

# Hijab: A Woman's Right to Choose

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THE FIRST thing I'd like to say is that it is impossible to understand why we are having this meeting today without locating it within the increase of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism since 9/11. The grief of the victims of 9/11 has been exploited by George Bush under the banner of the "war on terror" to stamp new US military dominance on the world and to remap the Middle East in its own economic and strategic interests. Old-fashioned imperial conquest is now repackaged and disguised as a defence of "civilisation" against "global terror". The "threat of Muslim fundamentalism" is to White House propagandists today what the bogey of communism was during the cold war. The new phase of imperialism requires a new phase of racism. Today it takes the form of Islamophobia and Muslims the world over have become legitimate targets. In this context, a green light is given to every bigot to spew out their bile against Muslims. And this is seeping even into the official "respectable" discourse of our political establishment.

So, for example, in the UK, the *Daily Telegraph* – traditionally the newspaper for the Conservative Party here – prints articles comparing Muslims to dogs and argues for incorporating anti-Muslim sentiment into official British Conservatism, unashamedly calling for: "An anti-Islam Conservative Party." The fascist British National Party made an attack on Muslims the centre-piece of its television broadcast during the European elections. Such prejudiced views and blinkered thinking, unfortunately, are not just confined to the right. We hear echoes of the right-wing demonisation of us as Muslims even in some left circles.

This is at its most extreme in France where the bulk of the left, to its shame, has joined in the hysteria about the right of female Muslim students to wear a headscarf. Young women, like me, who wear a headscarf are apparently a threat to the values of the French Republic. Alternatively we are told that we need to be rescued from our own oppression, which we are apparently too backward to recognise ourselves. The debate about the danger of Islamic fundamentalism dominates

French discussion about their own Muslim population.

What is the reality confronting Arabs and Muslims in France? There are at least 5 million Muslims in France – the largest Muslim population in Europe. But there is not a single Muslim member of the National Assembly and not a single Mayor. The greatest threat to the "values of the French Republic" is racism and exclusion and not some supposed danger from within its Muslim communities.

Muslim women find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. We are caught between those who claim to protect us – the many Muslim men who act to restrict our movement and freedoms – and those who claim to liberate us – killing us with their bombs and allowing us no voice unless it mirrors exactly their own. The women of Afghanistan are an example of this. Laura Bush even stated that the "W" in George W. Bush stands for women. We are asked to believe that the US army was really on a feminist mission in Afghanistan!

The real emancipation of Muslim women can of course only come from themselves. In practice the voice of Muslim women themselves – in all their diversity – has to be heard. We have to get past the simple caricatures of the passive victim or aggressive fundamentalist. We have to recognise that while the road to female emancipation in the West has taken the route of the right to not be covered in response to the rigid expectations placed on women historically in terms of dress and societal roles, many women may choose to liberate themselves in different ways, and just because the trajectory of their resistance to oppression is different, it does not make it any less legitimate or significant.

For many Muslim women wearing the hijab is an expression of Islamic notions of women's empowerment. "Hijab" actually is a whole concept relating to the interaction of men and women, not just an item of clothing to cover the head or body. The hijab is not about the denial of female (or male) sexuality. Quite the opposite. I think sexual attraction between men and women is part of human nature and natural. The concept of hijab

actually denotes a code of behaviour between the sexes that both acknowledges that fact and encourages a mutually respectful interaction between men and women. "Hijab" literally means "barrier". It flows from the emphasis on marriage in Islam – the Qur'an describes a husband and wife as each other's "garments" – giving each other intimacy, warmth and protection. The idea of hijab is to maintain the exclusivity of that relationship, such that the degree of physical intimacy and exposure is limited in all other interactions between men and women. In this way the aim of hijab is to de-emphasise sexuality in public interactions, whilst encouraging sexuality in private ones.

It is important to remember that whilst the hijab has recently been associated exclusively with Islam, the idea of modest attire for men and women is referred to in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as well as many other religious and cultural traditions (e.g. Sikhism and Rastafarianism). In many parts of the world, from villages in Italy to Indian suburbs women cover themselves in similar ways that Muslim women do.

For many Muslim women wearing the hijab marks a rejection of a world where women have to endure objectification as sex objects. It helps them to enjoy a sense of their own (special) privacy and personhood. For me, the wearing of the hijab denotes that as a woman I expect to be treated as an equal in terms of my intellect and personality and my appearance is relevant only to the degree that I want it to be, when I want it to be.

Wearing the hijab can also be seen as a challenge to the power of corporations and advertising. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, responding to the banning of hijab in French schools, makes the point that the headscarf law is a pure capitalist law in that it orders femininity to be exposed. He suggests that, by banning all reserve, women are brought into the market paradigm and are forced to display their bodies as merchandise. He further asks the question: "Is it not even more mean and petty for a woman at school to act as a sandwich board for a corporation than as a follower of God?"

Indeed it is true that while the Western feminist movement campaigned over many years for the right of women to be uncovered in public this "right" has quickly been appropriated by the forces of capitalism and consumerism. So much so, that we are at a point in time where much unhappiness, depression, eating disorders etc are directly attributable to the pressures on women to be seen to be sexually attractive. Clearly such expectations and consequences are oppressive to women. Prevailing cultural norms mean that young girls are robbed of their childhood as their clothes reflect and emphasise female sexuality; and older women

are made to feel irrelevant (or relevant to the extent that they can maintain the appearance of being younger).

Whilst I passionately defend my right to wear the hijab and urge solidarity on this issue, I think it is a shame that the identity of Muslim women has been reduced to simply the wearing of the hijab – by some Muslims as well as non-Muslims. It would be unfortunate if a Muslim woman was only viewed in terms of whether she wore a hijab – by her brothers and sisters in faith who may not regard her as "highly" if she doesn't, or non-Muslims who may regard her as less worthy if she does. Ultimately it is about her personal relationship with God, and not anyone else's business! Whilst we can point out the benefits or otherwise (whichever view you hold on the issue of hijab), coercion or enforcement from either side is not the answer.

Indeed the real crime that is committed against women is when that choice is taken away from them. That's why I am opposed to the Saudi and Iranian governments' imposition of the veil and that of the Taliban previously. But this is also why I oppose the ban on wearing the hijab. In both cases the woman herself is no longer free to make a choice. In both cases her dignity is violated. And with all the hype around the issue not many people are aware that actually right now the hijab is banned in more countries than it is enforced.

This issue of the right to wear hijab is a crucial one for the ESF. Because racism in general and Islamophobia in particular is central to the whole neo-liberal project, any movement which effectively wants to challenge that project – and the war, racism and poverty it leaves in its wake – has to rest on a solid foundation of anti-racism. It especially has to reach out the hand of solidarity to the Arab and Muslim communities bearing the brunt of racist attack and vilification.

I cannot exaggerate how important this kind of solidarity is. It is the antidote to both the current racist neo-liberal onslaught and the threat of extremism and fundamentalism. By focusing on what we have in common and fighting oppression – whether from inside or outside of our communities – we have a powerful alliance. The wonderful world-wide demonstrations on February 15th when millions across the world united together against the world gave us a glimpse of what another world would be like – a world united against war and oppression – but diverse in its colour, race, cultures and faiths.

**This is the transcript of a speech delivered at the European Social Forum in London on 16 October 2004. It is taken (without permission) from the National Assembly Against Racism website.**