

THE HIJĀB

DO TRADITIONS HINDER WOMEN IN MODERN SOCIETY?

SARA HUSSEINI

IN TODAY'S GLOBALISED SOCIETY, WHERE DIFFERENT CULTURES and ethnicities come into contact on a regular basis and external religiosity is reported to be increasing, the question concerning the prominence of religious and cultural traditions in modern society is becoming ever more critical. The *hijāb*, as a practice which is only adopted by women, as well as being one of the most externally obvious religious-cultural signs, provides an interesting case for discussion.

In 2001 the Canadian organisation Women Working with Immigrant Women (WWIW) documented the experiences of Muslim women applying for jobs in manufacturing, services and sales. One participant tells her story: *"I did an interview by phone for an office-cleaning job. I got the job. I arrived and asked what I should do. The next day my supervisor talked to me about that thing I was wearing on my head. I corrected her and told her it's called hijāb. I told her it was my religion; I had to wear it. The supervisor told me that some people feel uncomfortable to ask me about it. I wanted to talk to a higher supervisor. He never talked to me and they never addressed my issue. Then my supervisor followed me around and started harassing me. After a week I quit. It's not worth it."*

The word *hijāb* commonly refers to the traditional headscarf and long dress worn by many Muslim women, but also has broader meanings encompassing the values of modesty, privacy and morality. Its original name, as written in the Qur'an, is *khimār*, it was not until later that the word *hijāb*, from the root *hajaba* meaning to 'veil' or 'screen', was introduced. The main Qur'anic basis for the practice of *hijāb* can be found in the *surat an-Nur* 24:31:

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or the servants whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex, and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments."

Following the standard interpretation of this verse by Islamic scholars the *hijāb* is usually adopted at puberty, but this is not a fixed rule; indeed there is debate as to whether it is obligatory (*fard*) in Islam, or merely recommended (*mustahabb*), which is why not all Muslim women choose to wear it. If

adopted, the *hijāb* is worn in public at all times, but not around close family members or other women.

In the last few years this garment has caused debate and controversy in countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Nigeria, among others. It has resulted in laws banning religious symbols from public schools in France and Belgium, and even in parts of Germany, where eight out of the sixteen federal States have recently adopted a similar policy. Meanwhile, Muslim women in a range of countries- and by no means only in the West- have complained of discrimination in employment and of increased discrimination in all areas of life since the events of 9/11 and the London bombings of July 2005.

The *hijāb*, in one respect, is clearly a gender issue, although disagreement about wearing it in the workplace forms part



Woman with hijāb. Photo courtesy of www.333cn.com.

of a wider religious, cultural, and ethnic issue in modern society. Currently, the legislation in some European nations bans *all* religious symbols, including the Jewish *kippah* (skull cap) and the Christian cross, in public schools and some other government-run institutions. The UK-based British Airways requires their staff to wear crosses underneath their clothing, and allows Muslim women to wear the *hijāb* only because there is no way to hide it. Male Sikhs have also experienced problems with the turban they are required to wear for religious purposes; currently the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the US is suing the finance company Merrill Lynch for discrimination against a man based solely on his Muslim faith and

them a sense of identity and show openly that they are Muslim. Many women have said that they like to be judged on personality rather than on looks, and some simply felt that the *hijāb* made them more focused in life. Whatever the reasons for wearing the *hijāb*, most Muslim women are keen to stress that it is not the sign of oppression which many non-Muslims perceive it to be. The overwhelming sense that one gets from reading literature on this subject is that *misunderstanding* is the biggest problem engendering discrimination and antagonism towards the practice. What is needed, it seems, is education.

By unveiling myths, raising awareness, increasing understanding, and altering misperceptions, the NGO community



Iranian origin. There is strong evidence that many of the arguments about wearing garments with symbolic value in public are not targeted specifically at Muslims, but at manifestations of religion in general.

One suggestion of how to deal with this *hijāb* issue is that it be removed in the public sphere, particularly in jobs which involve daily contact with the general population. This rule, already enforced in some nations, is supported not only by secularists but even by religious leaders who are concerned by the discrimination faced by Muslim women. One such singular supporter was the former Chairman of the Council of Mosques and Imams in Britain, Zaki Badawi, who advised Muslim women to remove their head scarves for their own safety after the backlash created by the London bombings in 2005. The general response of most Muslim women was to refuse to compromise their religious beliefs, arguing that by not continuing to lead their normal lives, as every other Londoner was advised to do, they too would be granting victory to terrorism. The predominant feeling among Islamic women in Britain is very much that the *hijāb* is an individual right, and should remain so.

Most Muslim women complain of having to explain themselves continuously, clarifying that for the vast majority, the *hijāb* is a personal choice to do with modesty and respect, worn primarily for religious reasons, but often also for a number of cultural and personal reasons too. For instance, some feel that a lot of Muslim men prefer to marry a woman who wears the *hijāb*; others wear the *hijāb* to give

can begin to break down these barriers of intolerance and discrimination. There are already efforts being made by a number of organizations worldwide, from small student groups like one at the University of Leicester (UK) which organized an event in 2006 to improve understanding of the *hijāb*, to larger projects such as an ad campaign ran by the New York Times in 2003, or the aforementioned study carried out by the WWIW in 2001. Further projects could involve after-school or weekend activities for children and their parents, whereby women who wear the *hijāb* talk to people and inform them about the practice. At the same time they could organise and participate in a range of sports and cultural activities, in order to show that the *hijāb* is not something to be feared, that it is merely a way of dressing that reflects a certain way of life. This sort of education could and should cover all forms of religious, cultural and ethnic discrimination: A desperately needed large and long-term project that the NGO community certainly has the resources, knowledge and capabilities to undertake. ■

SOURCES

- www.hijab.com - *A forum for discussing the politics and cultural contexts regarding Islam and women.*
- ABDEL-FATAH, RANDA, *Does my Head Look Big in this?* (New York: Orchard Books, 2007).
- MCGOLDRICK, DOMINIC. *Human Rights and Religion: The Islamic Headscarf Debate in Europe.* (Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2006).
- RAMADAN, TARIQ, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).