

Laws and Practices: Why Do Muslims Have a Dress Code

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Article

A brief text which talks about Hijab and dress code in Islam through textual and logical proofs.

Why Do Muslims Have a Dress Code?

“And tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest...” (Holy Qur'an, 24:30).

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent...” (Holy Qur'an, 24:31).

Islam does not forbid men and women to interact, but enjoins them to adopt a code of behavior characterized by *modesty* so that they may treat one another with full and appropriate respect. Islamic modest behavior consists of piety and mutual respect, as well as a standard of dress often identified by the headscarves worn by Muslim women.

Lower Your Gaze for the Good of Your Spirit

The philosophy behind what is commonly called *hijab* – Islamic modest dress – is rooted in the concept of guarding one's senses from anything that may lessen one's innocence. Imam 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet of Islam (may peace be upon him and his family), said,

“The eye is the spy of the hearts and the messenger of the intellect; therefore lower your gaze from whatever is not appropriate to your faith...” Lantern of the Path

In the modern world, our senses are bombarded from all directions with a plethora of sights, sounds, and smells. Islam teaches us to control what our senses are exposed to since our experiences affect us externally as well as spiritually. A smell of perfume may call to mind a distant memory of one's grandmother; the sound of fireworks may startle and bring forth an image of war; the sight of a beautiful woman in a revealing dress may bring feelings of unwanted and inappropriate arousal.

When our senses witness immorality, crime, or debauchery, even though we are not guilty of committing the offense, we lose a degree of innocence. We all hold childhood memories of a moment when we went through such a loss of innocence. What was once something shocking or held in special status falls into the realm of the ordinary.

In Islam, it is not only for parents to carefully guard what their children are exposed to, but it is for the adults to also guard themselves. Failure to do so can eventually lead to spiritual sickness.

Thus, the larger philosophy behind *hijab* is one of maintaining dignity and purity and applies to all facets of life and not exclusively to dress. We must prevent ourselves from looking at the opposite sex in a lustful way, and we must dress so that we are regarded with respect.

The Proper Observance of Hijab

The Qur'an addresses Islamic modest dress as follows:

“And tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do” (Holy Qur'an, 24:30).

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to [those relatives who fall within bounds of close relationship explained in the Qur'an] ...” (Holy Qur'an, 24:31).

The purpose of this modesty is to maintain the dignity of both men and women when they interact.

First, men are required to take the lead in respecting women. They should not engage in or approve of any activity which objectifies or demeans a woman. They are also required to cast down their gazes in humility and to observe the general philosophy of modesty of the heart and dress. They must wear decent clothing and avoid activities and places that will cause them to witness that which they should not.

Hijab does not prevent men and women from interacting for the purpose of study, work, performing good deeds, and so on. Rather, when hijab is mutually observed, such interactions will take place in sincerity of purpose and devoid of impropriety.

Women should respect themselves as dignified beings and interact with men in purity. They should not modify their behavior around men so as to seem invitingly attractive or flirtatiously pleasing and thus allow themselves to be objectified.

When among men who are not close relatives, women should dress modestly so that their adornment (source of beauty and attraction) is covered. Muslim scholars unanimously state that a woman should respectably cover all except her hands and face. Muslim women fulfill this requirement by wearing loose fitting clothing and covering their hair with scarves.

The requirements for modest dress differ between the sexes due to fundamental biological distinctions and causes of attraction. One will observe these distinctions in Western society where a relatively small number of women read pornographic magazines or visit prostitutes when compared to men who engage in such activities.

Contrary to some views, hijab is not a sign of inferiority of woman nor is it imposed upon her by the opposite sex. Before God, men and women are distinguished from one another only in terms of individual piety. When observing modest dress, before one another, they are distinguished by non-physical characteristics such as intellect and integrity.

Islamic modest dress does not socially suffocate women by denying them free and necessary movement, expression of opinion, education, health care and other human rights. Rather, hijab assists in building a sound society and reduces the number of crimes such as rape and molestation since a possible stimulus for such crimes is not present when hijab is observed. Observance of hijab is part of a larger system in Islam that when properly followed maintains the dignity of men, women, and society as a whole.

What do Muslim Women Really Think About Hijab?

- “I can feel the extra respect coming my way. People take me more seriously, and I feel protected and confident when I step out.” Dr. Mrs. N.Z. Vakil, M.D.
- “In the modern society of today, a woman has always been looked upon as just another sexual object for the men. Why should one display one’s beauty for unwanted eyes to feast upon? The *Hijab* protects a woman’s honor and doesn’t arouse unwanted passion from the opposite sex. I feel if the women were to universally adopt the Islamic code of dressing, the rate of incidences of teasing, molestation, rape, etc. would be negligible. Wearing the *hijab* gives me more confidence in myself as a woman and it doesn’t obstruct me in any way in my profession.” Mrs. Salva I Rasool, Graphic Designer
- “I am a convert to Islam and so I can compare the experiences of life with and without Islamic Modest Dress. I am well aware of the attitude in Western society that *hijab* is repressive or hinders the freedom of a woman. My experience with *hijab* and my study of Islam allows me to understand that this is not the case. Non-Muslim people may sometimes stare, but in *hijab* I am always treated with respect. I have never had trouble getting or maintaining a job, I no longer face unwanted advances or lewd comments from the opposite sex, and I feel more dignified than without *hijab*. I realize now I can be accepted and interact with others as my true self once my appearance is not allowed to be the controlling factor. Even in bad neighborhoods, men that are normally lewd just step out of my way.

The overall concept in Islamic Dress of maintaining proper respect and my experience that it does indeed increase respectful interaction creates an added sense of security when I go out in public. Knowing what *hijab* gives me, I would never go back to living without it. I go out in public as a recognized Muslim woman – a reminder to myself and all who see me that I seek to live in a manner which is decent and pure. I am one who seeks to obey God in all matters. People know this of nuns when they see them, and they know the same of me. Even if they cannot understand my reasons for a style of dress that is unusual here in the United States, they express admiration for someone who isn't afraid to live by her principles.” Mrs. Diana Beatty, Teacher

- “I found I liked wearing the *hijab*. Actually, 'like' is not the right word, because it isn't positive enough. I loved it. For the first time in my life as an American woman, I felt that my body finally belonged to me. I felt as though I finally had what I can only describe, for lack of a better phrase, as the integrity of my own bodily privacy. I found that I was treated very well, much more respectfully, and I noted a definite tendency on the part of men, especially young men, to leave me alone and give me a wide berth. The way this manifested itself most powerfully was the degree to which I found I was no longer followed by men's eyes. The *hijab* gave me a message, not even so much 'not available,' although I think that is a part of it, but something stronger...” A non-Muslim American participant in the post-September 11th *Scarves for Solidarity* Campaign, as quoted in a letter to the San Francisco Chronicle, May 9, 2002.

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