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Hijab: lifting the veil

Standing up to religious oppression or state racism?

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In France at the moment there is a big controversy about the recommendation by a government commission and by the president, to ban the wearing of religious symbols such as the Islamic headscarf (the hijab) in state schools. The government declares that this proposed ban is in keeping with France's long tradition of secular education, and also that it would promote equality between the sexes. Many of those in France's considerable Muslim minority however see this step as racist and intolerant and as a direct attack on their civil rights.

For many people, the wearing of a headscarf is a symbol of oppression against women. The advice in the Koran that women should dress modestly is generally interpreted to-day as meaning that Muslim women should cover their head. Within the Muslim community, women are often judged on what they wear and the hijab is viewed as the measure of a woman's piety.

Many argue that the hijab is used as an instrument to control women's sexuality. There exist extremely negative attitudes, for example, which consider women who do not cover their hair as

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somehow “unchaste”. Women are also advised to wear the hijab for their own protection against sexual harassment. This is really a sort of justification for sexual harassment if you don’t wear the veil. This sexist argument holds that men are not at all responsible for their actions (reminiscent of how when rape victims go to court what they were wearing when they were raped is often scrutinised as if what they wore could some-how justify being raped).

The hijab is forced on women in many countries under the influence of Islam, either legally or under cultural and social pressure. In States where women have no civil rights whatsoever and are treated as subhuman, forcing women to wear the hijab or a much more extreme dress code is clearly used to subjugate and humiliate woman.

The women of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) state:

“We will never allow the fundamentalists to define and decree what women should or should not wear. They have no right to impose the veil upon us. As far as we are concerned, we will NOT wear the veil as far as security and social discretion allow us, for we regard rejection of the veil as a symbolic form of resistance and defiance of the fundamentalists. To wear, or not to wear, the Islamic veil is a completely personal issue and no one has the right to interfere with this decision or impose the veil upon us”.

Context, however, is important when considering the hijab. It is important not to equate fundamentalist Islam with all Muslim people. Not all Muslim men are misogynistic. And for women, the wearing of an Islamic headscarf may not be in itself inherently oppressive. Many Muslim women certainly wear the hijab out of their own free will and often resent being seen by western culture as oppressed victims. While the women of RAWA reject wearing the hijab in defiance of religious fundamentalists, some Muslim women

in Western society say that for them wearing the hijab is an act of defiance in a world increasingly hostile towards and intolerant of Muslim people – that they wear the hijab as part of their Muslim identity despite the racist abuse they often get for wearing it.

Others say that they wear the hijab for cultural and religious reasons and that the idea of modesty behind the head-scarf is not necessarily sexist; that they want judgment of their physical person to play no role whatsoever in social interaction.

They correctly point out the fact that Western society is oppressive with regard to women's appearance. For women who freely choose to wear the Islamic headscarf, it can be difficult to take being told you are oppressed for wearing it from a culture where around 5% of all females spend their teens puking over a toilet bowl so that they can look like Kate Moss.

One Canadian Muslim woman explains her perspective:

“Women are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. 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.

Feeling that one has to meet the impossible male standards of beauty is tiring and often humiliating. 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.”

Although we do not see progress for humanity coming from religion, at the same time we do not hold the West as the ideal cultural model. In any case it is up to Muslim women to struggle against sexist oppression and to define the parameters of that struggle, not for us to tell them what to do.

The US State has conveniently used the poor treatment of women in countries, like Afghanistan and Iraq, as a form of justification for war. The hypocrisy of this position is highlighted by the fact the US-backed Iraqi Governing Council has cancelled secular family laws in Iraq and moved family law under the jurisdiction of Islamic (sharia) law; a law that destroys women's rights regarding marriage, child custody, inheritance and allows women to be stoned to death for adultery.

In France it is hard to see the government's proposed ban as anything but a cynical political manoeuvre to appease the right-wing constituency in France and hold onto power in a country where the extreme right is grow-ing. They are hypocrites who on the one hand marginalise and stigmatise young Muslim girls under the guise of secularism and on the other continue to substantially subsidise private religious schools.

As anarchists we have a long history of struggle for secularism. However, banning the hijab can only lead towards further exclusion of the Muslim women in France and encourage religious fundamentalism.

Ultimately we believe that people should have the freedom to dress whatever way they like. This means freedom from state interference and freedom from religious interference in how one should dress.

by Ada