

What does it mean for a girl to wear a hijab?

Suzanne Kanso

This article summarises the results of an explorative research project with Muslim hijab-wearing girls in Canada and cross examines it with scholarly perspectives and the author's personal experience as a Muslim woman wearing the hijab.

In my Muslim family, wearing a hijab (a head-covering or headscarf) means modesty, honesty, being kind to one another, and sleeping with a clean conscience at night. I grew up watching my mom wrap her beautiful silk hijab around her hair every time we left the house or whenever a non-mahram man (mahram: an unmarriageable kin, cf. Abdul-Rahman, 2007) came over to visit.

I knew that when I came of age, I wanted to wear it and look pretty, just like my mother. I never questioned its purpose, because I wore it with educational reasoning in my back-pocket. I never once imagined the implications it could have on my life living in Canada, because I saw myself like any other Canadian born and raised here, with rights to practice whatever we choose to – that's at least what we were taught in school. However, this all started to change from the age of 15 when I went to high school and my personal battle and struggle with societal stereotypes and alienation began. So, what does it mean for a girl to wear a hijab?

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

I started an explorative research project with a group of 6 Muslim hijab-

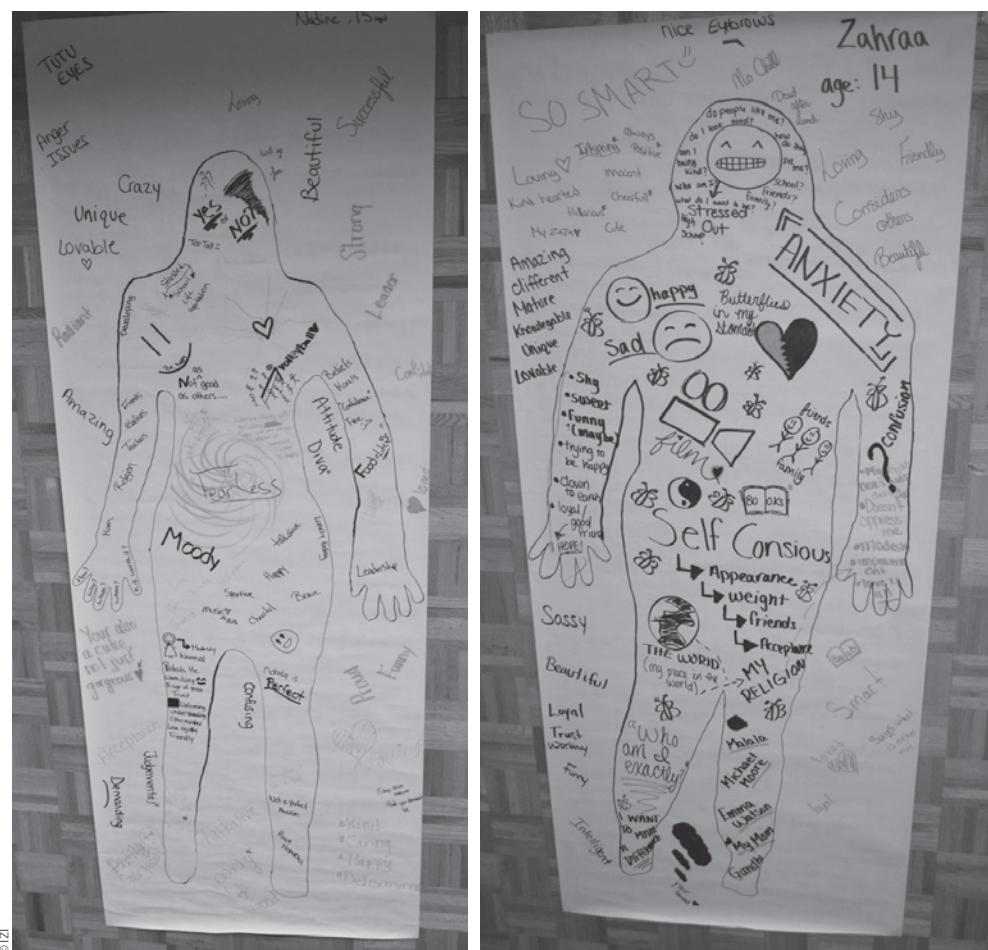
wearing girls from Ottawa, ON, Canada between the ages of 12 and 15. As a part of the "shape myself" project (see Jennings et al. in this issue) the girls drew themselves on a big piece of paper and had time to reflect what shapes them and their identity (Ill. 1); an interesting and important experience for all of us to examine. This article shares the experiences of the interviewees, reveals the results of the study, and cross examines it with scholarly perspectives and the author's personal experience as a Muslim women wearing the hijab. 14-year-old participant, Jasmine Samhat, believes the hijab to be a symbol of power, having a voice and standing out. Similarly, 12-year-old Batoul Hussain notes the most prominent belief for her is how the hijab represents equality between men and women. It was quite fascinating to examine the outcomes of this research project, as all 6 participants shared a common theme of putting others before themselves and to later discover how common it is to neglect their emotions amongst their peers and place family as a main priority.

Zeinab Hussain speaks on behalf of the other participants when she talks about "self-conflict" being a recurring theme in her self-representation. This project has allowed participants to explore themselves and regain focus as to who they aspire to be. Nadine Matar, 15, "felt really excited and happy about the project; it reminded me of who I truly am." Like Nadine, Batoul Hussain found the project to be very fun and educational because it helped her "open up to what it means

to be a girl that wears the hijab." This project allowed these young Muslim girls to relate to characters in whom they saw themselves, like Blair Waldorf from *Gossip Girl*, Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter* and Superwoman (a YouTube personality and comedian known as Lilly Singh), because they had high standards and were not slaves to their emotions. They described them as successful and determined, incredibly empowering and witty, and full of love for others. They taught them how to set goals and to never give up.

THE HIJAB: SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION OR TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT?

In today's society, the hijab is still considered a form of oppression and often used as a weapon for stereotyping Muslim women. From an Islamic perspective, an esoteric concept of the hijab is to reflect purity of intention and honesty. These two concepts are interrelated in defining the purpose of wearing a headscarf for Muslim women. To wear the hijab for practicing Muslim women means "an articulation of faith and an embodiment of divinely-prescribed frameworks for modesty" (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012). Contractor states wearing a headscarf creates opportunities for Muslim women to truly understand their faith as they go out into the real world and contribute as citizens without the risk of being objectified. Muslim women wearing the hijab do not intend to polemicize a pro-



III. 1: Examples of shapes created by hijab-wearing girls. These self-representations show that the hijab is an integral part of their complex identities

hijab stance, rather to articulate in the broader scheme of things meeting the basic threshold of basic human rights, which seeks to ensure and guarantee the right to religious expression and freedom from discrimination. The headscarf unfortunately has been a wide topic of debate for many policy influencers and governmental personnel in impacting the lives of Muslim-hijabis (women who wear the headscarf), by undermining Muslim women and their potential for growth in non-Muslim majority countries. Highlighting the tension between social and personal identity often times leads to a misconstrued image and representation. For Muslim women, this intermesh subjugates individuals to marginalization and alienation. The social and political ties associated with the hijab

can, for some, be a symbol of Muslim women's subordination. The hijab, fairly viewed as an item of oppression and denouncement of a woman's voice, creates a misconstrued item for roundtable debates. Appropriately, this implication also silences many Muslim women's voices as it leaves them with no safe space to talk about their relationship with/to the hijab.

Section 2 of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom states "regardless of whether [one is] a Canadian Citizen or an individual... [these] 'fundamental freedoms', namely freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, are applicable to all." (Jacob, 2007). Bullock believes that the "hijab means that she is a Muslim woman

who believes her body is her own private concern" (Bullock, 2002) and then adds that "young Muslim women are reclaiming the hijab, reinterpreting it in light of its original purpose - to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies" (*ibid.*). In a qualitative study conducted with a few participants, Hiba states she is "terrified to practice [her] faith by putting on the hijab in fear of getting rejected by society." For Bullock the hijab is a tool of empowerment; a tool that young Muslim women can use to reassure society that wearing a headscarf is not a form of oppression but rather personal choice, and that should be respected as basic human rights. When asked "What does the hijab mean for Muslim

women?" one can assertively note that it surely is not a form of oppression and is notably not a symbol of the female subordination in the Muslim faith.

On a further note, Carens (2006) states that the construction of female identity in respect to a woman's ability to dress in ways that are attractive to men, has contributed more to the subordination of women than the hijab ever did. Thus even if the hijab does stand for the subordination of women within Islam, Taylor & Zine (2014) argue as to "Why Muslim girls should [not] be permitted to wear it if they choose to do so?". What it means to wear the hijab surpasses the defined stereotypical norm outlined by society. The choice of wearing a hijab or not, regardless if it has potential for serving multiple

purposes, should not have an effect or any bearing on the rights of girls to wear the hijab and practice their faith.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH THE HIJAB

Wearing the hijab was a personal choice of mine and not one that was enforced upon me by my parents as the alienated picture is typically painted. Freedom of choice is an imperative principle in the household I was brought up in. I was 13 years old when I first wore my hijab, and it was one of the harshest things to endure as a kid, because of the marginalization I received from people and society at large. I was subjugated to spiteful words and had to fight back with diplomatic approaches. I had to learn how to be Canadian and Muslim and balance the integration of both worlds into my life. When exposed to demeaning comments like "towelhead, terrorist, etc." or accused of carrying bombs in my backpack, society by definition ostracized my self-identification. Society forbade and stripped me away from enjoying the innocent pleasures and privileges of being a kid.

When I turned 25, I made the most difficult decision of life, and that was to rid away part of my identity in order

to fit societal expectations and pay passed due bills. My hair was impressively flattering; it instantly landed me a career and relieved me from reaching a 3-year mark of unemployment. Today, I wear my hijab in my heart. Coming from a Lebanese, Turkish, and Argentinian background gives me privilege as a Caucasian-looking woman to be an educator on topics of "Hijab, Breaking Stereotypes and Empowerment." I, therefore, seek to provide girls who want to wear the hijab an opportunity to flourish in their own skin and create a safe space for them to identify in whichever shape or form they wish to represent themselves.

My hijab is my identity, my right, my voice, my freedom. I am not oppressed because I wear it; I am rather oppressed when I am forced to take it off. As a Canadian from birth, we are taught from our Canadian constitution the freedom of choice, so I question the validation and authenticity of such a law when in practice, I am my own person. My hijab does not represent who I am as a person. "I" am not a religion, nor am "I" a topic of discussion for your political agenda or societal approval. "I" am a human being, just like you, and I want to live free by choosing to do whatever "I" want to do as an individual. ■

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