

Face Masks and the Niqab: Learning from the Parallel

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The Niqab in Islam:

Many Muslim women around the world choose to wear the Niqab (face veil) for the pleasure of God. While opinions on its necessity differ within the Muslim community, Islamic teachings provide strong legal and scholarly support for its practice. For Muslim women, wearing the niqab is a means to seek the pleasure of God rather than responding to societal pressures.

Unfortunately, western media often misrepresents the niqab, implying that it is worn out of coercion rather than personal choice. However, many women, equate it with an expression of freedom – a freedom that liberates them from the world's focus on women's bodies and sexuality.

Niqab and Islamophobia

In recent years, the niqab has been unfairly linked with extremism often in conjunction with Islamophobia. Despite their strong desire to wear the niqab, many Muslim women find themselves in doubt due to the hostility and scepticism they face in Western societies. [1]

Public debates in the UK, particularly in the media, have ridiculed the niqab, with political figures even using derogatory terms like "letterbox" to belittle Muslim women who wear it. Such comments have caused immense distress within the British Muslim community. Similarly, in 2010, France passed a law prohibiting the wearing of full-face coverings in public spaces, further contributing to the stigmatization of the niqab. This has impacted Muslim women in job interviews and at times rendered them unsafe in Public. [2]

Face masks and the Niqab: a comparison

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought about a universal requirement for face masks, enforced by health authorities worldwide. As a result, wearing face masks became mandatory in hospitals, workplaces, shopping

malls, and public spaces. Various forms of PPE (personal protective equipment) were introduced in various health care settings. From surgeons and physicians to nurses and ICU staff, all adhered to wearing the appropriate face mask coverings based on the requirements of their roles. Remarkably, no one questioned the need for identification, communication, or personal choice when it came to wearing face masks. Life continued as normal, even with people covering their faces.

In contrast, Muslim women who choose to wear the niqab face constant scrutiny and judgment. They are often asked questions such as, "How can anyone identify you?" or "Are you forced to wear this by your husband?" In Western societies, where secularism often clashes with religious practices, the niqab is frequently seen as a barrier to communication, a symbol of extremism and a sign of oppression.

Some people within the Muslim community also question a woman's choice to wear the niqab, saying it is not required in Islam.

The struggle of wearing the niqab in the NHS

In the UK, Muslim women have been advised to remove their face veil when taking exams such as the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) exam, a challenge I personally faced. Many NHS trusts' uniform policies previously overlooked religious attire, such as the niqab and hijab, and failed to acknowledge the religious significance of personal clothing choices.

However, thanks to the efforts of advocates within organisations like BIMA (British Islamic Medical Association), dress code policies have been updated to accommodate religious attire, such as allowing hijabs in healthcare settings and providing options for full-length sleeves in wards to accommodate Muslim women working in the NHS. [3] [4]

Although wearing veils (Christian or niqab) is now permitted on religious grounds in the uniforms and workwear guidance for NHS employers, practically there are still significant barriers to accepting the niqab in certain professional settings, especially within the NHS. [5]

Understanding and respecting the Niqab

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how attitudes toward face coverings could change. With face masks being mandatory worldwide during the global Covid 19 pandemic, many Muslim women found themselves less judged and less discriminated against. The global response to face masks showed that communication and identification was not a problem and business could function smoothly despite face coverings.[6]

So, if the world can operate efficiently with face masks, why should there be scepticism about Muslim women wearing the niqab? Muslim women, like all individuals, are capable of excelling in all industries, from business to aviation to surgery, while wearing the niqab. The face veil is not a barrier to professional success or personal achievement, and it should not be perceived as such.

References:

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