

THE LIMITS OF FORCE/CHOICE DISCOURSES IN DISCUSSING MUSLIM WOMEN'S DRESS CODES

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Abstract

As the question of Muslim women's dress codes comes under intense media and political scrutiny, two competing discourses have emerged. The first of these discourses centres around the veil (in whatever form) as a symbol of patriarchal force. The second discourse has emerged largely in response to the first, and asserts that covering is an exercise in women's choice and a symbol of female empowerment. This paper argues that neither of these discourses adequately describes the complex negotiations that Muslim women employ with regard to dress. I discuss the discourse of 'force' with regard to media imagery of Taliban era Afghanistan, and 'choice' with regard to contemporary Australia, grappling with the issue of how to challenge the representation of the Muslim women's dress as a symbol of oppression without reinforcing its standing as a symbol of cultural loyalty.

[keywords: Islam, women, hijab, dress code]

Introduction

The focus on Muslim women's dress has been so intense and most of the time so unhelpful in developing any understanding of the lived experience of the women concerned that any new paper on the issue has to begin by justifying its own existence.

Many Muslim women in particular share the weary sentiment that there have been more than enough hijab-themed rows, debates, and academic papers to last us a lifetime. Yet it is clear that despite all the 'hijab rows' that have taken place in Australian public discourse, Muslim women still face serious limitations in the ways of speaking available to us when it comes to hijab and to other gender issues. The intensity of the debate has meant that an

‘either/or’ mindset has taken hold – either the hijab is a freely chosen symbol of empowerment, or it is a symbol of the power of Muslim men over their ‘enslaved’ women. Tiresome though it may be, we need to keep talking about hijab, and allowing our ways of discussing it to evolve. Otherwise, some of those Muslim women who do not feel that their life experiences are reflected in Australian ‘Muslim’ discourse about the hijab may well take the only other option apparent to them, and join the chorus of voices denouncing the hijab as a threat to Australian gender norms.

This paper argues the inadequacy of the discourses of ‘force’ versus ‘choice’ with reference to the cases of women in Afghanistan and Australia¹. I argue that while each of these discourses adequately describes the experiences of some Muslim women, many Muslim women ‘negotiate’ rather than ‘choose’ over issues such as dress, and they do not negotiate on equal terms. They may deploy one or other of these force/choice discourses according to need, despite the fact that both are oversimplifications. But despite the usefulness of such simplifications, they hold inherent risks because of the tendency for a discourse produced in one site to leak into another.

The various interpretations of the relevant religious texts referring to dress are outside the scope of this paper. Women’s decisions about wearing hijab are not solely governed by their personal beliefs as to whether or not their religion requires it. Some women believe that hijab is a religious obligation, but don’t wear it; others believe that it is not, but wear it anyway. The focus here is on the non-theological factors that give rise to such complexities.

Nor is this paper a denunciation of past contributions to ‘hijab rows’. In the face of discrimination and harassment of women wearing hijab, a response was developed and delivered (if not always adequately reported) in a way that gave voice to the women who were the most intimately concerned, but who were in danger of being entirely silenced. A decade ago, the idea that a woman might wear hijab of her own volition

¹ This paper is based on personal encounters rather than systematic fieldwork. However, I sought feedback on the general concepts, and in some cases shared excerpts of the draft, with a number of Australian Muslim women, both hijabis and non-hijabis. I thank them for their open-minded approach and invaluable comments. The author also wishes to thank Christina Ho and Tanja Dreher for their support and advice.

rather than at the behest of her male relatives was an unfamiliar concept to most non-Muslim Australians.

Although levels of harassment of hijab-wearing women have risen sharply since 9/11 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004) and expressions of hostility from media and politicians have gathered intensity, the concept of hijab as ‘choice’ is no longer so novel to Australian public discourse. Although many Australians still do not accept it, they are at least likely to have encountered it. It was necessary, and it continues to be necessary, to defend a woman’s right to wear hijab, free from harassment and abuse. However, danger arises from the fact that rather than being seen as a strategy that should and must evolve with changing social circumstances, certain ways of talking about hijab have come to be seen as sacrosanct. Neither Australian public discourse nor the sociology of Australian Muslims have remained static in the years since ‘hijab rows’ began. Accordingly, we cannot allow our ways of talking about hijab to remain in stasis.

Muslim women are caught in a classic double bind between patriarchy and racism. As Christina Ho writes:

While [minority women] face racism and sexism from the majority society, they also confront sexism and male domination in the own community. In this bind, speaking out about oppressive practices in their own community, such as gendered violence, can result in being treated like a traitor by their own community, while also reinforcing negative stereotypes of the majority society of oppressive, backward cultures (Ho 2007: 296).

In Australia, this was illustrated in 2006 during the controversy surrounding the speech given by Sheik Taj al din al Hilali in which he compared immodestly dressed women to “uncovered meat”, offering temptation to “cats”. “If the woman is in her boudoir, in her house and if she’s wearing the veil and if she shows modesty, disasters don’t happen” (Mattar 2006: np). Many Australian Muslim women were horrified by Hilali’s remarks (although he also had his female supporters), but equally appalled to find themselves at the centre of a bullying political and media row in which ‘the Muslim community’ was called upon to ‘deal with’ Hilali, or face the consequences. In some quarters, responsibility for Hilali’s remarks was placed not only with him and his supporters, but with Australian Muslims in general. Muslim women (including myself) who spoke out against the attitudes embodied by Hilali found their voices appropriated by those who wished to illustrate that Islam was by nature a violent and misogynist religion.

Conversations about Muslim dress codes are similarly caught in a double bind, between those like Bronwyn Bishop and Fred Nile who see hijab as a dangerous threat to Australian society, and those like Hilali and Sheik Faiz on the other who see ‘immodesty’ as cultural and religious treason, if not incitement to rape. This has set the scene for two competing discourses: one centred around the theme of hijab as a symbol of patriarchal ‘force’ and another around the theme of hijab as ‘choice’. In attempting to problematise these discourses, I feel the full force of the double-bind. By seeking to complicate the discourse of hijab-as-choice, I risk giving aid and comfort to those who attack hijabis in the national parliament, in the media, and on the street. By challenging the notion of hijab-as-force, I risk appearing to defend regimes and social forces that impose mandatory covering and/or hold Hilali-esque attitudes to non-veiling. In this face of this dilemma, the temptation to stay silent is almost overwhelming.

This scope of this paper is ‘Muslim dress codes’ rather than simply ‘hijab’ (which literally means “curtain” but has come to refer to the headscarf worn by many Muslim women) in part because it also discusses the discourse on Afghan women and the burqa, but also because even in the West, the issue of Muslim women’s dress is much more wide-ranging than a concern with headscarves. For example, in Australia, few families of Pakistani background would expect their daughters to wear hijab, and many are actively hostile to it. However, they may nonetheless enforce prohibitions on form fitting jeans or blouses that would be acceptable in some Arab families where hijab is an accepted norm. Women who wear the hijab by choice may nonetheless find themselves in conflict with their families and social networks over other dress related issues (translucent fabric, the cut of their clothes, make-up, whether or not to cover the feet, etc). During the furore that followed al-Hilali’s speech, a television channel ran a profile of his family, in which his daughter (suitably hijab-clad) defended him – only to attract negative comments from some Muslims for her ‘un-Islamic’ plucked eyebrows². While ‘hijab’ (in the sense of headscarf) is a convenient shorthand term, it does not adequately convey these complexities.

I respect and share the positive associations that many Muslim women hold towards hijab; I do not believe that Muslim women should be ‘persuaded’ or ‘educated’ to abandon hijab any more than I believe that they should be forced to do so. However, I

² In conversations and in chatrooms:

<<http://forums.muslimvillage.net/lofiversion/index.php/t28161.html>>

do not believe that all of the factors that currently affect women's decision to cover (or not) are positive, and (in common with many hijabis) I do not believe that it should be used as a signifier of authenticity. As someone who has spoken out against 'anti-hijab' voices such as Bronwyn Bishop and Leslie Cannold, I face a dilemma: how do I defend women's right to wear hijab, free from discrimination and harassment, without also reinforcing the position of hijab as a symbol of 'real' Muslim womanhood, which I have no desire to do?

Afghanistan and the discourse of 'force'

Australian representations of Islamic dress as a symbol of patriarchal control are underpinned by the examples of state-enforced dress codes in societies such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan. Yet although such controls undoubtedly exist and are often brutally enforced, a gap remains between the ways that Islamic dress codes are understood by the women concerned (even those who resist such codes) and the way they are represented in Western-dominated discourses of force.

The "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan" campaign, led by the US-based Feminist Majority, provides interesting points of reflection on the issue of Muslim women's dress and patriarchal 'force'. International coverage of Taliban atrocities fetishised the burqua, which was displayed in countless media montages and snipped into blue squares which the Feminist Majority Foundation sold for \$5, to be worn "in solidarity" with Afghan women (Kolhatkar 2003: np). In a special performance of Eve Ensler's play, *The Vagina Monologues*, a burqua was symbolically lifted to reveal the face of an Afghan woman. This woman was rendered as incapable of lifting her veil for herself; the task of unveiling was left to talk-show host Oprah Winfrey (Lerner 2001: 54). This type of depiction, in which Western women were the headline act, while Afghan women were reduced to cameo roles in their own struggle, became a source of increasing resentment.

Orientalist stereotypes of downtrodden Afghan women were generated by Western media and some Western feminist campaigners rather than by Afghan women themselves. Afghan women tended to accord much less symbolic weight to the burqua than did the international campaign that sought to liberate them. They were far more preoccupied with immediate issues of survival amid war and deprivation. However, as I

witnessed during fieldwork in Pakistan during 2000 and 2001, some Afghan women were willing to deploy the Western fetishisation of the veil when dealing with the media if that was what was necessary to raise international awareness of their situation. It may be argued that this type of 'strategic essentialism' was necessary in order to gain media attention and puncture Western indifference at a time of acute crisis. Certainly, despite my deep discomfort at some of the Orientalist imagery involved, my own belief at the time was that it might be desirable, even necessary, to deploy misplaced stereotypes in the face of such a catastrophic level of organised patriarchal violence.

Witnessing the feminist campaign against the Taliban, which I observed both in Australia and among Afghan women in Pakistan, brought home to me the rather obvious point that the 'transnational' element of transnational feminism means that discourse formed in one political environment will inevitably leak into others. Concerns about racist stereotyping, which loomed large in the lives of Australian Muslims, including myself, seemed very remote during my conversations with Afghan women in Pakistan. Here, the immediate enemy were violent and Islamically-named patriarchal militias. There was a strong sense among many Afghans that the outside world, which had taken an interest in Afghans when they had been the brave guerrillas fighting Soviet imperialism, had afterwards forgotten them. They were often not much concerned if Western media reports or support campaigns (which most Afghans of course never saw for themselves) were a-historical, Orientalist, and even at times crypto-racist, provided that they adequately communicated to the outside world the prevailing sense of crisis. I came to share this attitude to the extent that without consciously being aware of the fact, I regarded the feminist campaign for Afghan women and the anti-racist campaign that encompassed the rights of asylum seekers as two entirely separate and different spheres in which different language, tactics and discourse could be deployed.

Of course, subsequent events revealed that they were no such thing. For one thing, the reductionist portrayal of Afghan gender relationships heightened Western fear and suspicion of Afghan men; fear which had very concrete repercussions when Afghan refugees attempted to find sanctuary in the West, including Australia. On the issue of immigration and asylum, sympathy for Afghan women was far outweighed by fear of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Furthermore, in the weeks following 9/11, the de-historicised and uni-faceted campaign was easily appropriated for the propaganda

purposes of the 'war on terror'. After September 11, the "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan" campaign dovetailed with the propaganda campaign supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, in a synthesis of feminism and militarism. The Feminist Majority literature expresses it thus: "by mid November, the Bush administration was giving speeches that could have been lifted directly from the organisation's literature" (Brown, Rounds et al. 2002: 74). Afghan women's opinions on the bombing of their country and the restoration of power to the Northern Alliance were seldom sought. They were required only to symbolize Taliban oppression, and for this purpose, the sight of the burqua-clad woman was all that was required.

Australia and the discourse of 'choice'

My observation of the transnational campaign for Afghan women sensitized me to the dangers of strategically deploying discourses that are too easily appropriated for other purposes. In Australia, Muslim women have generated a discourse in relation to dress, in response not to patriarchal control but to an ethnocentric characterisation of hijab as an alien symbol of patriarchal force. Muslim women wearing hijab have been subjected to discrimination and harassment, and to attempts to forcibly 'unveil' them (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004). We have responded with a discourse that emphasises hijab as a personal 'choice', as a symbol of empowerment and an instrument of female liberation (from sexualised cultural imagery of women's bodies). This association of hijab and choice has become a common refrain among Muslim women living in the West.

Tanja Dreher and Frances Simmons have written an account of an Australian workshop where this representation of hijab was selected as a strategic response to endless public questioning about "why do you wear that thing?" (Dreher and Simmons 2006: 117). The presentation of hijab as 'choice' (like the use of the burqua to symbolise 'force') made a bite-sized, easily digestible media message, although as the authors observe, it meant erasing other rationales that were considered too complicated or unlikely to receive a sympathetic reception.

Some Muslim women use the term 'choice' with regard to hijab as an ideal (it *should* be about choice), but others talk about it though it is as an existing reality, which for many women and girls, it is not. While some women do make the autonomous choice as to

whether or not to wear hijab, others (hijabi and non-hijabi alike) do not. Choice is a meaningless concept when the choice involves negotiating racist prejudice and harassment on the one hand, and/or family and community conflict and pressure on the other. If you are not wearing hijab for fear of harassment on the street and discrimination in the workplace, are you really making an autonomous choice? Similarly, if you wear hijab in order to deflect family or community disapproval, is that really a choice?

An additional complication is that those who talk about 'choice' with regard to women's dress codes do not always mean the same thing. For some speakers, hijab is a 'choice' because they do not believe that it is stipulated in the Qur'an or Sunnah. It is therefore not an Islamic requirement but a 'choice' made by individual women. This interpretation has been taken as the justification for an 'anti-hijab' argument by some Muslim and non-Muslim speakers: since hijab is not required by Islam, it is permissible for governments, school authorities, and so forth to ban it from public spaces (Adonis 2003: np). In Australia, the number of Muslims publicly taking such a stance is vanishingly small. More commonly, those who do not themselves believe that hijab is mandated by the Qur'an accept that other women should be free to believe otherwise and to act on that belief, or to use hijab as a symbol of religious identity. In fact, some women who subscribe to this theological understanding nonetheless wear hijab in order to show solidarity with other Muslim women, as a reminder to themselves of their faith, to signify their rejection of the sexualisation of women's bodies, or simply because it holds positive associations for them. Amina Wudud, an African American Muslim scholar who made international headlines when she became the first female imam recorded as having led mixed-gender prayers, is one prominent example of this attitude:

As a descendant of African slave women, I have carried the awareness that my ancestors were not given any choice to determine how much of their bodies would be exposed at the auction block or their living conditions. So, I chose intentionally to cover my body as a means reflecting my historical identity, personal dignity, and sexual integrity (Wadud 2006: 221).

Other Muslims say that it is a 'choice', but simultaneously describe it as 'mandatory' or 'obligatory'. This apparent contradiction can lead to confusion among non-Muslims when Muslim women on the one hand defend hijab as a personal choice and on the other say that it must not be prohibited because it is mandatory for them. The notion of hijab as a 'voluntary obligation' can be explained as meaning that while Muslim women

are obliged by their faith to wear the hijab, they should not be coerced into doing so – they must be allowed to choose for themselves to accept this obligation. This is the position taken by Tariq Ramadan, whose writing on Muslim identity in Europe has been highly influential (Roy 2004). Similarly, the European Council for Fatwas and Research pronounced that hijab was “a devotional obligation and a duty prescribed by the Islamic Law”, but continued that it had to be based on personal conviction (Shadid and Van Koningsveld 2005: 36). Some speakers continue by observing that it is not necessarily the most important obligation and we should not allow ourselves to become obsessed with it. Other forms of proper Islamic conduct take a higher priority. And some women who consider hijab to be a religious obligation do not wear it, because they do not wish to make themselves a target of discrimination and harassment.

Another and to my mind more troubling group are those who mean that hijab is a ‘choice’ when living in Australia or other non-Muslim societies, because in such circumstances Muslims are obliged to follow the law of the land, and the law allows women to choose not to cover. However, they defend the right of Muslim governments such as Saudi Arabia and Iran to enforce hijab. Choice has its limits, as Jamal Badawi, from the North American Fiqh Council relates:

societies have the right to set reasonable limits on choices so as not to harm society at large or its ‘moral values’. It is in the same vain [sic] that it would not be inappropriate for an Islamic state to set those reasonable limits (Anon: np).

This last proviso on ‘choice’ is not often explicitly spelled out, but arises when the subject of conversation switches from Australia to the Islamic societies concerned. There are many objections to be raised against this position, but for the purposes of this discussion, the most relevant one is that it seems an unsustainable use of the word ‘choice’: *My* choice to cover, not *yours* to uncover.

The multiple meanings ascribed to ‘choice’ raises difficulties when Muslim women are grouped together to defend hijab as women’s ‘choice’ as though they are all talking about the same thing. Obviously, these different understandings of ‘choice’ represent wildly divergent worldviews, yet for the most part (and despite the care taken by some speakers to articulate a more complex worldview) they are folded together into a general ‘pro-hijab’ discourse. And (as with the transnational campaign for Afghan women), this discourse is able to ‘leak’ from one political site to another. In Pakistan, I

spent time with the women's wing of the religious party, the Jamaat-i-Islami. The French prohibition on hijab in public schools was an immensely important issue for them, and they expressed their support for their French sisters through gestures of solidarity such as street demonstrations. But of course, although they spoke of a French Muslim woman's right to 'choose' hijab, they were not demonstrating in favour of a universal principle of 'choice' – as part of the ruling coalition in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, the Jamaat-i-Islami is seeking to enforce hijab on women working in public spaces.

Choice/force vs negotiation

Hijab has become much more common throughout the Muslim world over the past couple of decades, shifting from a non-conformist option to a common (but by no means universal) social norm. Young women wearing the hijab today still face the same issues of discrimination and harassment as did an earlier generation, if anything at a higher intensity. However, in other regards, their experience of hijab is very different to that of middle-aged hijabis. These women were very often 'first generation' hijabis, whose mothers did not cover and whose families may in fact have opposed their decision to do so, either because they regarded it as a sign of religious fanaticism, of 'Arab imperialism' (in the case of some non-Arab ethnicities), or because they were afraid of the negative attention that it attracted. When hijab was still regarded as a non-conformist option even among Muslims, it was much more clear that those women who wore it had reached an autonomous choice.

These attitudes have not entirely disappeared from Australian Muslim communities, and some young women still face opposition from their families when they begin to wear hijab. Hijab remains much more common in some ethnic communities than others. However, many young Muslim women have now grown up with it as a social norm and a parental expectation, and in such circumstances it is far less obvious when it is and is not a choice.

To take one (hypothetical but fact-based) scenario: a teenage girl says that she chose to begin wearing hijab when she was twelve, but on closer examination it would perhaps be more accurate to say that she chose the *moment* at which to begin wearing hijab. It was always her family's intention that she should begin wearing hijab when she was no

longer a little girl (sometimes but not always defined by a definite point such as menstruation), and like many twelve year olds, she was ready to leave little-girlhood behind her. Had she failed to reach that decision by age sixteen, it would have been a source of significant family conflict. Depending on other circumstances, she could still reasonably describe this as her own choice, but it is a different kind of choice to that made by her mother, who was raised with quite different parental expectations.

This does not mean that young women who have been raised with family expectations or even family coercion as to dress code (and of course, most non-Muslim families also have expectations as to dress code) are victims of brainwashing or ‘false consciousness’ when they describe themselves as possessing ‘choice’. Some young women unhesitatingly accept their families’ values with regard to dress. However, in other cases their use of the word ‘choice’ may in part be due to their non-acceptance of the alternative discourse of ‘force’, with all its attendant connotations of violent Taliban-style barbarism and helpless female victims. For some women, adherence to a dress code may not be their first preference, but neither do they feel enormously burdened by it. For others, acquiescence on the issue of dress provides the family harmony necessary for seeking greater personal autonomy in other areas, such as education, work, relationships, and personal mobility. This form of negotiation has been well-documented elsewhere in Muslim communities elsewhere. Claire Dwyer reports that the young South Asian Muslim women in Britain were deploying religious discourse to validate their creation of hybrid styles of dress that nonetheless remained ‘Islamic’:

By evoking this Islamic authority, individuals were able to argue that not only should they be able to dress in a style which was both “western” and “Islamic” but that they should also have greater freedoms to go out or go on to higher education and to be fully involved in the choice of marriage partner (Dwyer 2000: 482).

‘Negotiation’ also describes the experience of some women who report that they would like to wear hijab, but do not do so because of discrimination and/or harassment. The writer and lawyer Randa Abdel Fattah says that she stopped wearing hijab because it was a negatively-regarded form of dress in her chosen professional environment. She was not ‘forced’ to unveil, but nor did she ‘choose’ to do so, in the usual understanding of either word. Some women have been forcibly unveiled in street assaults, and this may deter them (and other women who hear of such incidents) from continuing to wear hijab. However, since women reach different decisions about whether or not to stop

wearing hijab in the face of such assaults, there is still a degree of agency involved. To describe this agency as ‘choice’ seems an overstatement; ‘negotiation’ seems closer to the mark.

The hijab as a signifier of authenticity

Paradoxically, the media, which is so often the vehicle for anti-Muslim sentiment in general and anti-hijab sentiment in particular, is also reinforcing the position of hijab among Australian Muslims. A disproportionate number of the Muslim women rendered ‘visible’ in press photos and on TV wear hijab. In part, this is because the media seeks out interviewees from formal community organizations, and Muslim women who belong to such organizations are much more likely than average to wear hijab. Women interviewed at mosques or Islamic community centers and events are also likely to be wearing hijab on these occasions, even if they don’t do so in everyday life. However, for cameramen and photographers, the woman in hijab also represents the ‘money-shot’, the vital ingredient, for Islam-related stories. While no Muslim has ever explicitly suggested that I should immediately don a hijab, several journalists and editors in search of the ‘hijabi money-shot’ have done so, and on one occasion even suggested that I veil my computer as a novelty shot. Journalists with whom I have discussed this issue deny that this is a form of stereotyping, describing it instead as a visual ‘clue’ to the viewer, to let them know what the story is about. Regardless of intent, the high visibility of hijab in media representations of Muslim women reinforces the idea that it is what ‘real’ Muslim women wear. Non-Muslims who engage with ‘the Muslim community’ on a professional or organizational level (journalists, bureaucrats, service providers and the like) tend to regard the woman in hijab as the more ‘authentic’ Muslim and hence the more legitimate spokesperson (which is not to say that they regard her as an equal).

Some Muslims are also absorbing media images of hijab as a mark of authenticity. Muslims may read Australian media in a more skeptical way than do non-Muslims, and they have sources of information (family, religious networks, etc) that are not available to non-Muslims. Nonetheless, mass media remains an important source of information for them on what being a Muslim ‘is’: negative images are simply inverted into positive ones. While Muslims frequently critique negative media representations of hijab-wearing women, they apply less critical analysis to the media’s use of the hijab as symbol of Muslim authenticity.

Women who do not wear hijab are also regarded as somehow 'less Muslim' by some Muslims because they have not experienced the discrimination and harassment commonly directed at women in hijab. A woman who does not wear hijab is thought not to 'really' know what it is like to be a Muslim in contemporary Australia, because she supposedly has not experienced abuse in the name of her religion. Her life experience, then, is less 'authentically' Muslim. This raises another dilemma: how do I acknowledge the reality of discrimination and harassment against women wearing hijab and the resilience of such women in standing up to it, without by implication stigmatizing non-hijabis as somehow falling short? It is often said that wearing hijab requires "courage" in today's Australia. This is true and deserves recognition. But this is difficult to do without implying that non-hijabis are somehow lacking in courage, which is not something that I accept about myself or about many other non-hijabis. Refusing to wear hijab in a community where it is fast becoming a symbol of cultural loyalty can require courage, too, especially if there is strong family pressure to do so. Any young woman worth her salt wants to be thought courageous, but courage is not exclusive to one form of dress.

In fact, we should not assume that the experience of wearing hijab uniformly means that a woman attracts a higher degree of prejudice from non-Muslims, although this is by far the most usual scenario. Hijab is a highly visible marker of 'Otherness', but it is not the only one. Race and ethnicity may be obscured, but are not obliterated, by its presence or absence. A Muslim woman's experience of racism is governed not only by whether she wears hijab, but also by her ethnicity, her physical location, the degree and nature of her interface with non-Muslims. In cases where she belongs to another stigmatized 'out-group', wearing hijab may actually lead non-Muslims to treat her in a way that she finds more tolerable. The stigma attached to 'Muslimness' (terrorist, fanatic, victim of patriarchy) is not necessarily more intolerable than the stigma attached to 'blackness' (substance abuser, petty criminal), with blackness seen as a more likely immediate threat. One such young woman reported that "People [meaning non-Muslims] smile and talk to me when I wear hijab". This experience suggests that the latent racism still held by many anti-racist whites renders them less nervous about being friendly to an unknown young Muslim woman than to an unknown young black woman.

There is no universal ‘life experience’ for Australian Muslim women, nor a universal life experience determined by whether or not they wear a headscarf. Commonalities and differences crisscross various forms of dress. The use of hijab as a mark of authenticity is generated by non-Muslims, but it is unreflectively absorbed by many Muslims.

Talking on

Besides the complexities outlined above, there are also strategic reasons why we need to continue to develop new ways of talking about hijab. Anti-hijab rhetoric seems to be shifting away from a simplistic representation of hijab as a symbol of patriarchal control, and towards rhetoric about hijab as a symbol of religious separatism, ‘chosen’ by women themselves. The discourse of ‘choice’ is relevant to the claims by those such as Leslie Cannold, who think the hijab should be banned from state schools because “rightly or wrongly, many Australians see the scarf as a symbol of the gender-based oppression women suffer in many non-Western countries” (Cannold 2005: np). However, to those such as Bronwyn Bishop who may draw selectively on feminist discourse when it suits them, but whose objection is based on the claim that hijabis “don’t fit in”, it doesn’t matter whether or not you ‘chose’ to wear the headscarf – it is still the wrong choice. It is an “icon of defiance” although still a mark of subservience – a blurring illustrated by Bishop saying that she could not:

accept someone who wants to be a little bit of a slave, or a little bit subservient. The fact of the matter is that in this country, freedom is defined by our law, and that’s the standard, not somebody else’s definition of what they think freedom might be (ABC Radio National 2005).

The complex terrain of this issue does not translate easily into media soundbites. ‘Choice’ and ‘force’, whatever their limitations, at least make for a simple, direct message. ‘Negotiation’, while closer to the lived reality of many Muslim women’s lives, does not pack the same punch. ‘Freedom from coercion’ (whether by the state or by families and communities) might provide a more direct message than ‘choice’, since it more directly implies an ideal rather than an existing reality, and is less easily blurred into the qualified meanings that have attached themselves to ‘choice’.

Communities that are fearful and besieged are unhealthy places for women. In such circumstances, the importance of women’s dress as a mark of cultural loyalty is heightened, and transgressions of such loyalty are regarded with greater seriousness. Both Australia as a whole and Australian Muslim communities are in different but

interlinked states of fear, and there are increasing demands from both sides that Muslim women display their cultural loyalty through their dress. If this social climate continues, the question will not be what a Muslim woman ‘chooses’ – it will be which side is able to wield the greater force.

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