

‘Muslim women have the right to dress how they wish.’ Discuss.

There are over a billion Muslims in the world today, including 3 to 5 million in the U.S., making it the second largest religion after Christianity. According to some estimates, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world. Women in Islam, have obligations to respect their religion, become dutiful wives and mothers, the right to be educated and work, if they wish to but also to protect their modesty by wearing the headscarf known as the ‘hijab’¹. The Holy Qur’an clearly states: “And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty...” [24:31]². This is enough evidence for Muslim women to follow this obligation and wear the hijab. “Why do Muslim women have to cover their heads?” This question is one which is asked by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For many women it is the truest test of being a Muslim. Some Muslim women believe that God has told them to guard their modesty and wear the hijab with dignity and self-esteem; where they are pleased to be identified as pure and chaste Muslim women. A woman who covers herself is concealing her sexuality but allowing her femininity to be brought out. She does not want her sexuality to enter into interactions with men in the smallest degree, or be singled out for physical appearance, viewed as a ‘sex object’, but to be treated fairly and equally and taken seriously. This, is perhaps, generalised for all women, not just women of Islam.

However, not all Muslim women would choose to wear the hijab- it is completely their choice. Like in most religions, there are strict, fundamental Muslims and Muslims who choose to be more relaxed about traditions and beliefs. A strict Muslim woman would perhaps choose to wear the ‘niqab’ (veil covering the face) or the ‘burqa’ (outer garment covering the whole body), whereas a less strict Muslim woman would opt not to wear any of the Islamic garments. The question of the garments known as the hijab, niqab and burka for Muslim women has been a controversy for centuries and will probably continue for many more. Many different viewpoints have contributed to this subject; in this essay, I will discuss the different points of views and also include my own opinion on Muslim women dressing how they wish.

Fundamentally, Muslims, like any religious group, are entitled to practice their faith and religious traditions. Islam stipulates specific codes of belief, of which one of them is the hijab. Female liberation is when a woman can choose what she wears, thus Muslim women opt to wear the hijab. Some people agree with this statement as they believe strongly in the concept of freedom of speech. They believe that people have a need to express their religions and would argue that the world is now a world of freedom. In today’s society, everyone deserves the right to incorporate their religion and religious symbols into their daily lives, and this should be respected. It is a basic human right to have freedom of speech and this should not be violated.

It is not only Islam that requires its followers to be modest with their clothing, but other religions and practises as well. For example, in the Catholic Church, it is a known fact that the Virgin Mary was rarely seen in paintings without wearing a veil. A famous quote by Roberto Maroni, the Italian Prime Minister challenged the global issue- ‘If the Virgin Mary appears wearing a veil on all her pictures, how can you ask me to sign on a hijab ban law?’

¹ <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/Galleries/Why-the-Hijab.aspx>

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<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=0000000181089>

³This statement reveals that, according to Roberto Maroni, Islam and Christianity are in fact, similar and should both be respected for this reason. Orthodox Jewish women often cover their heads when doing the blessing over the Sabbath meal and possibly in the Temple or synagogue because modesty is the primary reason, in addition to proclaim their loyalty to Judaism, as Muslim women do to show they belong to Islam. A Sikh man would be required to wear a turban as he would believe it to be a gift from God, as would an Orthodox Jewish man be required to wear a 'kippah'⁴, a small cap. Therefore, on the subject of Muslim women dressing how they wish, some would argue that why they shouldn't be able to as there are many other religions and cultures that incorporate the same thing.

The Islamic veil controversy in France⁵ had been on-going over a long period of time, until a ban on the covering of the face in public places was passed by the Senate of France in September 2010. This resulted in the ban of the wearing of face-covering headgear, including the niqab. Some people opposed to this ban, believing this to be an assault of freedom; a Muslim woman's freedom to wear the niqab has been taken away so that woman is now less free. Others approved of the ban of wearing veil in public buildings as they deemed it valid for security reasons. However, some question that the freedom to follow a religion and put it into practice is of significant importance and wearing the veil is a Muslim woman's individual right. They would argue that a ban should not solely be passed on one piece of clothing.⁶

Although some people would agree with this statement, there are also people who will disagree, and will have strong opinions as to why they believe Muslim women should not be allowed to dress how they wish. They would believe the burqa and niqab to be a threat to society or a Muslim woman wearing these garments is a symbol of female oppression. For example, the English Defence League⁷ is a human rights organisation protesting about Islamic extremism. The EDL's leader, Tommy Robinson⁸ strongly believes that Muslim extremists are an actual threat to society and that people from other cultures i.e. Muslims are the main cause of Britain's economic problems. Robinson, who has been involved in the media recently states, 'I am actually offended when I see a woman in a burqa on the street...it needs to be banned straightaway'. This is an example of freedom of speech; however to what extent can this be described as discrimination? It is estimated that there are 100,000 supporters of the EDL in just Britain alone, and this number is likely to increase in the future, as controversy continues.

Some people believe that in the UK, Muslim women should dress how non-Muslim would and that religion should not be allowed to be used to dictate culture in a country. Some Muslim women follow this tradition and choose not to wear the hijab or any Islamic clothing, due to the belief that Islamic culture does not have to be followed exactly. For example, Shanna Bukhari is a 24 year old model who became the first Muslim to represent the UK in

³ <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/09/04/259784/italy-minister-refuses-to-ok-hijab-ban/>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kippah>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/11/france-begins-burqa-niqab-ban>

⁶ <http://www.debate.org/opinions/should-the-hijab-be-banned-in-schools-public-buildings-or-society-in-general>

<http://www.englishdefenceleague.org/>

⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommy_Robinson_\(English_Defence_League\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommy_Robinson_(English_Defence_League))

the Miss Universe Contest 2011⁹. She strongly believes Muslim women in the UK should be allowed to have a western lifestyle, regardless of how strict their religion/culture is. Shanna Bukhari is an example of how different Muslim women interpret their lifestyle choices.

In conclusion, different people will have different opinions on the topic of Muslim women dressing how they wish. Some may believe it is harmless and that Muslim women have the right to choose how they live their lives, like everybody else. On the other hand, other people may believe it is dangerous and a threat to society. We live in a multicultural society where it is completely normal to see a woman adorning the headscarf in the street. I fail to see how that affects anybody else and how a piece of clothing can be a threat to society. In the 21st Century, people do what they like, study what they like, eat what they want, do as they wish, so why should people not wear certain clothes if they want to? People can follow a religion if they want, and those that do, we should respect their culture and tradition. Religions like Judaism also enforces Jewish women to be modest with their clothing, therefore Islam should not be scrutinised for actually putting the hijab to practise.

Many misconceptions are constantly given in the way of Islam, such as Islam being linked to terrorism and the controversy of the veil; however I firmly believe that each culture, tradition and religion should be respected and treated equally. Some people grow so accustomed to the media creating stereotypes of Muslims and opinions for them, that their brains automatically register whatever information they hear or read as 'correct'. Not all Muslims are extremists and not all Muslims think alike. The hijab is merely a symbol of Islam, and Islam is a religion of peace. Being a Muslim and wearing the hijab myself, I strongly believe that Muslim women have the right to dress how they wish.

⁹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1364986/Miss-Universe-Shanna-Bukhari-hopes-Muslim-represent-Britain.html>