

Are muslim women subjugated research paper

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Given my cultural background, I always believed in the equality of genders. I come from a country where gender discrimination against employees is a punishable offense by law. The freedom and rights that women have in the United States, Europe as well as developed countries, although often debated by feminists, is considered by most to be quite liberal. Hence, I grew up taking the rights of women for granted and believing that they enjoyed the same treatment across the globe. I was aware of Islam as a major world religion but had never studied its tenets, particularly with regards to women. I did have a few Muslim, Arab as well as non-Arab, friends and acquaintances over the years but the relationship was limited to social interactions and never delved into the topic of religious beliefs.

I first became acutely aware of the serious differences in beliefs after the 9/11 terrorist strike on the World Trade Center in New York. The sudden rise in debates about the nature of Islam caught my attention. Newspapers, television networks, even discussions at school began to include the mindset of Muslims. At the time, the general wave of emotions was of disbelief that such a grave act of inhumanity could be carried out in the name of religion – any religion. I kept hearing instances where Muslims were called extremists and fundamentalists. I became apprehensive about a religion that I really did not know much about. As the backlash of the 9/11 attacks took full form, it became a global concern that innocent moderate Muslims could become targets of hate crimes.

I read a speech by the then President George W. Bush Jr. where he said that he wanted Muslim women to be able to go about their day to day tasks without having to fear being attacked just because they wore a headscarf .

This was probably the first time that I really took notice of the importance of the 'hijab' or veil to the religious identity of a Muslim woman. At the time, my first reaction was that of sadness. I felt sorry for these women who had to cover themselves up from head to toe and did not even have the freedom to dress how they wished.

I realize now that my perception was heavily biased, however, back then, most of the news that I was being exposed to kept telling me just subjugated Muslim women are. In the following years, my prejudice was further strengthened by accounts of ill treatment of women in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. I read stories about how women were stoned and even killed for not covering their heads and faces, or wearing clothes that revealed their body shape. I was told that it was forbidden for women in Iran to wear make up to grow their nails or use bright nail paint. This seemed to be extremely grotesque to me.

I began discussing this topic with my Muslim friends. None of the girls I knew wore a veil and they told me that had no pressure from their family to do it either. While most of them belonged to families that were practicing Muslims, my friends always seemed most liberal and easily blended into their Western surrounding. They told me that the problem of subjugation of women was limited to countries and was not really based on Islamic tenets. However, I assumed that these statements were made by my friends in order to 'save face' and not slur their own religion. It seemed sensible to trust what was being conveyed through the mass media than the account of a few people. I attributed their views to a more liberalized and moderate approach influenced by life in a Western society.

Then came the news that France was banning the use of headscarves in its schools. It was told that the French government did not want to promote religious symbols that revealed the religious or ethnic identity of its citizens. It was not limited to the veil of Muslim women but also other religious symbols such as the turbans worn by Sikhs as well as skull caps worn by Jewish boys. It seemed like a very sensible argument to me. If people did not know which religion you belonged to, they would not be able to carry out hate crimes or discriminate against you. The law seemed to be in favor of protecting Muslim women and I honestly thought that such women in France would heave a sigh of relief. Hence, I was very surprised when I read reports of Muslim women protesting against the law and claiming that it was stopping them from exercising their right to follow their religion!

The intensity of these protests moved me to study the subject of women's rights in Islam for the first time. I became particularly interested in understanding what 'hijab' meant and why were Muslim women living in developed and liberal countries fighting to be allowed to remain covered. I began by searching for content on this topic available on the internet.

Needless to say, I came across views that seemed to be from two opposite ends of the world! While most Western commentators and mass media held the view that the hijab was meant to degrade a woman, denying her the most basic of freedoms. However, there were also several accounts, not only from Muslims but from non-Muslim scholars as well, that delved deep into the religious and cultural significance of the veil. They also made it a point to highlight the rights that Islam granted to women, several of which were not available to women from Western cultures until much later.

I read two books that, according to me, were real 'eye openers'. One was titled 'Rethinking Muslim women and the Veil' by Katherine Bullock and '100 Myths about the Middle East' by Fred Halliday. Bullocks work revealed to me that term 'Hijaab' referred not only to clothing but also to actions and thoughts. The concept was to guard one's modesty by dressing and behaving in a modest manner. I also realized that Islam did not just prescribe hijaab to women but to men as well! I also learned that Islam did not favor the enforcing of the hijaab and had a tenet that clearly stated that there can be no compulsion in religion.

Halliday, too, points out that wearing the headscarf or veil is not a mandatory requirement for women. In countries where it has been made an obligation, the decision has been the governments and not based on religious requirements. I agree with this argument as Islam, as a religion does not promote compulsion in religion and follows a principle of non-compulsion. The concept of dressing modestly applies not only to women but men too have been asked to dress modestly and not gaze at unknown women with sexual intentions. Hence, the hijaab is meant for the protection of women and with no intention of oppressing them. This explained to me why my female Muslim friends felt no pressure to follow the practice of hijaab.

I also noticed that Muslims from different countries practice or follow their religion at different levels. For example, I have observed that women from Arabian or Middle Eastern countries such as Iran or Saudi Arabia as well as Asian countries such as Indonesia are most likely to wear a veil even when they live in Western countries. However, Muslim women from non-Muslim

nations such as India or liberal Islamic countries such as the United Arab Emirates or Bahrain often choose not to cover up. This observation made me realize that the extent to which a woman practices hijab is based on the culture of the country to which she belongs as well as her own interpretation of religious texts such as the Holy Quran as well as the Hadith or the teaching of the Prophet Muhammed.

Extremists, such as the Taliban, firmly assert that they are following the teachings of Islam. Halliday, however, says that this cannot be true because there can be no one 'correct interpretation' of religious texts. People coming from various backgrounds and having individual interests are bound to interpret the texts in a matter which appeals to them, it is human nature. However, he does not provide his own take on the myth or the position of women in the region based on its religion. It is possible, for a region to be modernized without giving up its cultural and ethical values. If one visits a country like the U. A. E, one can witness women clad in traditional head to toe coverings or 'Hijab' and be working in MNCs as part of the top management. Popular American food chains as well as consumer products are available freely in Middle Eastern markets.

So far as Islamic countries are concerned, again, the rights and treatment meted out to women is governed more by the country's laws and government mentality than a particular religion. For example, wearing a short skirt would be illegal in Iran but countries like the U. A. E are quite liberal in their rules regarding dressing. Islam, as a religion, gives women several rights that are not given by others or by governments of non-Islamic nations. A Muslim woman can own property, has a right to inheritance, can

conduct and a business, is allowed to divorce, is allowed to set a 'mehr' or what the west now calls a 'pre-nuptial agreement' and is allowed to remarry after the death of a husband.

My research and personal observation on the concept of hijab as well as women's rights in Islam has changed my thinking towards this practice. I am no longer prejudiced against those who wear a headscarf, I no longer assume that women who wear a veil are subjugated. I now realize that, for several Muslim women, wearing the veil is a matter of choice and their right. I understand that a Muslim woman can be covered and yet be liberated and empowered, work in corporate environments, vote, and even hold offices in Islamic governments.

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