



Asserting citizenship: Muslim women's experiences with the hijab in Canada



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ABSTRACT

In Canada, hijab wearing Muslim women have increasingly faced discrimination in the post 9–11 era. In this study, we investigate Muslim women's experiences with the hijab and how they are viewed as the "other" in a multicultural country like Canada. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Muslim women who describe their experiences with the hijab. The study focuses on how the hijab is perceived in public and how experiences with discrimination have motivated Muslim women to reclaim their voices in a space that perceives Muslim women to be oppressed. Thematic network analysis of the data revealed three central themes: religiosity, societal prejudice and internal struggle. Discrimination was experienced by all participants and internal struggles resulted in resolution techniques that helped in mitigating negative experiences.

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In the post 9–11 era, veiling by Muslim women has become a prominent topic of debate. The hijab, a veil, is worn by Muslim women and may be paired with modest clothing such as an abaya. The hijab can also include a face veil known as the niqab. The niqab covers the face while exposing the eyes. Unfortunately, veiled women, both those who cover their faces and those who wear the hijab, encounter discrimination in Canada and other western societies. They are viewed, paradoxically, as either oppressed or as threatening, with the hijab an over-determined sign of 'otherness'. Muslim women are too often the targets of hate crimes. In response, in the post 9–11 era, Muslim women increasingly have reclaimed their voices in their journeys with hijab and niqab and are using social media to defend their choice to veil. Limited research is available on how Muslim women define the hijab and their experiences with discrimination. Interest in the subject was sparked by disturbing recent events in Canada. This study was initiated to systematically examine how Muslim women in Thunder Bay and Calgary, of varying ages and backgrounds, perceive the hijab and niqab and to explore the meanings they attach to it in current day Canada. To understand the ways in which Muslim women view the hijab in a cultural climate of racism and hostility to Islam, a qualitative study based on interview style data collection was aimed at providing space for women to speak about their experiences, and the

discrimination they face, and to allow them to explain why they wear the hijab or niqab. Interviews were all conducted by the lead author. The theoretical and political approach is shared by all of the authors and each contributed to the analysis and framing of the work. A total of twenty-six female participants, ranging in age from 18 to late 40s, were interviewed in Thunder Bay, Calgary and Toronto. After data analysis, three central themes emerged in the interviews: the effect of religion, societal discrimination, and the internal struggle with hijab.

Muslim women in Canada

The hijab and niqab are often associated with oppression, loss of freedom, terrorism and perceptions of the "other" in Western countries (Ramachandran, 2009; Hoodfar, 2003). Muslims are largely seen as one group without diversity in practicing their beliefs. When this happens, people assume that all Muslims are the same and label Muslim women stereotypically. (McDonough, 2003). However, how Canadians react to the hijab and niqab may stem from the underlying history of opposition towards religious domination and the fight for women's rights (McDonough, 2003). Historically, Canadian women have fought for their right to vote, to pursue careers, and to be free from control by religious leaders (Ramachandran, 2009). Those who choose not to be "free of religion" are too often viewed as oppressed. This is particularly true in a context in which Islam itself is perceived in the west as 'backward' and threatening. In this way, the veiled woman becomes someone who needs to be freed from her "oppression" and from authoritative male figures in her family and the Muslim community

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(Hoodfar, 2003). Not only are Muslim women perceived to be lacking agency, but they are also assumed to have lower education and academic capabilities. “The assumptions that the veil equals “ignorance” and “oppression” has meant that young Muslim women have to invest a considerable amount of energy in establishing themselves as thinking, rational, literate students, both in their classrooms and outside” (Hoodfar, 2003, p. 5). Added to this is the difficulty women face in a post 9–11 era. Increasingly, Muslim women are viewed with hostility and suspicion and the perception of Muslim women being potentially dangerous is rampant in media images (Chambers & Roth, 2014). Muslim women of colour also face racism and their ‘otherness’ is compounded by veiling. Not only does this create obstacles for Muslim women in claiming their identities, but also Muslim women find it that much more difficult to achieve their goals and ambitions.

Ostensibly, Canada celebrates multiculturalism. Muslims are a small percentage of the Canadian population, but Muslims have become part of the Canadian mosaic. In fact, according to Statistics Canada, the Muslim population is just over 1 million, representing 3.2% of Canada's population as of 2011 (2014). Based on this census data, women who don the hijab or niqab are not numerous. However, “Muslims have become visible actors not only in sports, but also at school and at work, in big cities and smaller towns. The most visible Muslims are those women who have taken up the *hijab* and the *jilbab* (a full body cloak worn in addition to *hijab*)” (Ali, 2005, p. 515). Despite the limited number of women who veil, and the purported multiculturalism of Canada, what Muslim women choose to wear is still a hot topic of debate and scrutiny. Under the constitution, all women are to be protected under the law and should be free to practice their agency and choose what they believe and how they dress. Not only are Muslim women subject to different standards of appearance, but they are also misrepresented and stereotyped (Hoodfar, 2003). Intersectional analysis suggests that racism, Islamophobia and other markers of difference cannot be entirely disentangled and that women who veil experience discrimination for myriad and complicated reasons (Crenshaw, 1993; Hillsburg, 2013). In whatever manner they choose to wear the veil, Muslim women who veil are highly visible and face discrimination and injustice in Canadian society (Marcotte, 2010).

In *Banners of Faiths and Identities in Construct: The Hijab in Canada in The Muslim Veil in North America*, Reem Meshal focuses her findings on how the hijab is practiced differently according to race and class in Canadian society. The hijab is worn in different styles and can be paired with large cloaks. Other styles also exist, known as turban styles, which only cover a woman's hair and expose her neck. The hijab can also include the niqab, a full face veil only exposing the eyes. In essence, the hijab and niqab are worn for reasons and in styles that only the woman herself can define, but non-Muslim Canadians do not see this variety. As Meshal (2003) states, “under the Canadian multicultural umbrella, the generic “Muslim community” stands as a mosaic within a mosaic. From West to East, this community encompasses immigrants from the edge of the Moroccan Atlantic coast to the Indian subcontinent; from North to South it spans the European Balkans down to the southernmost tip of the sub-Saharan belt. As one might expect, this expansive geographic bloc defies singular depiction” (pg. 73). Meshal emphasizes that many women practice the hijab and niqab with a strong connection to a religious understanding. Younger Muslim women tend to have a stronger understanding of the religious requirements of the hijab rather than a cultural understanding. A religious understanding helps Muslim women in explaining the significance of the hijab and niqab to Canadian society. According to Meshal, the hijab is a symbol of Muslim women's identity and they are very well aware of its significance. “The act of donning the *hijab* renders its wearer more visible even as it covers her form. Veiled, she is marked and identifiable, not just to the Muslim community, but also to the wider Canadian society” (Meshal, 2003, p. 93). A study conducted by Marcotte found similar results. In *Muslim Women in Canada: Autonomy and Empowerment*, the author states, “Muslim women, whether they choose to or not, are

conscious of it or not, also partake in the complex dynamics of acculturation. This is the difficult process of adoption and assimilation of elements of an alien culture” (p. 358). In the complex process of acculturation Muslim women simultaneously incorporate Canadian and Muslim parts into their identities.

In *More Than Clothing: Veiling as An Adaptive Strategy*, Homa Hoodfar suggests that as Canadians we need to understand that the veil is not hostile; instead, we perceive it to be. Instead, Hoodfar (2003) suggests we need to broaden our understanding of the veil as a voluntary act with multiple motives and meanings. “This broadening of the discussion will help us view a veiled woman not as a passive subject, but as an active agent involved in redefining her position and options in the contemporary context of her life” (Hoodfar, 2003, p. 38). In fact, Hoodfar emphasizes that persistent colonial images of Islam have been used to create an atmosphere of Islamophobia. Surprisingly, this type of rhetoric, in some cases, motivated Muslim women to take up the hijab or niqab (Hoodfar, 2003). Hoodfar emphasizes that the adoption of the hijab symbolizes Muslim women's faith and allows them to grow into confident beings. The hijab is not an object forced on Muslim women in Canada; instead Muslim women have reclaimed their voices in multidimensional ways. But stereotypes and discrimination remain pervasive.

Recent events in Canada

While ostensibly Canada promotes diversity through multiculturalism, Muslim women face racism and are discriminated against due to stereotypes about the hijab and niqab. According to police reports, of all Canadian hate crimes between 2010 and 2013, over 47% were against Muslim women who wore the hijab or niqab (Statistics Canada, 2013). This report also suggests that such numbers only take into consideration crimes that were reported; however, there are many other incidents that go unreported. Targeting of Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab gets official sanction, despite a stated commitment to multiculturalism. In a recent Supreme Court case, *R v NS*, the court had to consider the right of a niqab wearing woman to veil while testifying as a victim of sexual assault. Lower courts had refused to allow her to testify because of her niqab; the defense asserted that a ‘naked face’ was required in order to meet the right of the accused, his lawyer, the judge, and the jury to assess the veracity of the woman.¹ Under a compromise endorsed by the court, *NS* was ultimately able to testify in her case; however, others in her position are not guaranteed this same right.

Moreover, “in December 2011, just days after the Supreme Court of Canada heard oral evidence in *R v NS*, Jason Kenney, the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and Multiculturalism stated that “the citizenship oath is a quintessentially public act. It is a public declaration that you are joining the Canadian family and it must be taken freely and openly.”² Such statements implicitly assert that veiled women are neither free nor open/honest” (Chambers & Roth, 2014, p. 395). Throughout 2014, Stephen Harper's government banned the use of the niqab while taking oath during citizenship ceremonies. Many Muslim women felt targeted under this law. Harper's government supported the view that wearing the niqab in citizenship ceremonies goes against Canadian values and is in fact “anti-women” (Chase, 2015). Immigration Minister, Chris Alexander, suggested that hijabs should be banned as well in citizenship ceremonies (Abedi, 2015). However, the federal court ruled that Muslim women are able to take off the niqab for security and identification purposes. Thus, there is no reason for the niqab to be prohibited in citizenship ceremonies. In response to the federal court's ruling, Prime Minister Harper vehemently stated in the House of Commons, “We do not allow people to cover their faces during citizenship ceremonies.

¹ Demeanor Evidence: Viewed by law as a requirement for trial fairness. Under law, the face of all witnesses, complainants and accused, should be visible in order to adequately assess their credibility: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2384966

² Fournier and See, “The ‘Naked Face’ of Secular Exclusion,” 63.

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