com/Thomas Gordon

6: <http://www.pathsofdevotion.com/islam/modesty.html> © iStockphoto/Lucian Coman

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variations of the veil

- The niqab is a veil that is used to cover the face in addition to the headscarf. While not necessary to do so (as it predates Islam), some Muslim women choose to wear the niqab because of their understanding of what it means to be modest according to Islam.



<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/10/08/canada-muslim-burka-niqb-ban-government.html>



<http://womenagainstshariah.blogspot.com/2008/05/taquiya-beautiful-muslimiya.html>

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variations of the veil

- A burqa is a full head-to-toe outer garment that covers everything except the eye.
- The fully covered style of burqa is mainly worn by women in South Asia (mainly in rural and northern areas) and Afghanistan. A small number of women in other parts of the world also choose to wear the burqa.
- While some women wear it out of personal choice, many in Afghanistan are forced to wear the burqa based on cultural pressures and punishment for not doing so. Fear and coercion make this an oppressive practice.



<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jul/18/burqa-ban-unbritish-immigration-minister>



<http://muhajabat.wordpress.com/2010/01/>

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variations of the veil

- The burqa has existed since before Islam and was traditionally worn to signify wealth and status.
- Many Muslims believe that the burqa is not mandatory according to the Qur'an. Their belief is one of the many interpretations of the requirements for modest clothing.
- In parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh where the burqa is generally worn, it is part of the local culture and not necessarily a religious requirement.
- The burqa gained popularity under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, it is important to note that it was imposed in a political context and not because it reflects Islamic history.

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variations of the veil

- The burqa is a heavily loaded topic because of what it represents to different people.
- To the dominant Western society, the burqa is used to symbolize the ill-treatment of Muslim women by Muslim men and the fear of radical, militant, and extremist views of Islam.
- Politically, the burqa has been (wrongly) used to signify the difference between us (those in the West) and them (those in Afghanistan and Iraq) to gain support for “war against terror.” This creates misconceptions about what the burqa and those wearing it stand for.

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variations of the veil

- This fear of what the burqa and the niqab represent has led several states – such as France, Turkey, Egypt, Italy, Belgium and Australia – and the provincial government of Quebec in Canada, to try to ban the burqa and the niqab in public spaces.
- Recently, the Quebec government proposed Bill 94, which bans Muslim women from covering their faces when delivering or receiving government services.
- Such bans are problematic because they are based on prejudiced ideas about Muslim women. The bans reinforce these negative stereotypes about Muslim women and regulate their bodies by dictating how they should and shouldn't dress.

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variations of the veil

- A chador is a loose piece of clothing that women use to wrap around their bodies. It can be worn alone or with a headscarf.



<http://ivoh.org/image/maartje-computer-chador-0>

misconceptions about the hijab

#1 Muslim women who wear the hijab are forced to wear it.

- This is not true. Some young women wear the hijab due to cultural pressures, similar to how some non-Muslim women may wear trendy clothing out of peer pressure. But most Muslim women make an active choice to wear the hijab. Some even do so against the wishes of their family.

#2 Muslim women wear the hijab at all times (even when sleeping or showering).

- No. Muslim women only wear the hijab in public or when they are in the presence of men who are outside their direct family. In the privacy of their homes, Muslim women leave their hair uncovered.

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misconceptions about the hijab

#3 Only immigrant women or women who cannot speak English wear the hijab.

- It is false that only immigrant women wear the hijab because they hold onto the cultural traditions they had back home and are not able to become “fully Canadian.” Wearing the hijab is not necessarily characteristic of any ethnic group or region Muslim women come from. Nor does it mean that the hijab-observing woman is illiterate or not Canadian. These stereotypes are based on popular media images that negatively portray hijab-wearing Muslim women as “backward.” Many Muslim women, Canadian-born, naturalized citizens, immigrants and converts, are quite educated, even multilingual, and actively choose to wear the hijab to express their Muslim identity as a unique part of their Canadian identity.

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misconceptions about the hijab

#4 Muslim women who wear the hijab are oppressed and are disempowered.

- This is another stereotype spread by the media to support certain political interests that benefit from a negative portrayal of Muslim women. Many popular powerful Muslim women challenge such images of subordinated women, such as Zarqa Nawaz, filmmaker and producer of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, spoken-word artist Sofia Baig, and many more.

#5 Muslim women propagate terrorism and fundamentalism.

- Wearing the hijab does not mean that a woman holds radical views of violence and terrorism. On the contrary, to wear the hijab means to act out of modesty, which means avoiding excess of anything and keeping an overall attitude of humility and respect for yourself and others. Many women who wear a hijab are quite open in their world views and advocate for justice, democracy, women's empowerment, peace and human rights – progressive values that challenge extremist ideals.

why do some Muslim women wear the hijab?

- They believe that wearing the hijab is a part of their faith, and they want to express their Muslim identity.
- For them, it feels empowering to have people focus on them and what they say and not on what they look or dress like.
- They want to respect their bodies and be modest so that they are not treated as sexual objects by men.
- They want to exercise their power by choosing to wear the hijab and challenging Islamophobic stereotypes that portray all Muslim women as backward and oppressed.

why do some Muslim women choose *not* to wear the hijab?

- They do not see the hijab as being obligatory according to Islam. It is perceived as a cultural symbol rather than a religious one.
- For them, *observing hijab* means maintaining a code of conduct where women can appear and act modestly without needing to cover their hair.
- In their view, wearing the hijab does not necessarily mean that a woman is more pious. Living one's faith is more than wearing a piece of cloth.

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why do some Muslim women choose *not* to wear the hijab? (cont'd)

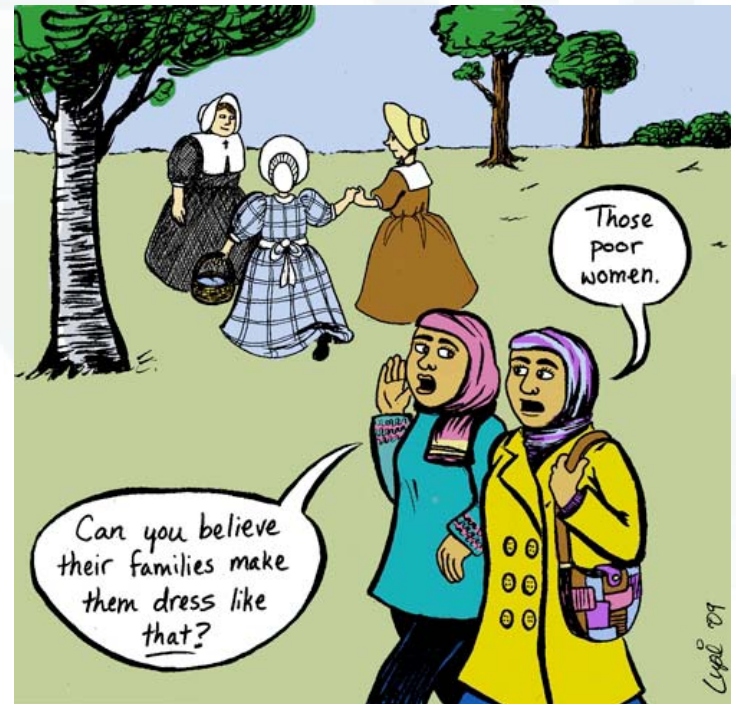
- Women who choose not to wear the hijab also experience discrimination because of this choice.
- Outside Muslim communities, women not wearing the hijab face problems, because they are not easily identified as Muslim or are considered to be not “real” Muslims.
- Within some Muslim communities, women who do not veil may experience pressure to conform. Their faith is judged by others because they are seen as not being “a good” Muslim or “Muslim enough.” They also have to continually justify their stance that wearing the hijab is a cultural choice and not a religious requirement.

“why I do—or don’t—wear the hijab”

- Video
<http://www.rferl.org/video/9660.html>

suggested discussion questions

- Before this presentation, what were your views about the hijab? How has this discussion influenced your own thoughts?



<http://www.hijabtrendz.com/2009/10/11/rather-wear-a-hijab-than-a-bonnet/>

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suggested discussion questions

“Western women, when they see a Muslim woman in the hijab, they think, ah, oppression. But you know, ten-inch heels and a miniskirt is not seen as oppressive. To me it is more oppressive than a putting a scarf on your head”

– Comment by a young Muslim woman in a study about Muslim women’s perceptions of the hijab

Source: T. Ruby (2005). Listening to the voices of hijab. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(1), 54-66.

- Why might this individual view the miniskirt and heels as being oppressive? What does this say about standards of dress and beauty that women in general are pressured to conform to? Do you think the hijab adequately addresses issues of body image in Muslim women? If not, why?