

My body is my own business

by Naheed Mustafa

I often wonder whether people see me as a radical, fundamentalist Muslim terrorist packing an AK-47 assault rifle inside my jean jacket. Or maybe they see me as the poster girl for oppressed womanhood everywhere. I'm not sure which it is.

I get the whole gamut of strange looks, stares, and covert glances. You see, I wear the hijab, a scarf that covers my head, neck, and throat. I do this because I am a Muslim woman who believes her body is her own private concern.

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.

The Qur'an teaches us that men and women are equal, that individuals should not be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth, or privilege. The only thing that makes one person better than another is her or his piety.

Nonetheless, people have a difficult time relating to me. After all, I'm young, Canadian born and raised, university - educated - why would I do this to myself, they ask.

Strangers speak to me in loud, slow English and often appear to be playing charades. They politely inquire how I like living in Canada and whether or not the cold bothers me. If I'm in the right mood, it can be very amusing.

But, why would I, a woman with all the advantages of a North American upbringing, suddenly, at 21, want to cover myself so that with the hijab and the other clothes I choose to wear, only my face and hands show?

Because it gives me freedom !

Women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. We feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile.

When women reject this form of oppression, they face ridicule and contempt. Whether it's women who refuse to wear makeup or to shave their legs, or to expose

their bodies, society, both men and women, have trouble dealing with them.

In the Western world, the hijab has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical, unconscionable militancy. Actually, it's neither. It is simply a woman's assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction. Wearing the hijab has given me freedom from constant attention to my physical self. Because my appearance is not subjected to public scrutiny, my beauty, or perhaps lack of it, has been removed from the realm of what can legitimately be discussed.

No one knows whether my hair looks as if I just stepped out of a salon, whether or not I can pinch an inch, or even if I have unsightly stretch marks. And because no one knows, no one cares.

Feeling that one has to meet the impossible male standards of beauty is tiring and often humiliating. I should know, I spent my entire teen-age years trying to do it. It was a borderline bulimic and spent a lot of money I didn't have on potions and lotions in hopes of becoming the next Cindy Crawford.

The definition of beauty is ever-changing; waifish is good, waifish is bad, athletic is good - sorry, athletic is bad. Narrow hips? Great. Narrow hips? Too bad.

Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bear their breasts in public, as some people would like to have you believe. That would only make us party to our own objectification. True equality will be had only when women don't need to display themselves to get attention and won't need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves.

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