

Women and Hijaab

One of the most defended actions in Islam is the head covering. Every Muslim girl, at some point in her life will have been questioned as to why a Muslim woman must cover herself and is often looked upon as being constrained in her actions.

The first point to remember is that any act done by a Muslim is done for the pleasure of Allah Almighty. If He ordains an act as permissible then it is done. If He prohibits an act then Muslims must refrain from doing it. Allah Almighty is the possessor of all knowledge and we are dependant upon Him for all matters; success, protection, comfort and of course our very existence. He is All Knowing and since He is The Creator He knows what is best for His creation and what will suit humanities needs and requirements. Thus the order for women to cover is a direct commandment of Allah (swt) and cannot be denied and rejected. Women must cover because Allah Almighty has deemed it to be so. That does not mean we cannot inquire into the reasoning behind the commandment or ask for further explanations since this is what the Companions would do in the time of the Holy Prophet (saw). Once a commandment was revealed they would abide by it immediately but still often asked the Holy Prophet (saw) for extra guidance and assistance, for that strengthens the faith and heart. However we should always remember that any acts we do are for the pleasure of Almighty Allah, and reasoning and justifications are merely incidental aspects of faith, which exist so we may become stronger and more committed in our faith in Islam. This paper will therefore attempt to provide the reasoning and logic behind the "*hijaab*" and provide the exact legal requirements for it. Since I have had the honor to compile this paper I take the ultimate responsibility of any mistakes that may occur in this compilation, I thus seek forgiveness from Almighty Allah for any errors that may occur.

The order for Muslim women to cover is not an act of oppression or an attempt to shackle her with chains, but is part of a moral standard to be implemented to achieve the betterment of society. Every society has put limits on individuals regarding their attire in order to achieve a balance of rights, a balance between the rights of the individual and the rights of society in which he or she lives. It is strange that people criticize Islam for putting constraints on persons regarding their clothing but no reference is made to what occurs within their own society. There are laws in most countries prohibiting lewd behavior, and if anyone was to walk naked down a street, they would be arrested for acts of public indecency. There are shops, restaurants that prohibit anyone entering there premises unless they are covered to a certain extent. The State allows organizations to implement their own dress codes and rarely do people complain that employees or even customers are being oppressed. During the summer months posters can be seen outside shop windows, restaurants stating that those wearing bikinis or swimming trucks are banned from entering. Why is this type of prohibition permitted and tolerated? The reason is that every society has set a certain standard of moral behavior regarding clothing. It is not thought of as acceptable that people should have the right to strip and walk naked in front of others in public, since this is considered as offending the sensibility of most, and can also cause undue harm to the person stripping, tempting people to insult or even attack that person. That is

why there are separate nudist camps so that the public and the nudists themselves can exercise their own rights, but not at the expense of each other, but privately and exclusively.

In essence therefore individuals in most societies have certain restrictions on them regarding their attire and Islam is no different. It too has a code of conduct and part of that conduct is to specify respectable clothing. Is there any school for example that will allow a girl to enter the premises without wearing a skirt or trousers, and just enter with a shirt on? Can a parent complain that their child's rights are being infringed if a Head teacher does not allow a child or teenager to attend wearing a bikini? Of course this sounds ludicrous but it is true nonetheless. Even if one argues the reason for uniforms in schools (for example) is to stop discrimination between the rich and poor students or exists to create discipline and a sense of belonging, why is it then that there are no schools who have a uniform just consisting of a shirt and nothing else? Why is it that schools do not have bikinis and swimming trunks as their uniform for the summer months? This may sound crude but it is reality. The reason of course is because teachers acknowledge that it is improper attire and morally unacceptable. Thus it is strange that so much criticism is leveled at Islam when most other nations have some kind of law restricting the types of clothing a person can and cannot wear.

The only difference in Islam is that it too has a law, based on a moral code, but one that is different than the prevailing norm in one society. Just because a certain consensus has been achieved regarding clothing in one society can in no way justify that such a consensus precludes anything else as being permissible.

Islam favors modesty in both men and women and considers it an essential part of society, if it is to function properly. Some form of modesty is prevalent in every society, as highlighted above, but it is the extent of modesty that is at the heart of the debate. 'A' for instance deems a skirt that reaches below the knee as modest attire and one that reaches above the thigh as immodest. 'B' on the other hand deems a skirt that reaches below the ankle as modest and anything shorter as immodest. If however 'A' then criticizes 'B' for enforcing modest clothing on women calling it subjugation, but allows its own society to put constraint on women's attire in schools for example, or prohibits nudity in a public places without a second thought, surely 'A' is guilty of applying double standards. When Islam puts constraints on attire, it is merely conforming to a moral standard that already exists within every society, with differences occurring only regarding the degree and extent. Any one who dares to object and says woman are oppressed in Islam because it asks them to cover must also then favor abolishing any kind of dress code and uniform anywhere and for anyone at any time, be it in schools, colleges, shops, restaurants, for children and adults alike, something of course which no one would in fact ever consider agreeing too.

Another aspect of attire and dress is public and social pressure. There is no question that whilst a girl is growing up she is under immense pressure to be beautiful, slim and attractive. She is judged more on her outer beauty than her mind, knowledge and intellect. The pressure continues as she grows up, intensifying in her teens and young adult hood. If a woman attends an interview for a job, the prettier the girl, the shorter the skirt the more likely she will have the edge. A job offer may not be solely reliant on this fact but it plays a major contributory role, unfair though it is. Will society's perceptions of women ever change? Will the pressure of being beautiful and slim lessen over time? Quite simple the answer is no. In fact in the age of super

models the pressure has increased manifold and does not appear to be lessening. Why is this so? It is men who dominate the entertainment business and the media which dictate social values and norms. Men prefer beautiful woman so why not have a slimly clad woman to sell a car than a man all covered up?

That is why Islam is a practical religion. Women are beautiful and will always be desirable for men. Islam does not negate beauty neither does it consider celibacy as a pious act. However Islam lays down rules and regulations so that beauty and sexual relations are permitted but within a framework of control and discipline so that overall society and in particular women are not disadvantaged or discriminated as a result of the desires of the few. The predominant reason behind the order for women to cover is so that the pressures of society are lessened upon them and so women are valued for their intelligence and sense as opposed to just how they look. Islam desires that women's recognition in society should not be dependant upon her charms and attractiveness but be due to her self-worth and as a result of her individual abilities. When a woman wears modest and loose clothing, covers her hair, she will still look smart and presentable but there will be nothing to distract attention from her genuine qualities. (Modesty, chastity in behavior and attire are also compulsory elements for men, but that is outside the scope of this article and will be addressed separately).

In fact the *hijaab* is a liberating force, since it allows women to partake fully in society, and enables them to take up their roles as mothers, wives and daughters, but also as doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals. In fact *hijaab* empowers woman, providing them with confidence and self-assurance in the knowledge that whether she is slim or large, beautiful or ugly (in the eyes of the public), her *hijaab* will provide protection. *Hijaab* gives a woman respect and dignity since it signifies her esteemed status in the eyes of men who are naturally more inclined to treat a woman with dignity and value than one who chooses to expose all then complain when eyes wonder! The remaining article will thus focus on the Islamic concept of *hijaab* and its legal requirements.

The word *hijaab* is derived from the Arabic root word of *hajaba*, which means to hide from view or to conceal. Many people assume it is the Arabic word for a headscarf alone, but *hijaab* encompasses much more than a headscarf: it is an entire way of dressing, behaving and believing. The Holy Qur'an mentions the word *hijaab* several times:

...who repel from the path of God and strive to make it crooked, and with regard to the hereafter, they are disbelievers." ...A barrier (hijaab) separates them, while the purgatory is occupied by people who recognize each side by their looks, They will call the dwellers of paradise, "peace be upon you." They did not enter (paradise) through wishful thinking Al A'raf (7:44-46).

In this verse, Allah Almighty refers to a spiritual *hijaab*, barring those who repel from God from Heaven.

When you (oh Prophet saw) read the Qur'an, we place between you and those who do not believe in the hereafter an invisible barrier (hijaab)"Al-Isra, (17:45).

..Mention in the scripture Mary, she isolated herself from her family, into an eastern location. ...While a barrier (hijaab) separated her from them, we sent to her our Spirit. He went to her in the form of a human being”, Al-Maryam, (19:16-17).

A scripture whose verses provide the complete details, in an Arabic Qur'an, for people who know.... A bearer of good news, as well as a Warner. However, most of them turn away; they do not hear. ...They said, "Our minds are made up, our ears are deaf to your message, and a barrier (hijaab) separates us from you. Do what you want and so will we" [41:3-5].

No human being can communicate with God except through inspiration, from behind a barrier (hijaab), or by sending a messenger through whom He reveals what He wills”, Ash-Shura, (42:51)..

....If you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a barrier (hijaab). This is purer for your hearts and their hearts....”Al-Azhab, (33:53).

The word *hijaab* is used several times the Holy Qur'an in the context of creating some form of barrier or separation between someone, either a spiritual barrier or a physical one. Thus the word *hijaab* is in fact a concept to be adopted by men and women, as opposed to just referring to it as a headscarf. Its intention is to create a barrier between men and women, to separate them from each other so that they may be distinguished and also protected from each other. Moreover the best type of *hijaab*, garment or covering in Islam is not so much the physical one but the state of mind of an individual, pertaining to the inner self. Allah Almighty states:

“O children of Adam, we have provided you with garments to cover your bodies, as well as for luxury. But the best garment is the garment of taqwa...” [7:26]

Taqwa is having God consciousness through the remembrance of Allah Almighty, knowing He is always watching and thus remaining on the path of righteousness. Having this belief is the best deterrent and protection from the vices of society. This also illustrates that even if a woman covers her body, it does not mean that she will automatically be modest but that modesty is also a state of mind, an act of the heart that needs to go hand in hand with the physical act of covering.

However since Islam is a religion of practicalities it provides rule and regulations to be followed regarding the dress of women. Islam has no fixed standard as to the style of dress or type of clothing that Muslims must wear, but some requirements must be met. There are two sources for guidance and rulings for Muslims to follow, the first being the Qur'an, the revealed word of Allah and secondly, the Hadith or the traditions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saw) who was chosen by Allah to be the role model for mankind.

The first of these requirements details the parts of the body which must be covered, and the main verse that contains the injunctions of clothing for women are in Surah Al-Nur, (24:31):

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must) ordinarily appear

thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty save to their husbands, or their fathers or husbands fathers, or their sons or their husbands sons, or their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sisters sons' or their women, or the slaves whom their right hand posses, or male servant free of physical desire, or small children who have no sense of sex.....”

The requirements of *hijaab* can be divided into the following categories.

1. Lower your gaze
2. Guard your modesty
3. Not display your beauty and ornaments except what appears ordinarily
4. Draw veils over bosoms
5. Not display beauty

Lower Your Gaze

The first requirement is for women to lower their gazes, known as *gad al basar*. Islam appreciates that there is a natural inclination between the sexes and that opposites, in terms of gender, do attract. So men and women are asked to lower their gazes and not gaze at each other unnecessarily which will act as a deterrent for any kind of illicit liaison. Lowering the eyes is more of a symbolic act which trains the heart and prevents *fitna*. Obviously men and women cannot walk around in public with their heads lowered all of the time, since practically this is impossible. However what is prohibited is continually gazing at one person in particular. If men and women need to talk and communicate with each other, making eye contact is part of the communication process, but they must not gaze so intently, or convey something through the eyes that will be considered over-friendliness. So the Qur'anic verse reminds us that when ever possible, lower the eyes and look down. If a man and woman do need to converse, if both of them make initial eye contact, as is the norm but then also look away, each will give the other the impression that the conversation is not to be taken any further and prevent any harm occurring. It is reported by Hadrat Jarr (rad) that “I asked the Holy Prophet (saw) what I should do if I happened to cast a look at a woman by chance? The Holy Prophet (saw) replied, “turn your face away”.

However there are exceptions to this rule such as when considering a proposal for marriage but this is outside the scope of this article and will be discussed later on in the series.

Guard Your Modesty

The second requirement for women is that they must guard their modesty. As stated earlier *hijaab* is more than just a covering, but includes the way you behave in public, your manners and social etiquettes too. Social interaction is also regulated thus men and women are

not allowed to mix freely with each other, chatting, talking or forming relationships outside of marriage. The Holy Prophet (saw) said:

“Beware that you do not call upon women who are alone”. One of the Companions asked, what about the younger or elder brother of the husband? “He is death” the Prophet (saw) replied. Sahih Bukhari.

In another Hadith he (saw) stated:

“Do not call on women in the absence of their women as shaitan may be circulating in any of you like blood”. Imam Thirmidhi

On another occasion the Holy Prophet (saw) said the one who touches the hand of a woman without having a lawful relationship with her will have an ember placed on his hand on the Day of Judgment. (Takmalah Fatah al-Qadri).

A man and woman can only have one lawful relationship and that is under the purview of marriage. Again it is strange when non-Muslims criticize this phenomena saying this is unduly restrictive and curtails the free liberty of the individual. However if one studies the realities of life, most relationships between couples normally fall foul of the very things Islam tries to prevent. Married couples or partners often break up due to extra-marital affairs which normally begin when men and women mix freely. Numerous arguments are caused between couples when they see their husbands or boyfriends chatting freely to a woman, especially if she is very beautiful or wearing alluring clothes. Couples attend parties and gatherings and then argue with each other if they catch their partner appearing over-friendly with another man or woman or are caught flirting. So much heartache occurs causing family breakdowns affecting not just the couples themselves but young innocent children as well as family and friends. So in order to prevent these social ills, Islam prohibits the free mixing of men and women and are thus asked to guard their modesty. Women are asked not to talk to men in a soft and beautiful manner but in a business like manner, to avoid any misapprehensions on behalf of the man;

“Then be not of soft speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease aspire (to you) but utter customary speech”. Al-Azhab, (33:32)

They are also asked to walk and behave in a modest way so that they do not attract attention to themselves:

...They shall not strike their feet when they walk in order to shake and reveal certain details of their body" [24:31].

Not Display Your Ornaments What Appears Ordinarily:

The next condition for a woman to fulfill is that she must not display her *zinat*, beauty and ornaments except that what appears ordinarily. This is clarified further from a Hadith of the Holy Prophet (saw) where:

"Hadrat Ayesha (rad) reported that Hadrat Asmaa the daughter of Abu Bakr (R) came to the Messenger of Allah (S) while wearing thin clothing. He approached her and said: '**O Asmaa! When a girl reaches the menstrual age, it is not proper that anything should remain exposed except this and this. He pointed to the face and hands.**' (Sunan Abu Dawood Kitab al Adhab).

It can be concluded from this tradition that when a woman enters the public, all of her body must be covered, except the hands and face. In Hanafi Fiqh, jurists permit the exposure of the feet for woman, thus you will see many women of the Asian subcontinent who do not compulsorily cover their feet. Furthermore the clothing must also be loose enough so as not to describe the shape of the body. In another verse of the Holy Qur'an it is stated:

'O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks ("Jalabib") veils all over their bodies(when abroad) that is most convenient that they should be known (as such) and not molested: and Allah is Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful.' Al-Azhab, (33:59).

Here woman are asked to wear draw their cloaks or veils over their bodies so that their clothes are hidden and the shape of the body is not revealed. The word *jalabib* is used taken from the word *jilbab* meaning a thing that hides and conceals. Thus when a woman goes out in public or comes in front of men who are not her *mahrem* she must wear an outer garment. What that consists of depends on culture to culture and Islam does not specify its shape or form. Those in the Arabian peninsular normally adopt a loose cloak known as an *abaya* as the outer garment. In the West, women wear raincoats or other coats that cover them. Women in the Asian sub-continent wear *chadars*, which is an extension of the head covering. What ever form the outer clothing takes what is important is that it is loose fitting and does not reveal the body shape of the woman.

Draw Veils Over Your Bosoms

The next requirement is that a woman must draw her veil over her body including her chest. The Arabic word used for veil in the Qur'anic verse is *khumur*, and is the plural of the word *khimar*. Ibn Kathir defines the *khimar* as something that covers and explains that the *khimar* was used by the women of that time to cover their heads. Classical Arab dictionaries also describe the *khimar* as a piece of cloth that covers the head. *Khimar* has also been described in the following manner:

"Khimaar comes from the word khamr, the root meaning of which is to cover. For example, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "Khammiru aaniyatakum (cover your vessels)." Everything that covers something else is called its khimaar. But in common usage khimaar has come to be used as a name for the garment with which a woman covers her head; in some cases this does not go against the linguistic meaning of khimaar. Some of the fuqahaa' have defined it as that which covers the head, the temples and the neck. The difference between the hijab and the khimaar is that the hijab is something which covers all of a woman's body, whilst the khimaar in general is something with which a woman covers her head." Shaykh Muhammad al-Munajjid on [Islam Q&A](#):

Imam Abu Abdullah Qurtubi: "*Women in those days used to cover their heads with the khimar, throwing its ends upon their backs. This left the **neck** and the **upper part of the chest** bare, along with the **ears**, in the manner of the Christians. Then Allah commanded them to cover **those parts** with the khimar.*"

Imam Abu'l-Fida ibn Kathir: "*Draw their khumur to cover their bosoms' means that they should wear the khimar in such a way that they cover their chests so that they will be different from the women of the jahiliyyah who did not do that but would pass in front of men with their **chests** uncovered and with their **necks, forelocks, hair** and **earrings** uncovered.*"

From the above we can see that before the Qur'anic revelation women wore the *khimar* in a style that covered the hair, but left the forehead, ears, neck, and upper chest uncovered. So when Allah (swt) commanded the women to draw their *khimars* to cover their bosoms, the women were being commanded to draw the ends of the *khimar* forward and fasten it so that their foreheads, ears, necks, and upper chests were covered as well as their hair. In essence what is now termed as the modern day headscarf is in reality the *khimar* according to the Qur'anic verse in Surah Al-Azhab.

In respect of covering the face, although there are some Muslim scholars who believe it is mandatory for women to wear *theniqab*, the face covering, this is not the majority view who state it is an optional requirement

The final part of Surah Nur states which category of people a woman must cover in front of. It lists 10 categories of people in front of whom a woman can uncover her hair and does not need to wear the outer garment. These are listed below for convenience:

1. Husbands
2. Fathers'
3. Husbands Fathers (father-in-law)
4. Sons
5. Husbands son's
6. Brothers or Brother's sons
7. Sister's sons
8. Women
9. Slaves right hand posses
10. Male servant free of physical desire

11. Children who have no sense of sex

The list of persons above are all those people a woman cannot lawfully marry (excluding the husband!) thus it is permissible for a woman to be at ease in front of them since there is no risk of offending and danger of abuse. However one must always remember that

“O children of Adam, we have provided you with garments to cover your bodies, as well as for luxury. But the best garment is the garment of taqwa...” [7:26]

Thus it can be concluded that Islam emphasizes modesty and chastity as beautiful traits, and ones that should be encouraged in society for the betterment of the individual and the community as a whole.

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