

**The Sociological Understanding of Muslim Wearing the Headscarf (Hijab) through
the Islamic Culture**

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Abstract:

The hijab controversy is really about the ‘choice’ of wearing the hijab for a Muslim woman and perhaps why she cannot be trusted to make this decision herself. One has to understand the religious significance of the practice including what is written in the Quran and then how it is widely interpreted including Sharia Law and second, depending on one’s own particular stance on the world, one then has to weigh in with cultural, political and personal viewpoints that can influence the debate. If feminism is about empowering women to make their own choices, when then have some ‘progressive’ cultures taken her right to decide away? One can only speculate that these North American and European cultures must not actually believe their women are capable of deciding for themselves. Meanwhile, researches indicated that the media bombards the public by constantly emphasizing the difference between Western and Islamic cultures, using the headscarf (*hijab*) as a main symbol of the culture clash. Because this particular practice in Islam appears to centre on women, it is easy to focus on the status of women in Islam as the main issue, especially because it varies so widely across the world.

Key words: (headscarf), Islam, Sociology of religion, Muslim women, Islamic culture, Feminism

Introduction:

Among contemporary society there are aspects that are viewed negatively by the majority people – abortion, airport screening procedures, obesity, social networking, and teen pregnancy, however, when it comes to other problems such as the status of woman and her practices within the religion of Islam, research shows there are some controversial issues especially when it comes to the issue wearing the headscarf (*Hijab*). Nowadays this issue became one of the ongoing debates one in Canada that during the recent election it became the topic of conflict among the different political parties and their nominated people. This topic identified as one among many social problems and can play an integral role in our daily lives.

A social problem can be defined as an attitude that is perceived as something that is negative and could threaten the social cohesion or moral standards of a given society. Throughout history, social problems have unexpectedly emerged and later disappear at the same pace while others have remained under constant debate throughout society (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998). There are several sociological theories that focus on social problems ranging from Karl Marx's conflict theory and critical theory all the way to Robert Merton's anomie theory. In regards to a more contemporary theoretical approach to social problems, there is the constructionist theory. This theory does not focus on the physical aspect of social problems but instead it is interested in the process in which social problems become identified and the actors that identify them (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998). Social Problems are attitudes, conditions or activities created by society and eventually solved by that same entity. These attitudes, conditions or activities are only considered a social problem once they receive the stigma as being a problem (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998). For instance, smoking tobacco was not considered a social problem in the

beginning of its introduction into society but recently with studies showing the link between smoking tobacco and cancer it has adopted the negative stigma of being a social problem. Some social problems can function to legitimate the dominant values of a specific group. For instance, Christianity uses social problems to maintain the allegiance of its believers. The idea of having sins and penalties for those sins allows for the dominant values of that specific group to prevail (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998). The purpose of this paper will be to examine the Sociological Understanding of wearing the Headscarf (Hijab) through the concept of social problems in regards to the second largest religion in the world – Islam. The focus will be on Islam’s view towards the Sociological Understanding of Headscarf (Hijab) and its links to the concept of social problems. Following the review of literature will be the main body of the paper where it will be argued that the two dominant religions of the world – Christianity and Islam – are not as separate and distinct as society proclaims them to be with regard wearing the headscarf (Hijab). This statement will be argued by referring to the literature previously reviewed and noting the similarities of both religions. By the end of this paper the individual should be able to see that the religion of Islam and Christianity are not as distant from one another as most of society argues them to be.

Discussing the religious and cultural significance of the hijab is a complicated thing to do. First, one has to understand the religious significance of the practice including what is written in the Quran and then how it is widely interpreted including Sharia Law and second, depending on one’s own particular stance on the world, one then has to weigh in with cultural, political and personal viewpoints that can influence the debate. Hilal Elver, Author of *The Headscarf Controversy*, suggests that the media bombards the public by constantly emphasizing the difference between Western and Islamic cultures, using the hijab as a main symbol of the culture

clash (Evler, 2012). Because this particular practice in Islam appears to centre on women, it is easy to focus on the status of women in Islam as the main issue, especially because it varies so widely across the world. Perhaps this has been an easy target in the Western world because it so distinctly sets apart men and women with a blatantly visible symbol. Certainly, in the Canada since November 2013 till today, this is a hot topic where the discussion is influenced by considerations of modern feminism and modern Islamic religious practice and how the two clash on one hand and combine on the other. After highlighting the religious underpinnings of the wearing of the hijab, the discussion of the controversy surrounding the clash between modern law and family or moral ‘law’ will emphasize the complicated social and political arguments around the topic. In the end, the goal of this discussion will be to better understand the controversy surrounding wearing the hijab and then to understand why it is not as simple as a ‘choice’ for the modern Islamic woman.

In the Western world, the veil worn by women has many more names in addition to hijab, however, hijab will be the name that this paper will use. It is “seen by some as a mark of religious freedom and others as an insult to women’s equality, the wearing of Muslim headdress...in public has stirred controversy in Canada as well as other Western nations” (Ernst, 2011). Countries including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany to name a few, have taken a staunch approach on the wearing of religious symbols, ultimately having the most impact on the female Muslim population. To many people of these ‘Western’ populations, the hijab has been portrayed as a symbol of Islamic oppression of women (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). Without carefully examining the wearing of the hijab, ill-equipped westerners may dismiss the practice as Muslim ‘backwardness’ which fails to recognize the complex religious and cultural interplay surrounding the issue (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). Before a proper

discussion of the wearing of the hijab, one has to understand the religious roots from whence the practice came.

In establishing a spirit of equality “the Quran teaches that before God (Allah) the ethical obligations of women and men are the same” (Drummond, 2005). That is to say that their divinity is to be respected regardless of biology and that living a life of righteous deeds will be rewarded. However, Muhammad (P.B.U.H) goes on to discuss, “that men have been put ‘a degree’ above women” and that “as a fact of life that men are managers of the affairs of women” (Drummond, 2005) (K:2:228; 4:38). To extend the discussion to covering oneself: “In a larger social context, prescription is given, as from God himself...for all believing women, to draw veils about their faces when they go outside their home” (Drummond, 2005) (K 33:53, 55, 59). This is not to say that there was not significant emphasis on the ‘equal spiritual status’ of men and women within the teachings of God through Muhammad (P.B.U.H), however, the tradition of the hijab may be of further family values consideration that spiritual power imbalance between men and women (Drummond, 2005). Within these particular teachings, interpretations vary widely as to the prescribed power men are to have over women in Islam.

In *hijab: a Symbol of Modesty or Seclusion*, a writing within the book *Islam and the Veil*, Khola Hassan suggests that “various Qur’anic verses were often interpreted narrowly to exclude women from the public sphere, to deny them any role in society except a very limited one, and to subject them to strict control by the men in their lives” (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). She goes on to explain that the Quran begins the conversation about the hijab suggesting that one ‘lower the gaze’ to protect one’s chastity (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). She points out that this particular direction is first cited to men and then to women (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). Further women are also to “extend their headscarf to cover the chest and not to reveal their adornments” in

public (Gabriel and Hannen, 2011). In a cultural context, Hassan suggests that the headscarf instruction were “not just about covering a woman’s hair and upper body but about standards of public decency, modesty and propriety” (Gabrielle and Hannan 2011). Sheema Khan, in her book *Of Hockey and Hijab*, recounts an important differentiation in the wearing of the hijab, that of the responsibility of women and men in controlling their sexual desires. She says Muslim men and women have a duty to challenge inaccurate views like those of the Director of the Islamic Society of North America (Canada) where he says, “I think if a woman is so pretty that she would attract attention to her, then she should cover her face,” also saying, “It’s essentially trying to avoid any bad feeling from men.” (Khan, 2009). This is really saying a woman is responsible for how the man receives her, and Khan disagrees entirely with this statement. She goes on to explain why she believes this is not the teaching of Mohammed (P.B.U.H) at all,

Shortly before his death, the Prophet travelled with a trusted companion named Al Fadl. During their trip, they passed a group of women. Al Fadl began to stare at the face of one who is described as ‘beautiful’. The Prophet physically turned Al Fadl’s face away. He stared again. The Prophet repeated his gesture. He did not order the woman to cover her face. He placed the onus on the man to refrain from gazing, in compliance with Quranic directives.
(Khan, 2009)

Khan indicates that she feels the Quran places emphasis on personal responsibility. She also acknowledges that the concept of Sharia Law, that is the framework of justice based on the Quran and the life of Mohammed, has a significant impact on family matters as well (Khan, 2009).

Within Sharia law, one must be aware that the Quran is not fully compatible with a secular notion of human rights and does not deliver the same set of rights (Akhtar, 2011) especially

when it outlines the framework for justice within the family. Some argue that Islam liberates women and elevates their status as it gives them prescribed rules to follow regarding dress and engagement with the opposite sex while also allotting for their right to participate in public spheres, own and inherit property. If Sharia Law prescribes the wearing of the hijab as a requirement within the family, and if a woman sees Sharia Law as her ultimate law rather than North American laws, it is impossible to differentiate the power relationship between Islamic men and women within the teachings of the Quran, and therefore the element of 'choice' for a women regarding the wearing of the hijab.

This is further evidence that the motivation to wear the hijab for a modern Islamic woman can be multifaceted. For some, it is a symbol of their commitment to their religious life, for others it may be as a form of rejection of Western emphasis on physical competition and beauty. There are those who wear the hijab as it gives them the feeling of safety and security and others who feel that it clearly identifies their cultural ties. Some Westerners believe it is a statement of unwillingness to integrate, of intent to do harm or desire to convert others (Gabriel and Hannan, 2011). The question becomes, is the choice to wear the hijab a 'free' choice, without negative consequences from the community or the family or the state when the decision falls on one side or the other? On the one hand, she wears the veil to adhere to the teachings of her religion, on the same hand, she wears the veil because she is 'helping' the men of her community not succumb to their mortal urges. On the other hand, why should she have to cover herself to help a man control himself? Why is that her responsibility? To add, in many cultures around the world, women participate in all sorts of physical activities, competitions and events and the question would be why should they have to endure the discomfort of covering their entire head

and body when they are not the ones who lack self-control? If that is the logic we are following here, shouldn't men just have to wear glasses that blind them instead?

And thus is the modern day controversy that is the wearing of the hijab in Canadian culture. In a CBC article in December of 2011, a lawyer for the Canadian Muslim Congress was cited as saying that “there are a number of reasons a woman could wear a {head covering}, they could be cultural, they could be political, they could be familial...” And so everyone who weighs in on the debate has a slightly different take on the variation of choice a Muslim woman may have regarding the Hijab (Crawford, 2011). With a viewpoint that is contrary yet no less controversial, Shabbir Akhtar suggests, in his book, *Islam as Political Religion: The Future of an Imperial faith*, “...even the *de jure* rights of Muslim women—and these are remarkable extensive in Islamic law thought not in Muslim practice—differ from those secured by a Western feminism determined to achieve maximal rights for women while, from certain viewpoints, potentially neglecting the rights of the family and the legitimate grievances of men” (Akhtar, 2011). Here, it appears that the author is suggesting Western feminism has a detrimental impact on the family and the rights of men. He goes on to say that,

“Many see Muslim women as oppressed and trapped in cultures where the demand for modesty is a second veil, hence the proverb, ‘the eyes are the first veil’. Muslim women are, however, generally assured of marriage and a home within their own cultures and this spared the humiliations of the free marked search for love and romance which fuels the gender war in the West.”

(Akhtar, 2011)

It seems that his argument suggests that without the religion and the corresponding veil, women would have a more difficult time finding a husband or owning property, thus suffering immeasurable cruelties only known to the Western world. One might be left to ask, ‘is being

married and owning property her definition of success?’ Or simply that of her religion and her family that raised her?

When mandated by family law, norms and mores—I feel that the wearing of the hijab is a force of oppression. When a woman feels she has to do something to please her family, rather than choosing to do something to please herself...it then, is not simply her choice. And the oppression doesn't stop there either. When a nation passes a law indicating that a woman cannot wear articles of her choosing, the state control over women is also oppressive. Is a woman in today's Canadian society so incapable of independent thought that either her family or the state has to make her decisions because she cannot be trusted to do this on her own? I doubt that very much. Furthermore, there are many cultures around the world that depict their pious female members as wearing a headscarf yet wearing the hijab is seen by some as a solely Islamic form of power and control of its women. Countries around the world, such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia recognize Sharia Law within their political structure and as such, the wearing of the hijab becomes law and not values. In this way, the hijab is a form of social control with a much bigger impact on women than men. Western culture tends to portray these nations as oppressive, giving little value to women or their position in society. This may also be where one begins to generalize the meaning of wearing head and body coverings to be the same sentiments among all Muslim groups across the world, and this is a mistake.

Shelina Zahra, writer for Aljazeera, argues that if people believe that every Muslim woman who wears the hijab does not do so out of free will, but because she has been brainwashed, then they have violated a core principal of feminism where we are to uplift a woman's right to control her own destiny by trusting her ability to choose (Zahra, 2013). She goes on to argue then, that the same logic must apply to every woman who wears the mini skirt or the bikini, that they too must

be brainwashed to believe that this is the right thing to do despite its restrictive nature (Zahra, 2013). Kholā Hasan suggests that when female children are raised within Islam and forced at a young age into segregation from her brothers and their activities and forced into wearing the hijab unable to ride a bike or climb a tree, that this is an act of oppression (Gabrielle and Hannan, 2011). She says, as with other trainings within the Muslim faith, it takes time to develop these practices and should be introduced and offered over time from puberty.

Drummond suggests that Muhammad (P.B.U.H) “evidently did not foresee the extent of personal restrictions that his prescriptions in this matter would bring upon generations of Muslim women for generations to come” (Drummond, 2005). Today, there are many Muslims who believe that women are relegated to be second class citizens in a man’s world (Gabrielle and Hannan, 2011). Sheema Khan, a Canadian Scholar, came to a very different conclusion after much consideration. She says, “I came to realize that the chauvinistic views held by many Muslims were in direct conflict with the teachings of Islam and the example of the first generation of Muslims, considered as the best” (Khan, 2009). She goes on to say that in the early days of Islam women had much equality in leadership, and were ‘bona fide scholars’ who questioned the Prophet, wrote poetry and went into battle (Khan, 2009). This is yet another layer of considerations that weighs on the debate especially depending on the values and norms of the family of origin. In this way, when a woman sees and chooses to wear the hijab as a form of modesty, self-respect and where she uses it as a symbol of her respect for her religious teachings and even a symbol of her self-removal from the objectification of women in Western culture, this write believes that is something to be celebrated and respected and not in the least as sign that she is oppressed.

With absolute eloquence, Sheema Khan describes the basis of the controversy around the hijab,

For some, it is a part of their faith's requirement of modesty. For others, it is an element of their cultural tradition. Many young Muslimahs wear it as a symbol of identity—or rebellion. And yes, there are women who are forced to wear it against their will. (Khan, 2009)

As noted in the beginning of this discussion, the controversy is really about the 'choice' of wearing the hijab for a Muslim women and perhaps why she cannot be trusted to make this decision herself. If Feminism is about empowering women to make their own choices, when then have some 'progressive' cultures taken her right to decide away? One can only speculate that these North American and European cultures must not actually believe their women are capable of deciding for themselves. Shelina Kahra Janmohamed feels strongly that this debate is fruitless. She says "...stop fighting over what I wear, and start addressing who I am. I am neither burqa nor bikini. I am woman" (Janmohamed, 2013). Ultimately, the balance between cultural, religious and family values means that this discussion will rage on. Perhaps, asking a Muslim woman about her motivation for wearing the hijab is a good start. It is simply this writer's hope that in the future, the debate will feature many more liberated Muslims, including men *and* women alike.

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