



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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Freedom of Expression: United States

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Muslim women struggle against demeaning stereotypical images depicting them as incapable of being productive elements in society. They often find themselves confronting cultural trends within the Muslim community that hold them to a high standard of moral discipline yet deny them any significant role in shaping the future of their own community. But Muslim women are diverse along lines of ethnicity, religious attitude, and occupation. Their experiences and views on gender and freedom of expression issues are even more complex.

Muslim women wearing *ḥijāb*, the attire that varies in style but usually covers the hair, neck, and body except for the face and hands, have been the most vocal in recent years in pressing for their right to practice their faith. Feeling empowered by the constitutional protection of freedom of religion, many Muslim women share the view that being American does not mean shedding their religious convictions. After all, the United States is a pluralistic society that has produced and marketed many modes of dress around the world. So, while the ethnic South Asian *shalwar kameez* and the Arab *thawb* have given way to contemporary North American clothing styles, the *ḥijāb* has survived because it stems from deeply held religious beliefs.

While the *ḥijāb* has caused controversy, for example, in uniformed occupations, the issue is increasingly regarded as a matter of freedom of religion in the workplace and at school. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a federal government agency set up to implement the employment clauses of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, has advocated the right of women to wear *ḥijāb* at work. The law requires employers to offer reasonable accommodation to the religious practices of employees.

Often the discriminatory treatment experienced by women wearing *ḥijāb* is overt and could conceivably be challenged in court. However, most potential plaintiffs are not willing to make waves, cannot afford the usually high cost of legal counsel, or simply are unaware of their legal rights. In many cases, Muslim women denied their First Amendment right to wear *ḥijāb* look for other jobs or relax their fulfillment of religious requirements to fit the demands of employers, just as some Muslim men shave their beards or take off the *kūfi* they wear for religious reasons in order to keep their jobs.

A few corporations have taken steps to recognize the need to accommodate religiously inspired modes of dress. For example, on 18 May 2001, United Airlines, whose uniform policy was challenged by Muslim women in a number of incidents, announced that its customer service employees across the United States would be “allowed to wear a company-sanctioned *hijab*, *turban* or *yarmulke* as part of their uniform.” Explaining the decision, the company stated, “We want our workforce to reflect the diversity of our global customer base.”

For the public, *ḥijāb* has become a Muslim identifier. Outside the workplace, women with *ḥijāb* are frequently the targets of anti-Muslim attacks. In schools, girls with scarves are taunted; in shopping malls women with *ḥijāb* are harassed or denied service. Traveling Muslim women also reported humiliating experiences at airports, especially after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On the other hand, Americans demonstrating sympathy and tolerance to Muslims wore *ḥijāb* to express solidarity with Muslim women when anti-Muslim hate crimes

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peaked after 11 September 2001. In one case of passenger profiling involving a Muslim woman, a coalition of groups led by the American Civil Liberties Union filed a law suit against private security personnel at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago for the degrading treatment of a Muslim passenger wearing hijāb , charging that the woman's freedom of religion and constitutional protections against unreasonable search and seizure had been violated.

Women who convert to Islam have indicated additional pressures. Some have faced rejection by family members who do not approve of their decision to embrace another religion; some families have become so intolerant of the change that they have severed relations and disinherited their convert daughters. In a few such cases, parents of converts have even attempted to gain custody of their grandchildren. In other cases family members and friends may express tolerance toward their relatives converting to Islam but treat them as if they have become disloyal citizens.

Muslim women with an ethnicity-based identity may face a different set of pressures related to racial and national origin prejudice. The immigrants in this subset of Muslim women struggle while attempting to strike a balance between assimilation and acceptance, being American without losing pride in their roots and core values. Some find the problematics of freedom relate more to the discriminatory treatment they face from family members who, for example, consider it unacceptable for their female relatives to date but are not bothered by the same behavior from their male counterparts.

Many women view their identity in terms that are much larger or even different from ones confined to religion and ethnicity. Regardless of orientation, most Muslim women are concerned about balancing the demands of work, family, and society. Experiences differ. Immigrant women coming from patriarchal cultures face a more difficult task in meeting the demands of career while fulfilling the demands of husbands who expect them also to cook, clean, and care for children. In some instances women have been forced to make a choice between marriage and work outside the house. In the United States, Muslim women generally place high value on education; many refuse to consider marriage or job before finishing college. Parents generally support such a tendency.

Many Muslim men are adjusting to the requirements of family life where both husband and wife are employed to sustain a household. Among many Muslim women a sense of sisterhood has been established around the need to support one another in pursuing a multi-faceted life inside and outside the house. Some have developed childcare services based on reciprocity; others have established day care businesses to support the desire of their Muslim sisters to earn a living or participate in public functions.

Because of the lingering male bias that often claims legitimacy on the basis of tradition, some intellectual Muslim women are joining forces to re-examine religious scholarly works. A number of contemporary female authors argue that religious texts have been misinterpreted for centuries by male jurists who did not have women's interests – or, for that matter, particularly Islamic interests – in mind. These women are only beginning to offer religious interpretations they believe to be free of male bias. This movement, however, is still in its infancy and has yet to make any significant impact on the discourse on the status of Muslim women.

Muslim women's roles outside the home include organizing on the basis of gender to promote the involvement of Muslim women in civic life. Such involvement is constrained by a gender gap between Muslim men and women regarding the social and political roles of women. More women than men are enthusiastic about the involvement of women outside the house. Still, the reality is that Muslim women participate in community life in a variety of ways, although women struggle for representation in leadership positions. A number of Muslim community organizations in the United States are responding to women's call for inclusion. The Islamic Society of North America had its first female vice president in 2001. The American Muslim Alliance elected a woman to serve on its board in 2004. Nearly half the staff and a board member of the Council on American-Islamic Relations are women. Among young Muslims, the inclusion of women is being institutionalized. For example, some Muslim Student Association (MSA) chapters, such as MSA-Northwestern University in Chicago, now have by-laws requiring co-presidency by males and females. On 25 June 2004, MSA National elected its first female president. As women gain access to higher education and job related skills, they enhance their contribution to community and society and increase their chances to improve their status and assume leading roles.

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